

Isolation

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Isolation

by [bexchan](#)

Summary

He can't leave the room. Her room. And it's all the Order's fault. Confined to a small space with only the Mudblood for company, something's going to give. Maybe his sanity. Maybe not. "There," she spat. "Now your Blood's filthy too!" DM/HG. PostHBP. Now complete with the epilogue.

Notes

Summary: Post HBP. Ron and Harry are Horcrux hunting and Hermione has been left at Hogwarts to help the Order make it safe for the other students. Draco is forced by Snape to stay in Hogwarts for his own protection, but he can't leave the room he is given; Granger's room. Hermione is the only student trusted with this information, so her and Malfoy share the small space, and Draco tries to avoid insanity as he becomes increasingly isolated with only the Mudblood for company. Something's going to give...

Mature content and themes, and explicit language.

Disclaimer: Don't own anything...check my purse...Cool, a bat!

Haven

Chapter Notes

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

People often said that in times of turbulence, you learned to appreciate the little things. Poetic and whimsical notions like sunsets, the sounds of birds and the varying colours of dainty flowers.

Well, Hermione could safely tell those people that it was all bollocks.

Bollocks. Bollocks. Bollocks.

Sunsets were pretty much the same everyday, squawking birds were actually very annoying and gave her a headache, and she could really care less about the hues and shades of flowers. They all died anyway; all wilted into ugly, shrivelled shapes. Especially when winter was starting to strangle life out of the world.

No, when times were bad, and they really were, it pretty much distracted you from everything else. Everything else was irrelevant and distorted, clouded by the gravity of the darkness. Hermione had noticed that even her classes had become meaningless, and the worst thing was everyone seemed to feel the same.

The students of Hogwarts were drowning in melancholy. All of them.

Well, the ones that had been allowed to return.

She'd worked out there were just over a quarter of the usual number of pupils, and all of them were scared; moving around the lonely corridors with glum faces and whispered tones. But the classes were still held, as were the Quidditch matches and other events, even though it was glaringly obvious that most of the students had lost the will to compete, socialise and even learn.

McGonagall was doing her best to keep things consistent and familiar, but it was pointless. Hogwarts was pseudo-school now; just a shell with ancient walls that people had once thought were safe. But, of course, that was all bollocks too.

It was the 1st of October, meaning Hermione had only been back at school for a couple of weeks, but it felt longer. It also meant that Dumbledore had been dead for exactly five months. No, Hogwarts was definitely not safe, and everyone knew it. The Death Eaters had breached their school, all thanks to Draco fucking Malfoy, and then Snape had murdered the most brilliant man she would ever know.

Voldemort was back. Well, he'd been back for a few years now, but the curse of his return was becoming louder and more threatening with each day that passed. She was petrified. That's right. Screw the stereotypes that came with her Gryffindor colours, sometimes it was rational to be frightened.

It certainly didn't help that her two supposed best friends had left her here all alone. Yes, Harry and Ron were currently traipsing all over the country searching for Horcruxes. Without her. She wasn't sure where the reasoning had been in that decision but it had been Lupin's suggestion. She loved her friends dearly, but if she was right Harry was probably having a mental breakdown every hour, and Ron would most likely be tripping over his own feet.

She knew it hadn't been their decision, but she couldn't help the resentment that had burrowed into her brain. At least they had each other.

She had been left here to assist McGonagall with turning Hogwarts into a shelter. A safe place. There were a few other Order members here such as Seamus and Dean, and Ginny was helping along with the rest of the professors. The youngest Weasley was nice enough, but she didn't come close to filling the gap the boys had left her with. For the most part, Hermione felt significantly alone.

She'd been given the title of Head Girl of course, possibly so she could have her own room to help with the Order's plans. Or perhaps it was so she could have some freedom to lock herself in the library at night with the hopes assisting the cause. Or maybe it was because she was the infamous best friend of Harry Potter, and was supposed to provide some symbol of hope to the miserable souls that were haunting Hogwarts. Whichever it was, she was glad she could help, but she'd have rather stayed with Ron and Harry.

Michael Corner was Head Boy, but she'd never really found out why he'd been chosen. It was probably just because he'd been a prefect and a member of Dumbledore's Army, but she doubted he was doing much in the way of preparation for the Order. She could have asked him, of course, or even attempted to make conversation with any of the other students, but the only person she really spoke to these days was McGonagall. She was too busy...too immersed in her desperation to help.

Her Head Girl dorm felt empty. Hollow.

Near the Gryffindor Tower, there was her bedroom, a little kitchenette, a small living space, the bathroom, and another bedroom. The bedroom that Harry would have probably occupied if he'd been chosen as Head Boy. Corner had his own Head dormitory near the Ravenclaw Tower, and for that she was grateful. If she was going to be angry and anxious about the state of the world, she didn't want anyone but Harry and Ron to know about it.

But, as she had noted so many times, they weren't here. They sent her one letter every fortnight, careful not to owl any more in case it alerted Voldemort to their Horcrux-hunt.

So, yes. Things were bad. Remarkably bad.

So bad that the words in front of her were just sliding over her brain and escaping her attention. It had just passed midnight when she'd made her way to the library to research Horcruxes again, spurred on by her passionate insomnia.

It was easily two in the morning now. The place was obviously empty, and only the faint glow of her Lumos gave any indication of life between the labyrinth of bookshelves. She

rubbed her sleep-deprived eyes and tried to focus on the blurry letters and shapes, but it was difficult.

"Right," she mumbled to herself, trailing her fingertip under the sentence to steady her gaze. "The first known wizard to create a Horcrux was Herpo the Foul, and they can only be...

Bugger...

She'd already read that sentence twice.

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"You are insane," he spat harshly, stopping in his tracks. "I don't know which of your crazy potions you've knocked back, but there is no way I am going back there."

"And I suppose you have a better idea?" Snape tuned slowly to face his companion, regarding the young man impatiently.

"Have you forgotten what we did in there?" he questioned, raising his fury-trembling hand to indicate the dimly-lit school. "I'll be killed on the bloody spot if I step one foot in that place!"

"We do not have time for these arguments, Draco," the ex-professor sneered, grabbing the back of the younger wizard's collar. "I made a Vow to protect you and this is the only place you will be safe-

"Get off me!" he hissed, struggling against the grip as Snape marched towards Hogwarts. He tried to dig his heels into the ground and pry the hand away from his robes, but it was futile. "You blood traitor scum!"

Snape stalled his long strides and adjusted his grip on Draco's clothes to bring their faces close. It didn't show on his face, but Malfoy suddenly felt very wary of the dangerous look in the wizard's eyes, but he didn't flinch. He was a blood traitor. Fact.

Snape and himself had been in hiding for the last few months following the...events in Astronomy Tower. Draco wasn't stupid. He knew his failure would have consequences, but he could have never imagined the magnitude of them. The Dark Lord wanted him dead.

He hadn't spoken to either of his parents since, and he had no idea what had happened to them. He'd barely left some Shetland shack, with his only companion consisting of the greasy and eerie man currently glaring torture at him. And he had a price on his head. Both sides wanted him dead. Peachy.

And then Snape had told him that he was a spy; that he'd betrayed them all and that he was one of them. Draco had vomited the barely-digested scraps they had managed to salvage that day and spent the remainder of the evening trying to escape their Scottish hideout.

But where would he have gone?

Had it not been for the fact that Voldemort wanted him Avada'd as soon as possible, he would have disclosed that revelation for some personal gain. But he had no place with the Death Eaters any more, which left him substantially bugged; forced into following around the blood traitor who had told him he could no longer protect him.

Head-fuck.

And now he had brought him to Hogwarts.

He'd tried to ask questions about the extent of Snape's involvement with the Order, but the odd git had characteristically said the bare minimum. Draco had wondered if insanity had finally caught up to the older man; that the whole spy concept was just the hysteric ramblings of a half-minded man. He'd murdered Dumbledore after all. But then why would he be taking him to Hogwarts if he didn't have some leverage with McGonagall and the Order?

All the questions and anxiety pounded against his temple and throbbed with echoing reminders in his ears. But he'd had no answers. No promises. Nothing. Just left to simmer in a limbo that ached and wondering when everything had become so complicated.

Five months in a rickety shed on some desolate Shetland Island, with only the drones of sheep to slice the silence, had left him more than a little...tense. Of course, having the most powerful wizard on Earth hunting for your corpse didn't help.

What a shit week. Shit month. Shit year.

"I am trying to protect you, Draco," the sinister man snapped, tightening his hold on Draco's robes. "This is the only place you will be safe-

"I will not be safe here," the blond growled, curling his lip in disgust. "I am their fucking enemy-

"You're an enemy to both sides now," Snape pointed out, continuing his steps towards Hogwarts and yanking the Malfoy heir with him. "But this side is the least likely to kill you. Professor McGonagall had already agreed to this."

"Stupid cow," Draco barked, earning him a choking tug. "So I am to entrust my safety with that crazy hag?"

"You don't have a choice."

His protests stopped.

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She shivered.

Autumn had crept up on the castle too quickly, and it squandered the cold at the back of her neck. Her breath left her mouth in silky mists and she bunched the fabric of her jumper in her fists to protect her fingers.

Hermione jumped out of her seat when she heard the library door swing open, followed by shuffling steps. She grabbed her wand, silently ending the Lumos charm and listening carefully to the intrusive thumps against the floorboards. She made her breaths as quiet as possible, managing to rise from her seat without making the faintest noise.

She peaked through the gaps of the bookcases, searching for a glimpse of something out of place. All the shadows mingled into one mass of almost-black, so she concentrated on the sounds. Whoever it was still lingered by the door, but was slowly making their way further into the library. Her hand tightened around her wand.

"Miss Granger?" a familiar voice called, and she relaxed her shoulders. "Are you in here?"

"Lumos," the witch sighed, her feet following the friendly tone. "I'm here, Professor Slughorn."

"Oh, there you are," the jittery man smiled when she came into view. "You know, we've looking everywhere for you. You really shouldn't be out this late, even if you are Head Girl."

"Is everything okay?" she questioned, ignoring his comment.

"Professor McGonagall would like to speak with you," he stated simply, leading her away from the library. "She's in her office."

"Is something wrong?" her brows knitted together with concern. Why would McGonagall need her at two in the morning?

"I'm not sure what's going on, Miss Granger," he admitted with a harmless shrug. "I'm sure everything's fine, or we would have been informed."

"I suppose so," she nodded absently, tucking her hands in her pockets. "It just seems a little odd."

"In times like these, Miss Granger," he breathed, and she could hear how tired the man was. They were all so tired. "I'm surprised you can still find anything odd."

"Fair point."

"I will walk you to the office," he told her, his voice croaking with fatigue. "Would you like me to wait outside for you to make sure you get back to your room safely?"

"That's not necessary," she dismissed with a little shake of her head. "My room is only a small walk from McGonagall's office. Plus, you look very tired, Sir."

"I was woken rather suddenly," he confessed, smothering a yawn into his sleeve. "But then, you were reading in the library. Are you sleeping okay, Miss Granger?"

"Well enough," she lied.

"Might I recommend some Dreamless Sleep Potion?" he suggested, giving her a meaningful look. "I could brew you some for tomorrow?"

"No, thank you," she offered him a weak smile. "I have some Muggle sleeping pills I can take if I really need to, but I'm fine, Professor. Really."

"If you say so, Miss Granger," he relented, stopping as they reached the door to the passageway that would take her to McGonagall's office. "I shall leave you here then."

"Thank you, Professor Slughorn," she nodded politely, waiting until the wizard had disappeared down the corridor before she mumbled the password. "Tabby cat."

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Draco was sat in an oversized chair, grinding his teeth and chewing his tongue. The two professors were bickering in front of him, and it had taken every bit of self-control not scream at the pair. If McGonagall wasn't clutching her wand defensively, he would have probably hexed them by now, or at least cast a few silencing charms to block out there scratching tones.

"I agreed to meet you, Severus," the witch spoke harshly. "I made no such promise that I would actually let him stay here."

"There is nowhere else," Snape stated calmly, turning his eyes to Draco for a moment. "If the Dark Lord finds him, then he will kill him, Minerva."

"And you would have me put the rest of the students in jeopardy?" she snapped, her Scottish accent thick and reminding Draco of his vile stay in the North. Always hiding...

"You are trying to protect the students," the sullen wizard spoke. "He needs protection more than anyone-

"That boy is the reason this place was attacked!" she shouted, pointing an accusing finger at him. "That boy-

"Is a child," Snape interrupted, ignoring the offended grunt from the otherwise silent teenager. "He was mislead, Minerva."

Draco's eyes shot up at those words, and he analysed the man he had once trusted with wary scepticism. It felt odd and degrading to be defended by someone he now despised.

"He knew what he was doing," the headmistress said quietly, her conservative tone back into place. "And if he hadn't been so foolish, things would be very different-

"The Dark Lord would still be a threat," he reasoned carefully. "You know that Albus-

"Don't you dare try to bribe me with his memory!" she warned, her voice rising a decibel that harassed her own ears. "Don't you dare, Severus-

"You know I'm right," he said with a subtle force. "You know full well how determined he was to ensure Draco didn't follow...that path."

The Malfoy heir felt his jaw slacken. The inevitable questions flooded his brain too quickly, and he hissed the air through his teeth. The old oaf had taken an interest in him? Had wanted to keep him away from the dark path? And Snape knew this? Just more secrets; more splinters into his brain.

"What the hell-

"I warned you to keep your mouth shut," Snape drawled purposefully, not even bothering to glance at him. "Minerva, you know Albus would have let him stay-

"Well," she sighed, massaging her forehead with her age-creased hand. "Albus' benevolence could have been considered his downfall, alongside his desire to see the good in everyone."

Snape made a small sound of agreement. "Be that as it may," he mumbled quietly. "I'm running out of time. He needs a place away from the Dark Lord."

The old witch tensed her lips and moved her wise stare to study the youngest inhabitant of the room. Draco tried to hold the exchange but found himself glaring down at his lap, his lids heavy with fatigue. He'd been unable to manage a decent night's sleep since the night of June 1st, four days before his seventeenth birthday. Call it the cold that had crept in through the cracks of their hideout, or the painful hunger pangs that he'd suffered for five months, or perhaps even the flimsy remains of his conscience.

Sleep was a forgotten luxury, as was a decent meal. And a bed. And a shower. And warmth...

"Very well," McGonagall murmured finally, holding her head a little higher as she spoke. "He may stay. But I have my terms, Mr Malfoy, and if any of them are broken, you will be on your own."

Draco slowly raised his eyes to regard the woman with an agitated look. Who was she to lay down a list of rules? Like she was doing him a favour. He didn't want to be here. He didn't need her bloody help. She could stick it up her-

"Your wand, Mr Malfoy," she demanded calmly, stretching out her hand.

He snorted. "Sod off," he muttered coldly, but he felt something at his side move, and watched with furious eyes as his wand left his pocket and landed in her palm.

"You will not be permitted to attend classes with the rest of the students," she told him crisply. "I would think the reasons would be pretty obvious for that. You are to remain unseen and I'm sure you wouldn't be welcomed back by the other students anyway."

He rolled his eyes. He hated people who found it necessary to state the obvious.

"You will not leave the room you are given," she continued harshly, her lips pursed with stress. "If you step one foot out of Hogwarts without my permission then you will not be allowed back in. Ever."

Draco rubbed his chin and looked at Snape, who was watching him with that familiar impatient stare. He wanted to tell them both to fuck off; to mind their own business, but he knew this offer wasn't optional. He reminded himself again that he had nowhere to go. So that was it. Another place he wasn't allowed to leave. Another sanity-draining prison. Merlin, help him to save his mind.

"He will stay here?" Snape questioned, breaking the silence. "With you?"

"I have far too much on my plate to play chaperone, Severus," the witch explained in a clipped tone. "I have someone else in mind to keep an eye on him."

Snape frowned. "Slughorn?" he guessed. "One of the professors?"

"You know first-hand that they wouldn't have time for that," she replied with an arched eyebrow. "Considering the circumstances, Severus, there are only a handful of people I trust fully, and if you want Mr Malfoy's whereabouts to remain secret, then he will stay with Miss Granger."

Draco's eyes doubled in size and mouth went dry. "The fucking Mudblood-

"You will do well to mind your language, Mr Malfoy," she threatened with her clipped tone. "I think I've made it quite clear that your stay here is conditional-

"You think shoving me in a room with her will be safe?" he questioned with a disbelieving face. "If there is anyone other than the Dark Lord who would want me killed, it's the Mudblood-

"You will stop using that word," the witch reiterated with a scolding finger. "I am certain that Miss Granger is capable of handling this...situation maturely."

Draco released a humourless bark of laughter and shook his head. "You're off your bloody rocker."

"Apparently so," she agreed. "But if I was you, I wouldn't encourage me to reconsider this arrangement."

He narrowed his glare and tuned to Snape with an expression of sheer disgust. "This is your idea of protection?" he spat though his bared teeth. "Handing me over to these morons-

"Enough," he hushed him quietly, still eyeing McGonagall with a curious expression. "Are you certain Miss Granger is the wisest option, Minerva?"

"She's the only option," she stated resolutely. "She is the only student I completely trust."

"But one of the professors would surely be more appropriate."

"The professors have enough trouble keeping their eyes on the other students," the headmistress said with an edge of impatience. "Miss Granger is perfectly capable and she just so happens to have a spare room in her quarters-

"This is a joke," Draco growled, wrinkling his nose with disdain. "I refuse to stay with that-

"I won't tell you to shut up again," Snape sneered, take a long stride to smack the back of of his head.

"You will do as you are told, Mr Malfoy," the witch warned stiffly. "You will only have one offer of help from us and then you're on your own."

He felt the urge to challenge the witch rise in his throat, tickling his tonsils, but he was so exhausted. Hogwarts was so much warmer than the shed, and the warmth was like a sedative. The plush chair was absorbing him, no matter how hard he tried to ignore it. The smell of food lingered in the air too, and it was doing betraying things to his empty stomach.

"Shall I take that your silence means you accept our offer?"

Offer. He snorted. It wasn't an offer she was giving him, and everybody in the room knew it. It was an ultimatum. Stay with the enemy or risk death. The will to live only just beat his pride. Fine, let them feed him and provide an ancient roof over his head. His parents would be looking for him. His father would convince the Dark Lord to overlook his...mishap. Perhaps.

"He accepts," Snape spoke on his behalf, giving his ex-pupil a stern look that dared him to protest.

"So be it," McGonagall sighed, with all the dread of a demon-bargained soul. "Do you have any belongings?"

His eyes fell into his lap again. The simple answer was no. No, he didn't have a bloody thing to call his own. Just the multi-scourgified and battered clothes he'd been wearing since that

night, and a set of robes that Snape had given him. He was stripped of all the tokens of wealth; the symbols that represented his infamous heritage, and he hated it.

"No," he spat quickly, shuttering his eyes.

"Then I will have the House-elves get some things for you," she told him, her tone no softer than before. "I'll have them sent to Miss Granger's room at some point tomorrow."

"And Miss Granger has agreed to this arrangement?" the older wizard questioned with a sceptical tone.

"Not yet."

Draco's golden eyebrows rose high on his pale forehead. Not yet? The woman was digging his grave faster than Voldemort.

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She dragged her anxiety-nibbled fingertips over the old bricks as she shuffled her feet down the corridor, her other hand clutching her glowing wand to guide her way. She'd figured out why McGonagall had summoned her now. There was only one possibility.

Bad news.

Someone had died. Or been hurt. Perhaps Harry and Ron's plans had been discovered. Maybe the school was under another threat. Or Voldemort could have found the Order's headquarters.

There were hundreds of possibilities, and all of them bad.

She mourned her optimism; wished it hadn't been stolen by Astronomy Tower's dark memory and the absence of her best friend's sad thoughts of that night were stolen when McGonagall's distorted voice rattled down the passage, and just as the echoes subsided, another voice joined her. A man's voice.

Her grip on her wand tightened and she picked up her pace, the smacks of her footsteps loud amongst the acoustics. She couldn't discern specific words or even if there was perhaps a third voice vibrating along the walls now. With a twitch of her wrist and the password whispered again under her breath, the thick door slammed open. Her eyes went wide and wild when she absorbed the scene.

Snape. Here. In Hogwarts.

She didn't even notice Malfoy.

Three heads whipped around to look at her, but she only saw one. Him. The man that had killed the greatest man she'd ever known. She felt fire burst in her chest.

"You," she breathed, her features stretching with shock for a moment before the angry lines creased her face. Her wand arm straightened with an agitated snap of her elbow, and her bark-brown eyes narrowed into dangerous slits. "Impedimenta!"

He blocked her spell effortlessly, and it infuriated her more. The witch's rage was pounding her ears, muffling McGonagall's request for her to relax. Her magic was throbbing at her fingertips, ready for revenge. She fired a Stupefy, but it was deflected like her last attack.

Draco watched the duel silently with his calculating eyes, wondering why Snape was actually participating in it at all. Surely a quick Petrificus would put the meddlesome Mudblood in her place. She hadn't noticed him; hadn't once taken her eyes off the other wizard. He would bet his family's fortune that spotting him would hardly calm the little tantrum she was having right now.

Snape eyed the girl calmly and shot a silent disarming spell in her direction, deciding it was best to end this before it got out of hand. He cocked an impressed eyebrow when it had no effect, and faltered when another one of her curses made him stumble on his feet. She had been practising. When had she learned silent shielding charms?

"Enough!" McGonagall tried to intervene, but Hermione's eyes barely flicked over to the woman. "Miss Granger, calm down and let me explain-

The young witch didn't blink. "Confrin-

Her wand flew away from her hand, and her confused and betrayed stare shifted over to the headmistress. She felt charmed ropes coil around her to restrict her movements, and frustrated tears sauntered down her cheeks. The older witch gave her an apologetic look before she jerked her wand again, and Hermione felt her feet leave the floor before she went flying back into a closet.

The door closed behind her with a blunt bang, and she remained frozen in the dark for a stunned moment before she was struggling with everything she had and shouting until her throat felt stripped by bleach. Why was McGonagall doing this? She coughed on an outraged sob and swallowed back the scream caught in her windpipe.

What the hell was going on?

On the other side of the door, Draco sank back into the chair with a roll of his eyes. He watched the pair of professors as they shared a look of scepticism and resisted the compulsion to shake his head or laugh at their stupidity. How could they honestly be surprised that she had reacted the way she did? He really was surrounded by bloody idiots.

"Well," he commented, his voice raspy at the back of his throat, but still rich with surplus sarcasm. "That went well."

Chapter End Notes

And so begins another story...I know this chapter was rather short, but I assure you that the rest will be a little longer. I hope this introduction has been successful with grasping your attention! This fic is basically going to screw with Draco's head. A lot. And Hermione's for that matter. I'm going to enjoy this...I hope you do too! I know the whole 'they share a room' thing has been done but I have yet to find a fic that has one of them confined to the room and slowly losing their mind...This will be a little dark with some twists and mature themes and content later on. Also, explicit language throughout...

For everyone who read my last fic *Hunted*, I just want to thank you all for showing an interest and hope that this fic gains as much positive feedback from you lovely people! Fingers crossed, hey! I promise you more wine-induced chapters and, hopefully, quick updates! Read and Review please! Love to know your thoughts!

Bex-chan.

Punch

Chapter Notes

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

"She's improved," Snape commented, eyeing the door with a pensive look.

"You have no idea," McGonagall sighed, frowning as Hermione's protests only grew louder, ringing around her office and making her cringe. "She's been practising a lot with Horace and myself."

"I can see that," he nodded, glancing over to Draco. "Perhaps she will be able to manage him."

"She is capable," the headmistress assured him. "Severus, the anti-Apparition wards will kick in again shortly, and I think it will be easier to explain this to her if you aren't here-

"I've been here too long anyway," he agreed, taking some long strides to the young wizard hunched in his seat. "Remember what we discussed, Draco-

"You're actually leaving me here?" he questioned, hissing out the words through his teeth. "With these people? Thanks a bunch-

"Try to remember that you are in danger," his old professor advised, his voice thick and condescending. "And these people are the only ones that are willing to provide you with somewhere to stay-

"Well, more fool then," Draco shrugged dismissively, giving McGonagall a long and bored look. "Were you expecting some sort of gratitude for this?"

"I have no expectations of you at all, Mr Malfoy," she told him with genuine disappointment. "Your constant failure to do anything worthwhile has destroyed any confidence I may have had in you."

His cocky façade flinched at her words. Not because he was bothered about upsetting the wrinkly wench; he really didn't give a shit. No, it was that she had called him a failure. And the truth hurt. In the last seven years, he couldn't recall one thing that he had managed to successfully achieve. Not one. And his last cock-up had proved fatal; fatal enough to warrant a death-wish and an indefinite stay in this shithole.

Failure.

"Would you like me to pretend I care?" he muttered casually, looking back to Snape. "I thought you were leaving."

The blond growled when he received another harsh slap to the back of his skull. "You should learn to control that tongue of yours, Draco," the older man scolded sharply. "I apologise for this, Minerva."

"There is no need," she insisted. "I can handle it from here. You have my word that I will do everything I can to ensure his safety. You really should go, Severus. It will be getting light soon."

"Right," he mumbled, giving the witch a sullen nod. "I'm not sure if I will be able to contact you any time soon."

"You know where we are if you need us," she said, her voice softer and bordering on sombre. "Good luck, Severus."

Draco released a disgusted snort that was drowned out by the loud snap of Apparition. He felt his jaw twitch and fought the embers of apprehension that settled in his gut. Snape may have turned out to be a blood traitor, but at least the creepy guy had been bound by a Vow to protect him, whereas as these blood traitors would probably smother him in his sleep. Another one of Granger's shrill howls ruptured his eardrums, and he turned to McGonagall with a weary and half-shut stare.

"This will be fun," he muttered dryly, folding his arms over his chest.

"You will not say anything to make this more difficult," the witch commanded with an agitated finger pointed in his direction. "And you will certainly not use that awful word."

"You mean Mudblood?" he questioned, drawing out the derogatory term. "You seem awfully confident with that assumption-

"I'm warning you, Mr Malfoy," she persisted. "You are only making things more difficult for yourself if you continue to act this way-

"Just get it over with," he groaned, rubbing his eyes. The Mudblood's screeches had made his painful heartbeats thud against his temple, and the warmth was lulling his lids to fall. He really wanted some sleep. "It's nearly three in the morning and I would like to get some rest-

"And I'm sure you'd like to do it in a bed," she said slowly, staring him down. "I know you haven't had a bed for a while, Mr Malfoy-

"What's your point?"

"If you insist on making this harder than it should be," she started, taking a couple of steps towards the screaming closet. "Then I might decide not to let you sleep in the bed, or use the shower, or perhaps you would-

"I get your point," he scowled, firing her a foul glare. "Just get on with it-

"It would also do you good to learn some manners," she advised, finishing her short distance to the closet's door.

With an overdue calming breath, the headmistress tugged open the door and frowned when she saw the mess. Hermione's struggles had knocked some of the shelves, and the younger witch had gained a few bruises from some raining books. She paused her thrashing when she noticed McGonagall's presence in the doorway, her chest heaving against the ropes. The

greying witch angled her wand to levitate Hermione into her office and sighed when her student recommenced her attempts to get free.

Draco resisted the taunting words that teased his tongue for the sake of a comfortable night. Granger looked like hell had gargled her and then spat her back out; her chaotic hair swarming around her face like Autumn leaves, and her eyes red-stained with what looked like a sleep-deprived month. Good. He was glad she was suffering. Glad that somebody else was.

"Let me out of these things!" she shouted, her eyes swollen with tears as she hovered a few inches off the ground.

"I need you to calm down, Miss Granger-

"I will not calm down!" she refused, her voice quaking and scared. "What the hell-

"I promise I will explain everything," the professor attempted to soothe her. "I need you to calm down, Hermione. Please."

She stole six long breaths and swallowed back the anguish wedged in her throat. She still hadn't noticed him. "Okay," she murmured. "Okay, just please get these things off me."

With a moment of hesitation, McGonagall released the spell, and Hermione's feet landed on the floorboards with a small thump. She brushed her palms over the raw lines left by the ropes and studied the older woman like a stranger. She coughed away a confused sob and took a wary step towards the centre of the room, oblivious that she'd moved closer to Malfoy.

"Why was Snape here?" she questioned finally, deciding that the silence was far too vexing.

"Before I tell you anything," McGonagall started. "You need to understand that you can't reveal this to anyone. Not even Mr Potter or Mr Weasley."

Hermione shifted her weight and pursed her lips, analysing the situation in her head. McGonagall's words did not bode well with her; she told Harry and Ron everything, and her professor's odd behaviour in the last few minutes had completely baffled her. Her fawny eyes darted away, needing to focus on something else, and that's when she saw him.

Him.

She locked on to his icy-cool glare and felt something in her soul snap.

She didn't remember sprinting over to him, everything was blurry and fast. When she was close enough, she drew back her balled fist and rammed into his face, hard enough to scorch her knuckles. She felt a feral growl vibrate in her throat, and drew her fist back again, the blood slithering down his chin and across her fingers no where near satisfying enough. She wanted to pound his face until it was unrecognisable, until it stopped reminding her of what he'd done.

But McGonagall's spell dragged her to the other side of the room. And she was screaming again.

She fought the magic so hard her limbs burned, but it wouldn't give. "What the hell is that bastard-

"Stop it!" the other witch shouted, keeping her wand trained on Hermione's writhing body. There were no tears now; just a rage that simmered and practically caused the girl to glow. "Hermione, you must listen-

"You spineless twat!" she snapped, ignoring McGonagall and curling her lip as she eyed Malfoy. He was thumbing away the trickle of blood that was leaking from his lip with an expression that was far too aloof for her to handle. He caught her eyes again, and her hatred was blinding. He was slimmer than she recalled, and he looked a little worn, but everything else about him was exactly how she remembered. The creamy hair, the china skin, the rain-cloud eyes. It was awful, and she roared with outrage.

"Control yourself," McGonagall attempted again, stepping into Hermione's line of sight. "I'm trying to explain-

"How could you?" Hermione hissed at the ageing witch, fresh tears springing to her fiery glare. "They killed Dumbledore! How the fuck could you do this to-

"That is quite enough!" she replied, her tone that familiar strict bite. "I'm trying to tell you-

"Nothing you could say would-

"Severus Snape is a spy for the Order," she said bluntly, satisfied when Hermione seized up with shock and released a dulcet gasp. "He is on our side-

"Th-that's impossible," the brunette stuttered, ceasing her struggles to gape at her professor with disbelief. "No. No there's no way-

"It's true-

"You're lying!" Hermione blurted, her cheeks flushed like ripe peaches dotted with dew. She twisted her neck so she could look at Malfoy again, and she felt bile singe the back of her tongue. She felt sick. "They killed him...They-they killed Dumbledore-

"It's okay, Hermione," McGonagall attempted to console the girl, before she glanced over her shoulder to the silent wizard; still sat in his chair and trying to nurse the gash in his lip. "Mr Malfoy, I need to talk with Miss Granger alone."

"Good for you," he grumbled, flinching when it hurt to move his mouth.

"Mr Malfoy," she sighed, suddenly realising how tired she was. "I need to discuss some things privately-

"Why?" he shot back quickly. "Snape told me he was a spy, so I know all this-

"You don't know everything," the witch told him. "And you don't have any right to all the information-

"Well, I'm comfortable here-

"Don't force me to move you," she warned, gesturing with her free hand to a door on the other side of her office. "There's a kitchen through there. Help yourself to some food and I will call you when

we are finished."

A retort lingered behind his teeth but a spasm in his stomach reminded him that he hadn't eaten in the last twenty-four hours. His curiosity was loud, but the rumbles of starvation were louder. He slowly rose from his seat and gave both the witches a bored look before he headed to the kitchen, muttering a vibrant list of obscenities under his breath.

McGonagall turned back to Hermione once they were alone and tilted her head thoughtfully. "Will you listen to what I have to say if I release the spell?"

"Snape's really a spy?" she asked with a meek tone.

"I swear to you on my life," she said clearly. "Will you listen to me?"

With a confused and pathetic sob, she nodded her head and felt her arms and legs regain control. She wiped away the evidence of her weakness on her sleeve and observed the witch she looked up to with wild and desperate eyes. "Snape," she murmured hesitantly. "He can't be a spy. He killed-

"Albus left me one of his memories before he died," the headmistress started, her voice wavering a little with emotion. "And it was of a discussion between him and Severus-

"But-

"Albus knew about Draco Malfoy's mission," she continued. "And he asked Severus to complete...the task, so that Mr Malfoy would not. He wanted to save him-

"He is not worth saving," she frowned, shooting an agitated look to the kitchen door. "He is-

"You must understand that Mr Malfoy was forced into his mission, Hermione," she offered, but the argument was weak. It was hard to defend someone who had put so many lives in danger all before his seventeenth birthday. "Albus knew that Severus had agreed to an Unbreakable Vow to protect Draco so he asked Severus to do it instead-

"Does Malfoy know all this?" she questioned, spitting out his name like poison.

"I don't think so," McGonagall shook her head. "He knows that Severus is a spy for the Order, and that makes you the fourth person to know this information. No one else knows and I intend to keep it that way-

"So why was Snape here? Surely coming here would be dangerous?"

She sighed. "He's asked me to protect Mr Malfoy from now on-

"What?" Hermione barked, her brow wrinkling with distaste. "Why the hell should we?"

"Because if we don't," she answered carefully, making sure her student would understand the importance of her words. "Then Voldemort might find Mr Malfoy and kill him-

"That's no real loss-

"And then the Vow would kill Severus," she carried on, ignoring the harsh words from the girl. "Also, if Mr Malfoy left here, then he could reveal Severus' secret and he would be killed."

Hermione faltered.

Snape is a spy. One of us...

"And above anything else," McGonagall brought her back to the damning present. "If we don't protect Draco Malfoy from harm, then Albus' sacrifice will be for nothing."

The female fraction of the Golden Trio felt something in her chest drop. None of this made sense, and yet everything seemed to slide into place in her head. She would swear to Merlin's grave that every second of this haunting night was draining away her energy. There was just too much to handle; too much to take in. Snape. A spy. Dumbledore had known...And then a troubling thought popped into her head.

"Why did you call me here?"

"Because he will be staying with you," McGonagall told her steadily. "You are my most trustworthy student and your skills as a witch are-

"How can you do this to me?" she moaned, scrunching her face with stress. "I hate him. He's evil-

"I know that this is a lot to ask," the other witch said with genuine sympathy. "But there is nobody else I can trust with this. You have a spare room-

"We'll kill each other-

"No you won't," she argued, taking some steps towards the witch to place a comforting hand on her shoulder. "I am keeping his wand and I will ward your dorm so he can't leave and you have a password for your bedroom-

"There must be someone else," Hermione pleaded. "Anyone else. One of the professors-

"You are the only person who I trust to handle this," McGonagall breathed sadly. "The other professors have too much on their plates as it is. I need you to do this-

"For how long?"

"For as long as it takes," she answered cryptically, offering the girl another apologetic frown. "I am really sorry for this, Miss Granger. If things are really that bad then I will do my best to

make other arrangements, but I honestly believe that you can do this."

She wanted to protest; to tell McGonagall to let Malfoy rot in the grave he had dug himself. She wanted to point out that he would probably try to kill her in her sleep, or that she wouldn't last a day without hexing the twat until he was a pointless mess smeared against her wall. But images of Dumbledore fluttered in her brain.

If we don't protect Draco Malfoy from harm, then Albus' sacrifice will be for nothing...

"Okay," she found herself mumbling absently. "Okay, I-I will try."

McGonagall's face instantly relaxed. "Thank you," she gave the young witch a forced smile as she handed her back her wand. "I know this will be difficult for you, and I promise that I will do what I can to make it easier for you."

Hermione released a loud and lonely breath. "I'm tired," she whispered, her body and mind overworked and desiring sleep.

"I think we all need some rest," the headmistress agreed. "I will escort you both back to your dorm and set up the wards."

"Alright," she shrugged, too exhausted to argue any more. "Let's get this over with."

McGonagall gave the girl's shoulder a reassuring pat before she headed to her kitchen and pushed open the door. "Come now, Mr Malfoy," she called, eyeing the wizard closely as he came back into the office, his hands pushed arrogantly in his pockets as he gave Hermione a bitter and intolerant look.

"Get over your little bitch-fit?" he sneered, purposefully keeping his distance.

The urge to scream at him until his ears wept blood swamped her, but she shoved it aside. Something twiggled in her head, and she realised then that she had a massive advantage over him. She had her wand. She was in control.

"You still have some blood on your chin," she told him, her words drawn out and sharp.

He hid his irritation with an amused snort as he slowly wiped the back on his hand across his mouth again, keeping his stare locked onto hers. He realised then that her eyes weren't brown; they were more like gold. How repulsively Gryffindor. So, the little Mudblood thought she was in charge did she? His smirk stretched a little. Fine, let her believe that; at least he would have a little entertainment if he was going to be locked away in her room.

"Not happy to see me, Granger?" he goaded. "You look a little tense-

"And you look like shit," she retorted, trailing her tempestuous glare over his tattered robes. "I'm warning you, Malfoy. Don't wind me up-

"Or what?" he growled, bring his face too close to hers. She held her ground and cringed when she realised his breath smelled of the blood she had coaxed with her fist.

"You don't get it, do you?" she whispered, narrowing her eyes. "You have nothing. You are nothing. And now you're stuck here; forced to accept our help like some pathetic child."

Something flickered in his eyes; something between shame and spite. That look ignited a small and fickle flame in her stomach that made her feel powerful; cocky. It didn't last long, just enough to inject a little more boldness into her backbone.

"I hope this is killing you," she whispered with harsh honesty. "I hope that this is tearing you apart-

"Fuck off, Mud-

"That's enough," McGonagall interrupted, and he arched an eyebrow when she aimed her wand at him. "Let's go, Mr Malfoy. It's late."

His eyes flickered between the old bint and her wand. He could honestly say that he'd never planned to attempt a runner on the way to Granger's dorm. There would be no point with two armed witches watching him like he was an overfed cauldron; volatile and hazardous. He rolled his eyes at her and started to follow Granger out of the room, McGonagall behind him keeping her wand trained on the back of his neck.

The walk was silent, and the two witches glanced nervously around constantly to ensure the corridors were empty of wandering souls. They were, of course, and the three sets of footfalls mingled with the tittering echoes of rain. Draco eyed the back of Granger's head as they walked, noting the strained muscles in her shoulders and the too-tight grip on her wand. At least she wasn't waving it in his face though, unlike a certain headmistress who found it necessary to prod his spine every few steps.

The younger witch quickened her steps a little to pull aside a set of heavy drapes and reveal a portrait of a pride of lions, purring and basking in their painted sunlight. He didn't hear the password Granger muttered, but then he probably wasn't supposed to.

She disappeared inside and he barged in after her, as though he already owned the room. He took a slow and revolted look around the sitting room and Hermione watched him closely as he heeled away his shoes and headed towards the bathroom, shoving his way past her with more force than necessary. She was about to shout after him, but he simply slammed the toilet door behind him with a shuddering smack that made her flinch.

"Wanker," she hissed under her breath, twisting her neck to give McGonagall a weary look. "Will setting up the wards take long? I'd like to go to bed."

"Just a few minutes," the professor assured her, twitching her wrist and gliding her wand around the door.

The complicated incantation sounded more like lullaby to Hermione, and her lids felt like stone. She heard the shower turn on, and the running water hummed alongside McGonagall's words. She was so exhausted, and the night had done damaging things to her mind. She just wanted to lie down in a dark room and accept the dreams; the nightmares. She snapped out of

her trance when the headmistress moved into her vision, her mouth moving with unheard words.

"Sorry?"

"I'm finished," McGonagall told her softly, her face grim. "I must remind you again, Miss Granger, that this has to remain between us."

"I know," she replied.

And she really did know. She had become too acquainted with secrets in the last six years, and most had taken their toll, but she knew instantly that this one would haunt her the most. For the sole reason that she couldn't tell Harry and Ron; this one would stretch the limits of her tolerance. She rolled the word secret over in her head, and noticed it even sounded harsh; like a snake's hiss.

"Do I need to remind you to keep a close eye on your wand?"

"I always do," the brunette sighed, and the other woman mirrored her unease.

"I know this will be hard for you," McGonagall admitted. "But you have yet to disappoint me, Hermione."

She watched the older witch disappear from the room and suddenly felt ridiculously claustrophobic. She turned her head to eye the bathroom door and chewed her lip nervously. Clawing her agitated fingers through her mussed hair, she dragged her feet to her bedroom, keeping her anxious eyes on the bathroom door until she mumbled her password, *Lutra lutra*, and ducked inside.

She didn't bother shedding her clothes, just collapsed with an ungraceful fall onto her bed and cocooned herself amongst the sheets and blankets. She glanced out of her window and the sky was still black, but then winter had that effect on the colours and moods of the mornings. The distant calls of early birds were the give away, and a quick look at her clock confirmed that it was almost four in the morning.

She thanked Merlin that it was Friday and that she had no classes tomorrow, although she wondered if she really should be thanking anything or anyone considering the events of tonight.

The trickling droplets of Malfoy's wash were loud and clear in her room, and served as a taunting reminder to her new and unwelcome roommate. Her temple was throbbing with the beginnings of a stress-induced headache, and she knew that despite her fatigue, she would have a hard time finding sleep.

Half an hour passed before the water died, and she could hear Malfoy's crass movements as he headed into his own room. She groaned into her pillow when those sounds carried too; skimming across the bathroom tiles and leaking through the thin walls. She grabbed her wand to hurriedly mumble a silencing charm on her room, and hoped that it would last until morning.

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Draco combed his fingers through his damp hair and fiddled with the hem of the towel. He couldn't begin to describe how good it felt to have a decent shower; to feel clean again. His eyes roamed the bedroom and noted the Gryffindor colours with a repulsed grumble that simmered against his tongue. And this was where he would be staying; amongst the gold and red mess.

He heard a distant noise and realised it must have been Granger shifting in her sleep. He could hear that? Great.

Still, at least the bed was comfortable.

He discarded the towel and opted for sleeping in the nude, deciding blemishing his freshly-cleaned skin with his scruffy clothes would just irritate him. His eyes fell to the Dark Mark staining his ashen flesh, and he traced the outline with the tip of his finger; scowling into the darkness before he fell back into the inviting fabrics and stared up at the ceiling.

The sky had turned a nasty shade of indigo when he finally managed steal that elusive slumber that he'd been craving for weeks.

Chapter End Notes

Aw crap...this was a short chapter too...Needed to end it there though...Sorry! I promise the upcoming chapters will be bloody longer!

Anyway...thanks for the amazing responses I've had for this already! I see a lot of familiar names and I just want to thank you so much for giving this fic a chance! Also...wehey! Reached 900 reviews for Hunted and that's just...wow! Anyway..back to this fic...It's going to be quite similar to Hunted in that the relationship is going to be slow...And I'm working with Draco's prejudices this time too!

I'm a couple of chapters ahead on this because I'm going back to Uni soon and I wanted to keep my quick-update halo in place! As for the wine...there's a special offer on at the local supermarket, so I am all stocked up on my favourite way to get inspiration! Hope you enjoyed this chapter...lend me your thoughts. If anyone has any questions you're welcome to ask in review or mail my fanfic FB profile (link on profile page).

Oh, and *Lutra lutra* is the Latin term for the European freshwater Otter.

Read and Review!

Bex-chan

Doors

Chapter Notes

For Anwen...

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

She woke too quickly.

Her eyes snapped open and went wide, darting nervously around her room. She sucked in a short gasp and covered her face with her palms; blinking away her sleep and gulping back her dry throat. She felt disorientated and muddled, like an imp had skipped through the caverns of her mind and fiddled with her thoughts. She rubbed away the cold sweat on her forehead and sat up, looking around her room and ensuring that everything was where it should be.

Her nightmares had been so vivid recently.

She couldn't for the life of her decide if last night had been a trick of her subconscious or if everything had been real. Perhaps there'd been no Snape. No Malfoy. No secret. Maybe she was still the sole inhabitant of her dorm. Maybe. Her tired gaze fell to the rope burns on her arms and she exhaled a disappointed sigh. She'd wanted so bad for it to be a dream; so willing to delude herself. Call it the brain's defence mechanisms or call it hope. Hell, call it whatever you wanted; the fact of the matter was, it hadn't been a nightmare.

It made her feel sick. She could actually feel the contents of her stomach churn as she contemplated just how close he was. Just her small bathroom between them. Just two walls.

She glanced at her clock and wanted to scream when she realised she'd only managed three hours sleep. Hermione had honestly thought that she would have managed to gain a little more rest considering how exhausted she'd been. But no. Evidently, her insomnia was here to stay. Joy.

It was pushing nine in the already miserable morning, and she could already hear the usual raindrops tapping against her window. She knew that it was futile to try and get any more sleep, so she slowly eased herself out of bed, grabbed her bathrobe and wand, and headed for the shower. Keeping as quiet as she could, she peered out of her bedroom warily, catching sight of Malfoy's discarded and scuffed shoes.

The remains of her optimism fluttered away with that final damning observation, and she quickly slipped into the bathroom.

Shrugging off yesterday's clothes, she muttered a quick spell to flick on the shower at a high heat. The witch turned to look at herself in the mirror, brushing her knotted curls away from her face and fingering the shadowy crescents under her eyes. There was too much torture on

her face, and it was tucked into the creases of her permanent frown. She looked like a tracing-paper version of herself; paler and almost translucent. Like frosted glass.

She focussed on her eyes and thanked Merlin when she saw the familiar glint in them, the spark of fire and determination that had always lingered; that had yet to be beaten.

She was fine. Just tired and wondering exactly how she was supposed to coexist with Malfoy.

The mirror started to steam so she turned away from her worrying reflection and released a content moan as the steamy water soothed her shape. She closed her eyes and massaged the soap into her skin, inhaling the vanilla scent with a calming breath. She lathered her arms first, then her shapely chest and flat stomach, and then bent down to stroke the length of her legs.

This felt good. Like normality, and she basked in the sensations. She could feel her muscles easing and it was wonderful, relaxing enough that she allowed her ever-crowded mind to cease thinking, if only to shield the memories of last night. If only to forget that someone she despised was sharing her dorm. A Death Eater.

It took a bit more soap, but she let it all go and allowed herself to escape, because she knew it would only get harder from here.

Merlin, forgive her for pretending it didn't exist for some stolen minutes.

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Draco lifted one heavy lid when a feminine moan seeped into the room. The whispers of running water had started to stir him a few moments ago, but it was the strange sighs and mews that woke him completely. His brow furrowed when he didn't recognise his surroundings, and he raised his head to eye the room suspiciously.

He remembered then. He remembered that he was in Hogwarts. Remembered he was sharing a dorm with the Mudblood. Shit.

He gnashed his teeth and his eyes went to the window. Draco knew it wouldn't work, but he tried anyway; flinging himself off the bed and trying to shove it open. The clasp wouldn't budge. He drew back his fist and smashed it into the glass as hard as he could, but it didn't even crack. He growled as a small trickle of blood slithered across his knuckles. It hurt, but he'd had so much worse.

Yes, definitely trapped. Definitely his new prison.

Another female purr leaked into the air and he instinctively reached for his wand to silence the irritating sounds. But, he didn't have his wand, did he. Didn't have a bloody thing. Not even a set of clean clothes to put on.

"For fuck's sake," he muttered, heading back to the bed.

He hadn't had enough rest; his movements were sluggish and his sight blurry. He had five months of sleep to catch up on after all, and it would have been so easy if her incessant shower noises weren't polluting his atmosphere. He snatched the pillow and covered his ears, but it only muffled her.

He had a sinking and scratching feeling that she did this every morning.

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Her imagination only managed to distract her for fifteen minutes or so, before reality clawed its way back in. With a dejected breath, she stopped the water and left the shower, returning to the mirror and palming away the condensation. She gave this new reflection a ghost of a smile, deciding it was notably better. The warm water had roused a healthy blush to her skin and she felt more human. More present.

She wrapped the fluffy and practical bathrobe around her, and spared her damp and blurry reflection one last look before she grabbed her wand off the sink to mutter a quick drying charm for her hair, and then left the bathroom. Her fist had just closed around the knob to her bedroom when she heard a small knock at the main door. She cringed slightly but sorted her wits and crossed her sitting room to answer it, and a genuine smile graced her features when she eyed her visitor.

"Hello Dobby," she grinned, noting the large trunk behind him.

"Morning Miss," he nodded meekly, ever the nervous little soul. "Headmistress said for Dobby to bring you this."

"Thank you," she said, knowing they were probably things for Malfoy. "Could you do me a favour, Dobby?"

"Yes Miss!" the House-elf chirped merrily. "What does Miss want Dobby to do?"

"Could you possibly sort out some extra food for me?" she requested. "And I can come to collect it later?"

"Dobby can bring it here."

"That's okay," she told him with a delicate wave of her hand. "I'm going for a little walk later so I'll pick it up. Honestly, it's fine."

"Yes Miss," he mumbled, obviously a little disappointed. "I go now. Must help clean after breakfast."

She wanted to tell him to stay, feeling substantially...safer with someone she knew around, but he was gone with a snap of his fingers. She did some quick calculations in her head and realised that she hadn't seen any of her friends for five days, having spent all of her free time in the library doing what she could to assist the Order. She glanced behind her at Malfoy's door and concluded that she would need to meet with them soon.

They were another dose of something normal. Another escape.

Hermione pulled her robe a little tighter around herself as a chilly breeze swept up the corridor and invaded her dorm. She jerked her wand to levitate the chest into her sitting area, and let it crash to the floor with a loud thud just outside Malfoy's room. She considered giving him a shout to explain that he now had some belongings, but reasoned with her commonsense that the Hogwarts motto was there for a reason. It really was best to let sleeping dragons lie, especially a prejudiced, psychotic Dragon who was caged against his will.

She jumped when the Autumn breeze shoved her door closed with a piercing clap.

And then she could hear movement coming from his room, accompanied by heated and masculine muttering that sounded like venom; even if it was just muffled nonsense behind the door. She considered running for her room to avoid the hassle, but the stubborn lioness within her wouldn't allow it. She squared her shoulders defiantly and narrowed her eyes, preparing for the inevitable theatrics.

His door was flung open with an agitated tug, hard enough that it bashed into the wall, but she beat the instinct to flinch. The frustrated Slytherin came into her sight, his tall body filling the doorway and clumsily clad in his trousers and his unfastened black shirt. But she didn't notice. She refused to let her eyes wander lower than his bottom lashes, knowing that eye-contact was power. It was control.

"You are doing my head in!" he roared, his upper lip curled and his cheekbones high with irritation. "Could you make any more sodding noise? You-

"You want me to make more noise?" she replied, innocently cocking her head to the side. With a swish of her wand, all the doors in her dorm opened and then slammed close again, and she refused her instinct to blink at the heavy bangs. "Better for you, Malfoy?"

"Very mature of you, Granger," he sneered, and she could feel the intensity of his stare from across the room. "You think you're so fucking clever-

"I think we can both agree that I am fucking clever," she cut in, a little uncomfortable with her swear word, but she covered it well. "As you so eloquently put it-

"STOP making so much noise," he growled, his voice a foreboding rumble that lingered between them. "Stop banging things, stop talking, stop moving-

"I can do whatever the hell I want in my room," Hermione argued, faltering when he sidestepped the trunk and stalked towards her. She backed up against the wall and raised her wand, but he didn't cease his long strides. "Don't come near me!"

"As if I would fucking touch you," he growled, stopping only when the end of her wand prodded his chest. "I would sooner die-

"Be my guest," she retorted quickly. "It would be worth it-

"I'm warning you, Granger," he sneered. "I refuse to put up with this! It's like having a dyspraxic Giant in the room!"

"Deal with it," she snapped, adding more pressure to his chest with her wand, although she would swear it only pushed her further against the wall. She quickly tugged her robe a little tighter around herself, but if he'd noticed her post-shower attire, he gave no indication whatsoever. Thank Merlin.

"I mean it, Granger," he scowled. "Stop making noise or put a silencing spell on my room-

"As if I would waste my magic to accommodate you-

"Then shut the fuck up!" he yelled, slamming his fist into the wall beside her head. The castle's magic ensured there would be minimal damage, just a small dent, but the vibrations of the hit skimmed across the shell of her ear and roused a reluctant shiver. "I need rest! And I can't get any if you won't shut your Mudblood mouth!"

She drew her free hand back with the intention of hammering it into his creamy face, but maybe she was getting too predictable. Her angry eyes shifted to the long fingers tight around her wrist and she felt her blood bubble like sun-stimulated acid.

"Let go of me-

"You've reached your punch quota for now," he told her quietly. Too quiet. "You're going to have to wait another four years-

"Let go of my arm," she advised, biting out each syllable. "Or I swear I will-

"You'll what?" he challenged, tightening his hold and thrusting her hand against the wall, right next to the dent his fist had left.

Her next move was instinctive and quick, and her wand was at his throat, stabbing the space between his Adam's apple and a vein that spasmed with his rage. Her eyes locked onto his defiantly, daring him to goad her further. Hermione didn't doubt for a second that she would hex him to Hogsmead and back if he continued to tease her fragile temper, but his iron-grey eyes barely flickered, and the grip on her wrist remained firm.

"Go ahead, Granger."

And it was his confidence that rattled her the most; that stirred her magic to pour out of her wand and scorch his skin.

"You fucking bitch!" he shouted, stumbling back and clutching the fresh burn on his neck. "You'll pay for that-

"I've had enough of you," she told him, her wand still trained on the blond. "Go back to your room and get some sleep-

"Don't you even try to boss me around you filthy-

"I'm going out," Hermione explained steadily, even if her anger was begging to skip into her words. "So you will have a good few hours undisturbed sleep. I suggest you make the most of them-

"Then piss off already," he grumbled, turning his back to her and heading to his room.

Another door slammed, and she allowed herself to grimace this time.

She needed to get out. The living room was tainted with new and uninvited scents, and she felt like a hunted badger being smoked out of her set. She tore her gaze away from his door and rushed to her bedroom, changing as quick as she physically could. Fully dressed in her jeans and a comfortable jumper to fight the cold, she swiftly left her Head Girl dorm and started for the Library.

The walk was so much longer than she remembered, and the students that were littered sparsely in the corridors were watching her. She would swear it. But they couldn't know about her vile houseguest...could they? Their lingering stares said otherwise and she quickened her paranoid steps until she was racing with burning thighs and slapping footfalls. And then she smacked straight into a tall wall of flesh, but at least it was polite enough to catch her before she fell.

"Neville," she gasped, regaining her balance on his outstretched arms. "Oh, thank God-

"Hermione," he breathed with evident concern. "Are you alright? You-

"I'm fine," she rushed, tucking a stray curl away with trembling fingers. "I'm sorry, I wasn't looking where I was-

"You're really pale," Neville commented. "Are you ill or something?"

"No, not ill," she shook her head, offering him a false smile. "I just haven't had any breakfast yet."

"We haven't seen you in ages," he told her, and she realised then just how much he'd matured. "Ginny and Luna were saying they missed you yesterday and-

"I know I've been rubbish recently," she sighed, her eyes downcast. "I'm sorry, I've just been trying to help Harry and Ron-

"You need a break, Hermione," he told her. "It's not good for you, and you really do look ill. Just come and meet us for dinner later?"

She was too tired to protest. "Alright," she mumbled, earning a pleased smile from her friend. "I'll meet you in the Great Hall later."

She slipped past him without waiting for a reply and continued her urgent pursuit for the library, shuddering when a hungry growl of thunder shimmied along the corridors. But it was okay; she could see her target now. She threw herself against the doors and savoured a deep breath to still her jittery chest.

Her cider-tinted gaze flickered around the empty chairs and abandoned desks, instinctively knowing that the vast space was only hers yet again. Even Madam Pince had spent less and less time amongst her precious books and tomes, instead passing most of her time with the professors.

Company could do that for some people; distract from the fear and grief.

She supposed that most people found it more appropriate to enjoy the company of loved ones instead of preparing for exams that might never come to pass. Perhaps even she would have snubbed her favourite hobby if she could actually see any of her loved ones. But she couldn't...

Hermione went straight to her usual table, right at the back in the restricted section. Her desk was tucked away amongst the seldom-used bookshelves, with the perfect amount of seclusion for her to toss aside her troubling notions and swim away with the paragraphs. This was her sanctuary.

Lost with the seductive ink-kissed pages, she could forget almost anything.

She Accio'd her most recent text on Horcruxes and started to read, praying that Malfoy's sneering features would be erased from her mind. At least, for a little while.

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Draco dragged the trunk into his room and quickly examined the contents with a critical eye. Well, it could have been substantially worse. While the clothes consisted of items he would have never picked himself, at least there were no horrid hints of red or gold amongst the fabrics. There were a few pairs of black trousers, some white and black shirts and then three or four polo-jumpers in black and grey too. At the bottom of the chest were some simple vests and a set of standard wizarding robes, accompanied with some black shoes, socks and extra underwear.

It was more than he'd expected, but less than he'd hoped for.

With a bitter grunt, he started to organise them in the provided wardrobe the Muggle way. Merlin, he missed his wand. McGonagall may as well have ripped off one of his limbs, the sodding cow.

His wand had managed to keep him occupied when he'd been confined to the shed with Snape; whether he'd simply stretched the extent of his conjuring and transfiguration skills or practised new spells, it had always encouraged time to go that little bit quicker. And now that scraggly old hag had confiscated the only thing he could use to divert himself from hollow hours of nothingness.

He changed his clothes and simply sat on his bed for Merlin knew how long, trying to think of something to do.

He was no idiot; he knew that his inactivity and the imprisonment would do damaging things to him. His sleeping pattern was already buggered, and it was only a matter of time before his mind would start to close in on itself. He'd read the countless stories of foolish wizards who had locked themselves in closets and eventually gone insane after staring at the same four walls and having nothing to do.

He needed a deterrent; something to concentrate on and provide him with a goal, not matter how insignificant it seemed.

Draco headed into the main area of the dorm and steered himself toward the small kitchenette, pointlessly plucking open the cabinets. They were full of the expected products, but he had no idea how to prepare them without his magic.

He settled on two green apples and slowly scanned his surroundings, his stormy eyes settling on a set of shelves practically buckling under the weight of various books. He stared at them for a long minute, rationalising that reading would be an ideal way to keep him engaged.

But no. They were the Mudblood's. He didn't want to touch her things if he could help it.

He continued to study the room as he gnawed away at the ripe fruit, and absently started counting.

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She didn't meet her friends for lunch.

It was a conscious decision, and one that she regretted a few hours later, but she'd honestly thought she'd found something interesting. However, she'd forgotten that the French and Latin translations for the word crux were two entirely different things.

She'd made a quick trip to the kitchens to collect the extra food she'd requested and grab a simple ham sandwich, but otherwise didn't leave the library. When the day had finally started to simmer into the evening, she'd barely noticed. Time was an irrelevant mess amongst the creaking bookcases, but when night blanketed the sky and her Lumos started to waver alongside her concentration, she decided it was best she return to her room.

A sad glance at her watch informed her that it was midnight, and it had been yet another disappointing day without any progress. She blamed the echoes of her argument with Malfoy for her inability to engage completely with her task, but accepted that her insomnia probably didn't help.

Trudging her aching limbs back to her room, she allowed herself a relieved sigh when she found her dorm bathed in darkness and no sign of the Slytherin bastard who should have been suffocating in an Azkaban cell.

Mumbling a spell to illuminate the room, she set about putting the food in the appropriate cupboards and made herself a clumsy cup of tea. And then she could feel eyes on her, rubbing angry splinters into the back of her head.

With a startled gasp, she spun around and knocked over her hot drink to find him loitering in his doorframe again, observing her with fresh irritation. He watched her closely, like a territorial wolf who'd missed two meals. He'd been waiting for her to return after the inevitable boredom had ignited the idea to pick a fight with her the moment she'd walked through the door.

"Little jumpy there, Granger," he remarked quietly, crossing his arms. "Do I make you uncomfortable?"

"You make me sick," she told him squarely, her words crisp with honesty.

"Believe me when I say the feeling's mutual," he snarled. "You're making noise again-

"Shut up and go to bed-

"Put some silencing spells on my room-

"NO!" the witch yelled, her chest inflating as she drew in a seething breath. "I made it very clear that I would NOT waste my magic on you!"

"Yes, you will," he responded calmly, taking a few strides and effectively circling her. "I shouldn't have to listen to you-

"Well, tough luck," she snapped, slamming her palms against the counter between them. "This is MY room! I shouldn't have to listen to you, or even look at you!"

"Tough luck," Draco echoed, a crease slicing across his forehead with impatience. "Take it up with the old bitch and do us both a favour-

"Shut up!" she shouted, scrunching her eyes closed and quaking with her anger now. "Just stay out of my way, Malfoy-

"And how the fuck am I supposed to do that?" he fired back. "In case you haven't noticed, I can't leave your little shitty dorm and it's hardly the most spacious room."

Her glare flickered with the glaze of oncoming tears, but she fought them away before he could notice. "Then just stay in your room-

"No," he interrupted arrogantly, placing his own hands on the counter and bringing his face to her level. "No, I find watching you squirm too amusing, Mudblood-

"Do you honestly think that silly little word bothers me any more?" she questioned with lowered eyebrows. "Do you really believe I care what you think?"

"I think you care a lot about how people perceive you-

"You are not people!" she barked, smacking her palms down on the surface again. "You are just... You're just-

"Go on, Granger," he encouraged, his voice deceptively inviting. "How exactly do you feel about me? I'm curious."

She paused and panted out a couple of hot breaths as her glare roved over his sharp and expectant face. His pebble-grey eyes were as hard as quartz; cold and illegible. They didn't waver, just waited for her answer. He wanted to know? Fine, it had been writhing under her skin for longer than he could comprehend and she could stand.

"You're the most spoilt and selfish person I've ever known," she told him quietly, annunciating each tangy syllable. "You have done nothing in your entire life but bully people and you wouldn't know a real friend if they slapped you in the face, because you're too busy looking down at everyone to give a shit-

He snorted. "I'll have you know-

"I'm not finished!" she spat, aiming her wand at him for good measure. "For years you have just managed to avoid becoming exactly like your father; evil-

"You will not talk about my father!" he shouted, too enraged to consider the wand by his chest. "You have no FUCKING right-

"You wanted my opinion!" she retorted. "I always knew you were a vile little bastard, but I never thought you would become so twisted that you would become a Death Eater! Harry knew! Tried to tell us, but no! For some stupid reason, I thought you had a small dose of decency left in you, and I was so wrong-

"First time for-

"And you turned into what everyone expected," she ignored him, pulling away and pacing a few angry steps to the side. "Follower to Voldemort and pathetic excuse for a human, because you couldn't even do that right!"

He growled. There it was, being shoved in his face again; his failure. "Are you quite done?"

She sent him a fierce scowl, and he noted it was so much more intense than any look she'd ever dared to flash him before. Good. Getting her all riled up was bloody hilarious.

"You are sick and spiteful," she hissed, feeling her magic crackle between them as she tried to steady her sparking emotions. "And you always will be, and I find that very sad. You want to know know what I feel for you? Pity. That you could allow yourself to become what you are."

Another guttural rumble quivered at the back on his throat. "Predictable as ever, Granger," he slurred. "Always convinced there's good in everyone-

"Not everyone," she hushed him, and she almost sounded forlorn. "Not you. Not any more."

"Well, at least you're learning not to set yourself up for disappointment," he shrugged his bored shoulders, cocking an eyebrow when she took some more steps away from him. "Where are you going?"

"Bed," she muttered, sparing him another golden-spiced glare. "I am done with this-

"Hold on now," he protested, marching to block her exit. "It's my turn-

"I thought I made it very clear," she mumbled past tense lips. "That I didn't care about your opinion of me-

"I didn't care about your opinion of me," he said slowly straightening his back to loom over her.

"But you asked-

"Because I thought it would be amusing," he revealed, indulging in a cruel smirk. "And I was right-

"I know how you feel about me," she argued, trying her hardest to act nonchalant. "Mudblood this, bookworm that. You're rather predictable yourself, Malfoy-

"I may surprise you."

Merlin curse her curiosity for shrouding her commonsense for the umpteenth time. "Fine," she grumbled, eyeing him warily and tightening the fingers coiled around her wand. "How do you feel about me, Malfoy?"

"You repulse me," he sneered with sudden hostility. "The fact that we have to breathe the same air makes me want to vomit. You're disgusting; a rancid smear across the Wizarding World. You don't deserve your magic-

"Repetitive nonsense," she forced her eyes to roll. "I'm going to bed. Move, or I'll make you-

"I'm just building up," he promised darkly, and something untamed and severe flared behind his stony eyes. She shifted her feet but refused to look away. Needed to keep eye-contact. Control.

"I don't-

"You know you don't deserve your magic," he continued, baring his ivory teeth in an accusing snarl. "And that's why you work so hard, isn't it? That's why you spend all your pathetic time studying-

"I happen to like reading-

"But you feel the need to prove yourself," Draco silenced her with a confident and condescending tone. "Because you know your magic isn't rightfully yours." Uncertainty mingled with honey, and he relished his victorious grin. "Because you know you're inferior."

Her lip twitched. His smirk stretched.

"And that's why it still kills you when I call you Mudblood," he finished with delicious smugness, bobbing his head with a proud nod. He could see that Gryffindor tenacity fighting to control her tongue, so he stepped aside and headed for his bedroom door, satisfied that she was suitably rattled. Well, at least the revolting Muggle-spawn had successfully managed to provide some entertainment for this dull-as-dust day.

His fingers had just grazed the brass of the door-handle when there was a hot push against his spine, propelling him forward. He smacked head-first into the adjacent wall and released a grunt of discomfort as he slid down the cold surface. The impact was still buzzing across his skin, but he knew the pain would replace it within a heartbeat or hum of breath.

He raised his head with every intention of charging Granger and smacking her into the wall, but he barely caught her blurred shape ghost into her room, before the shrill bite of a blunt door deafened him for a moment. The pain subsided after a few seconds; just a little bump to his head and an ache in his back. He quickly gathered himself to his feet and his eyes did a slow scan of the room, his dilated pupils focussing on the bookshelves again.

Ah yes, his previous distraction before the Mudblood had returned.

He had always been good with numbers, and had decided that counting would be the thing to keep him sane.

Granger had one-hundred and one books in her sitting room; fifty-six of which were black, forty red, three blue and two green. Across all the spines were a total of four-hundred-and-sixty words, excluding the authors' names. He had double-checked this and stored the information away in his head, and Draco's stare recommenced roaming around the room; searching for his next counting project for tomorrow. His next sanity-preserving task.

But his eyes automatically fell to her door, and he felt the rage bristle along the fine hairs coating his body and sink into his pores. Entertaining or not, the girl made his temper churn. He would find something else to count tomorrow.

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Hermione slumped against the door and hastily murmured the silencing charms before she released a gargled sob. Dear Merlin, she hated him. Hated him! She roughly smudged away her treacherous tears and stumbled on shaky legs as she made her way to her bed.

She was denied a blink of sleep all night, and the witch's anger at the slimy Slytherin niggled at her until the birds came with the navy morning. She despised the birds.

And that was day one.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for the late update. For the Brits reading this, you may recall the recent story in the news about the car crashing into the lake and stealing two young lives. Unfortunately, one of the victims was my friend's beautiful little sister. I dedicate this story to her, as she was a massive Harry Potter fan and such a lovely girl.

Hope the chapter was okay. I appreciate the honesty and support you've given me and hope that this story is turning out okay so far. Massive thanks to everyone for Reading and Reviewing. Also, for those who read Hunted, I will be doing a one-shot featured eleven years later to tie up any loose ends, and also because I feel I have a couple more things I want to do with that story. It should be up soon.

I ask you not to go lightly on me because of the unfortunate circumstances, and instead insist that you continue with your honesty.

Thanks again, and all my love.

Bex-chan

Score

Chapter Notes

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

He woke with a start.

He had dreamt of Astronomy Tower again. The sights, sounds and smells had all plagued him ruthlessly; so vivid and vivacious. Even his subconscious was keen to mock him with the fruitful memories; licking away at his brain while he slept, so that the scene repeated itself endlessly in his head. They came every night, some more fierce than others, but there all the same. Nightmares. Tormenting him. Reminding him.

Failure.

Failure.

Failure.

He groaned into the too-soft pillow and turned over, squinting away a tenacious shaft of sunlight. The Autumn sun was irritating and warm on his face, and he didn't like it. It was too garish and deceptive, fooling hopeless morons into believing it wasn't freezing outside. He could already feel the chill creeping along his skin as he pushed away the blankets to set his feet against the bitter floorboards.

He shrugged on the robes he'd been given to beat a shiver, adjusting them over his boxers and vest. Merlin forbid McGonagall could have supplied him with a set of actual pyjamas that might do something to battle hypothermia. He glanced out of the window, but all he could see were roof-tiles, bricks and the brazen sky that was too harsh with the sun. What was the point in having a window without a view? Stupid Gryffindors.

He realised how quiet it was then, and the silence buzzed in his ears, eased only slightly by far away birds. He arched a confused eyebrow, realising something at the back of his brain was telling him he'd already woken up once today. If it still even was today.

Yes, he'd definitely already woken. He could sense the whispers of recollection blowing across his nerve endings. It had been the Mudblood to rouse him again, with her sodding shower and clumsy footfalls. He remembered mumbling a luscious list of swear words into his mattress as he'd listened to her uncouth movements, and he'd been four more obscenities away from marching in there with dangerous intentions. But then a door had clicked closed and the sounds had stopped.

She'd gone. Thank fuck.

So the warmth and soothed him back to slumber. Back to the nightmares.

Leaving the bed, he slipped out of the room in search for something to do, and something to eat. He helped himself to a glass of milk and some cereal that Granger must have left out, reminding himself that he really needed to learn some wandless cooking skills if he ever wanted a warm meal here. Asking Granger was obviously out of the question.

He poured himself a second bowl of breakfast as his eyes settled on the clock, and he released an agitated breath. It wasn't even morning it all; not breakfast. It was almost three in the afternoon; the official sign that a normal sleeping pattern was lost with his wand. With his pride.

His eyes went to the main door, and while he knew it was inevitably pointless, he set his bowl of cereal down and decided he would test it. The second his fingers grazed the handle, sparks shot up the length of his arm; crackling in his veins like spitting flames.

"Shit," he cursed, eyeing the red sting crowning his fingertips. With a resigned breath, he went back to the kitchenette and turned on the tap to soothe his buzzing skin with some cold water.

Then his eyes fell to the kitchenette's tiles. And he started to count.

Needed to do something...Needed to keep busy...

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"You're very quiet," Neville frowned, giving her a long look. "Are you okay, Hermione?"

Her mouth somehow moulded into a too-bold smile. "I'm fine," she assured him smoothly, running her hands over her strategically-placed textbook. "I have an Arithmacy essay due and I'm just trying to think."

It wasn't technically a lie, but she'd completed her essay four days ago. She'd anticipated a few awkward silences between her and her friends when she'd agreed to dinner in the Great Hall, and had purposefully brought something that she could divert her attention to. Who would bother disputing her need to study?

Seamus, Dean, Ginny, and Luna had been evidently surprised when she had entered the Great Hall with Neville, but had all futilely done their best to involve her anyway. She was grateful for their efforts. Really, she was, but the conversation was awkward enough between the other four Gryffindors and Ravenclaw without her input. Everyone just skimmed over the subject of war; of Voldemort, and that annoyed her. But she'd desired company that morning; people who she understood and could safely call friends. After all, it wasn't anyone's fault that times of turbulence could strain relationships, and it felt normal to sit with them.

So, she'd simply nodded and offered them one-word answers, scribbling down an occasional annotation for effect.

"Nobody else is putting any effort into their essays," Neville mumbled quietly, and the others didn't pause their conversation about Quidditch if they heard him. "I guess everyone thinks it's a little pointless at the moment, but I know how you are with your studies so I shouldn't be surprised."

She genuinely adored Neville and his clumsy sincerity. He was so endearing it made her heart ache sometimes, and she knew she wouldn't have agreed to meet the others if he hadn't been here.

"It helps to be distracted," she offered with a meek shrug.

He gave her a small nod of understanding before Seamus mentioned his name and dragged him back to their discussion on...Oh, hell, she didn't even know what they were on about. She pretended to go back to the chart-decorated pages, but found her sleepy gaze steering over to the Slytherin table.

It was empty, of course.

Of the two-hundred-and-fifty odd students that had returned to Hogwarts, only thirty-two bore the green tie. All were fourth years or younger and had taken to dining and socialising with the other houses in small groups. None of them wanted to be associated with the stereotypes of their house, and had done everything to avoid association with the snake emblem. As far as she knew, they didn't even sleep in the dungeons, and had taken up in the many spare beds cluttered around the various dorms.

It was sad really.

They were so desperate to avoid assumptions and bad impressions, even though their presence at Hogwarts alone was proof enough that they didn't agree with Voldemort's views. They were just like everyone else; hoping for safety and praying for it all to end.

She hated Malfoy just that little bit more then, for being so fickle and conforming to the stereotypes that came with Salazar's legacy, and her stare waltzed up the table to land at the spot she'd last seen him sit.

She remembered how awful he'd looked during sixth year and scolded herself for being so naïve to the signs of what had been coming. She could remember her comments to Harry about him, and how she'd almost sounded concerned. How could she have been so blind?

"Hermione," a soft feminine voice pulled her back to the present, and she turned to face Luna. "You okay there? You looked a little distant."

She fought hard not to squint at the irony-laced comment. "I'm fine, Luna," she sighed, gesturing to her book. "Just having a bit of difficulty focussing on this. I think I might head up to the library."

"Already?" Ginny frowned, and Hermione noted her concern was genuine. "You've barely touched your food."

The brunette glanced down at her half-nibbled Sunday Roast. "I'm not that hungry," she shrugged, pushing her plate aside. "I had quite a big breakfast."

She could see their reluctance to believe her, and she couldn't blame them. She knew she'd lost some weight since Harry and Ron had left, but it wasn't so much that she was starving herself, or really eating less food at all; she just ate at abnormal times. It was the insomnia again. Maybe she should take up Slughorn on his Dreamless Sleep Potion offer.

"Do you want some company in the library?" Neville offered earnestly. "I guess I could work on my Herbology essay."

"No, that's fine," she shook her head, rising from the table. "I know you don't like the library and you haven't finished your dinner."

"I might pop up later then," he compromised, spearing another sprout with his fork. "It was nice to see you though, Hermione."

"It really was," Ginny nodded, accompanied by a hum of agreement from Seamus and Dean. "Will you come see us tomorrow?"

No.

"I'll try," she breathed quietly, giving her fellow lions and the blonde eagle a soft smile. "It was nice to see you all too."

She gathered her belongings and turned to leave with a delicate wave in their direction. She could already hear their hushed tones fluttering amongst the Great Hall as she left, all discussing how bad she looked, no doubt. They would talk about the dark smudges under her bloodshot eyes and how her skin had turned a shade paler. Nothing vicious or remotely backstabbing. Just the truth. Just words of worry.

Perhaps she would have felt guilty if her body could accommodate any more negative emotions.

But it couldn't. Thoughts of Malfoy had pretty much filled her to the brim with spicy notions, and combined with a lot of loneliness and a dash of despair, she just didn't have the room.

The hope was still there though; just a flicker of optimism about the size of her heart that refused to perish. She clung to it desperately sometimes, and then cursed it the next moment. It was what kept her going and encouraged her late-night endeavours to read everything about Horcruxes, and also what lead her to continue Order training with McGonagall.

Yes, it was there. It just went missing sometimes...

The library was alive for a change. A few third years were crowded around a table discussing some Potions homework, and another desk was full with a set of fourth years. Madam Pince was tucked away in her usual spot too, with her beak stuck in a book and her narrow stare

peering over the pages to watch the students. Hermione offered the sullen librarian a nod which wasn't reciprocated, before she looked back around the space with unsure eyes.

She spotted another batch of pupils behind a bookcase and decided the library was too busy for her liking. She needed solitude. She headed to the restricted section and plucked two of the books she needed from the shelf and decided she couldn't stay here if she wanted to read in peace. She slipped the weighty texts in her bag and contemplated going outside, but the weather was hardly suitable for a reading session.

She just wanted to go back to her room and curl up on the couch with a hot chocolate and literature for company.

But he was there.

Her brow creased with determination. Well, she was not going to be exiled from her own room because of that bastard. She refused. Why should she have to alter her routine just because of Malfoy? If the slimy prat played up, she could just lock him in his bedroom. She cast a quick concealment charm on the books as she left the library, her intelligence warning her that it wasn't wise for him to know the subject of her interest. If the little swine found out and somehow managed to escape, no doubt he would go skipping back to Voldemort, expecting a pat on the head for foiling Harry and Ron's plans.

Her strides back to her dorm were bold and purposeful, building her up with adrenaline to ready her for a confrontation. Mumbling the password to the main door, *ad lucem*, she shoved open the door harder than necessary and her eyes found him instantly. Whatever she had expected to find him doing, this wasn't it.

He was perched on the counter separating the living space from her kitchenette with his hands braced at his sides. His shoulders were relaxed and his head slightly tilted to the side as he absently tapped one of his fingers against the mahogany surface. He hadn't noticed her, even after she had closed the door with a silent tug and taken some small steps into the room.

She craned her neck so she could catch the right side of his face, realising that his familiar scowl was still in place, darkening his features. She wondered briefly how his agitated expression could be so permanent, but then realised that her mouth had scarcely risen at the corners for several weeks. His scowl wasn't necessarily angry though, more concentrated than anything else.

Hermione peered a little closer, like he was a rare and dangerous bird that she had simply stumbled across. She followed his steadfast glare to nothing but the wall of white tiles. Her lips parted with a look of irritated confusion.

What the...

"What the hell are you doing?" she questioned sharply, watching as he flinched in surprise and snapped his head to look at her. Ah, there was the anger. Clearly she had disturbed him in some way, and he was furious about it. Her amber eyes flickered to the tiles again to see if she had missed something, but there wasn't so much as a blemish against the ivory ceramic.

"Bloody hell, Granger!" he roared, hopping off the wooden top with fluid movements. "I've lost count now, you stupid-

"Count?" she repeated, instinctively laying a hand over her pocketed wand. He didn't near her like she'd expected; just shifted his weight between his legs and regarded her impatiently about fifteen feet away. He still felt too close though. "What were you-

"What the fuck are you doing here?" he snapped quickly.

"I live here," she hissed, crossing to the sofa and dropping her heavy bag. "And I have some work to do, so leave me alone-

"And where exactly would you have me go?" he countered, folding his arms over his chest. He rolled his shoulders like he was preparing for a brawl, and she could see his muscles rhythmically fluctuate under the grey polo neck.

"I really couldn't care less," she answered crisply. "Go to your room-

"Why should I?" Draco growled, eyeing her with a calculating glare. "You can come and go as you please, so you should go somewhere else-

"This is my room, Malfoy!" she yelled, balling her fists defiantly. "You're just here because the Order feels sorry for you!"

He snarled. "I'm here because you bloody morons can't mind your own business!" he shouted. "Always sticking your noses in and thinking you're helping-

"We are helping you!"

"Well, I don't WANT your fucking help!" Draco screamed, his tone loud and reverberating amongst the dorm's antique acoustics. "I NEVER wanted your help-

"Well, you've got it," she interrupted calmly, unable to help the haughtiness to her voice. "So stop complaining like the spoilt brat you are and-

"Piss off-

"I'm waiting for you to piss off," the witch retorted. "I need to do some work-

"Why don't you go into your room?" he asked snidely, taking a long stride towards her. "Or better yet, sod off to the Tower with the rest of your dickhead friends-

"Because I shouldn't have to-

"Why do you Gryffindors always insist on making things more difficult?" he questioned, completely serious. "You're always chasing trouble and it's so bloody stupid, and then you wonder why people are always trying to kill you-

"I can understand that you would find it difficult to understand," Hermione said slowly, lifting her chin. "That we're brave enough to stand up for what we-

"Don't patronise me, Granger," he rolled his eyes. "Bravery, my arse. You and those feckless idiots crossed the line into stupidity a long time ago-

"Don't you dare call me stupid," she scowled, removing her hand from her pocket to point a scolding finger in his direction. "I am not-

"Very well," he mumbled, taking her back for a second. "You might have some brain cells to rub together, but the Orphan and the Pauper are just bloody useless-

"Don't call them-

"And there's a lot to be said about your shoddy little group," he continued, taking another stride towards her. "When it's the sodding Mudblood who has the brains!"

The Muggle instinct coasting through her blood goaded her to reach for the mug on the table and hurl it in his direction. And she threw it hard; harder than she had probably thrown anything in her life. But he dodged it. Bastard. She watched it shatter against the wall behind him. Pretty white china raining down with a few splinters of wood. She snapped her fire-gold eyes back to him, vibrating with uninhibited anger when she saw the amusement tugging at his features.

"I won't tell you again, Malfoy," she spat, reining in her stormy impulses to hex him here and now. "Go to your room and let me get on with my work-

"Touch a nerve there, Granger?" he drawled smugly. "Was it the Mudblood, or my comment about the twat twins?"

"Stop calling them-

"Why don't you go and irritate them with your presence?" he questioned with a flippant wave.

"Shut up, Malfoy!"

"No, I'm bloody serious," he insisted, a little intrigued when he noticed her lips twitch. "Why the hell don't you bother Potter and Weasley instead of me-

"Because they're not bloody here!" Hermione blurted, knowing it probably wasn't the wisest thing to tell him. She instantly saw his smirk stretch and resented the boys just that little fraction more for leaving her here. With him. "They're not here," she repeated in a calmer tone, willing herself to keep her wits about her.

"Where are-

"As if I would tell you," she scoffed. "Just leave me, Malfoy, before I-

"This is classic," he chuckled, licking his lips as though he could actually taste her frustration. Apparently it was delicious. "This certainly explains a lot."

She lowered her brow. "What are you talking about?"

"Why your face looks like a smacked arse all the time," he told her simply, nearing her again with a winning swagger. "Why you look ready to slit your wrists-

Too far. "Don't be ridiculous-

"The Golden Trio separated," he mused, more to himself. "That must hurt, Granger. Knowing that the only two people who can actually stand you have up and left-

"At least I have friends-

"But they're not here, are they?" he reminded her with a telling click of his tongue. "Must be a bugger not being able to get your leg over Weasley any more."

She sputtered but drew in her mortification with a quick breath. Ron was...Ron was her friend. Nothing more. She had hoped for more and sacrificed her innocence to him before he'd left with Harry. I had been...uncomfortable, and he hadn't particularly handled it well, and it had been made painfully clear to her that a relationship with him was off her cards, although some of those pesky romantic feelings towards him seemed to linger. Maybe after all the drama of the War had settled...

"Ron and I are none of your business," she muttered defiantly, realising she had probably remained silent too long. "Stop being such a-

"Perhaps you prefer Potter then?" he accused with a disgusted snort. "Merlin, you three are pathetic."

She wanted another shot with the mug. But no. She wanted an advantage that didn't rely on her skills as a witch.

He was closer now, and she noticed briefly that he smelled of orchards and sleep. His actions were too graceful and fluent, like he had planned this all meticulously, with her humiliation as his goal. Her fingers flexed with the desire to wrap around her wand, but she wanted to deal with him without magic if she could. She couldn't very well curse him every time they argued; even it was a ridiculously enticing prospect. She was a clever girl and quick with her tongue; she could handle him. She could.

She needed a new approach, so she placed her hands on her hips and attempted to mirror his cockiness. Fair enough, he knew what made her temper tremble, but he had his weaknesses too...

"It must be difficult for you, Malfoy," she said smoothly, pleased when he cocked an eyebrow with curiosity. "Watching the people you deem inferior doing so much better than you-

"What are you-

"Harry with his Quidditch," she listed proudly, withdrawing her wand and toying with it between her nimble fingers. "Me with my grades-

"Are you implying I'm jealous, Granger?" he questioned sharply, his voice a repulsed rumble in his throat. "Because I would rather-

"It would certainly explain a lot," she reasoned casually, as though she was debating her homework with a friend. She tapped her wand coolly against her palm; nothing offensive, just a little gesture to remind him that she had magic on her side. "All hatred stems from something. I mean, we have managed to accomplish a fair bit in the last six years-

"Fucking, well done to you-

"And as far as I can recall," she carried on, ignoring his sarcastic hiss with ease. "You have yet to do anything particularly...interesting with your life, Malfoy-

"Shut it, Granger-

"And anything you've tried to do," Hermione pushed, unable to stop herself now that impending victory was warming her bones. "You have always failed miserably-

"Shut your-

"I remember the time in second year," she went on, rubbing her chin in an almost pensive way. "When you fell off your broom and lost the Quidditch game to Harry. Wasn't your father there?"

He snarled and went to grab her, but when she flicked her wand towards him, he halted. "I warned you not to discuss my father-

"And I bet he wasn't too pleased when he found out your grades were second to a Mudblood," she said, noting that his scowl hardened when she used the derogatory term for herself.

"Don't talk about my father," he repeated, his voice low.

But she faltered when she noticed it wasn't particularly threatening; more irritated and perhaps a little...wounded? That was unsettling.

"Then don't talk about my friends," she murmured finally, watching his jaw clench as an unvoiced agreement was passed between them. He looked a little more human then, and she wanted to punch him again. "Are you going to leave me in peace, or do I have to put you in the room myself?"

He growled, but to her utter surprise and bafflement, he actually moved away from her with a couple of backward strides. His raincloud stare didn't leave her though, just stabbed her like he was trying to melt her away through will alone.

"When I get out of this shit-pit," he started with a dark murmur, just before he reached his door. "And I get my wand back, I'm coming straight for you, Granger."

"I'm sure you will," she nodded with trained indifference.

His eyes swept up and down her with a swift swish of his tar-puddle pupils. And then, almost in a blur, he was out of her sight, with only the expected loud crash of the door to split her

ears. She stared at it with slightly widened eyes and chewed at her bottom lip with a proud grin yanking the corners of her mouth.

She had done it. She had managed to get him to leave her alone without using magic. Hermione fell back into the couch and felt a proud giggle shimmy up her windpipe. She had beaten him, despite her earlier troubles when he had decided to bring the boys into the argument. She'd had the last word. She'd gotten what she wanted.

And while she didn't realise it, she allowed herself a smile that wasn't forced for the first time since she had waved goodbye to Harry and Ron. And that had been almost four weeks ago.

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Bitch...

Back in the small space, he would swear the four walls had shifted slightly. The room definitely felt smaller, and it made the beginnings of a cool sweat lick his forehead. He had half a mind to charge back in the sitting area and start screaming at her again, but then what would it accomplish? All she would do was abuse her magic, and he would end up back where he was, but probably in a bit of pain to make his day just that little bit more dismal.

He covered his face with his palms and dragged his scratching fingers through his hair.

He'd never felt so degraded in his seventeen years. When had his life deteriorated so much that he had landed here? Supervised like a pissing child by the Muggle-spawn scum. Trying to avoid becoming one of those sanity-drained freaks that mumbled nonsense to themselves when the walls had gotten too close.

But, it could have been worse, he mused. It could have been the Weasel. That would have definitely ended in bloodshed by now. At least Granger wasn't a brainless prick and could actually back up her arguments.

He went to the bed and slumped into the fabrics, resting his elbows against his knees and staring at the withered floorboards. His eyes shifted to the bedside table and he opened the drawer, peering inside to find only a discarded quill and a Gryffindor tie.

Perhaps he could use it to hang himself with when he'd finally gone insane in this place. When the walls...

He snatched up the quill and waltzed his fingers up the silky feather strands. He glanced back to the drawer to check if there was any ink or parchment, but there wasn't. So, he leaned back on his bed and brought the nib to the mahogany headboard.

He sliced at the dark wood and carved an M and a G, and then dissected the letters with a defined line between them.

M for Malfoy. G for Granger.

He would have put M for Mudblood if his surname didn't start with the same letter.

Alright, he would admit that she had won this argument, but he had certainly won yesterday's. It only seemed rational to keep score, and it was something else to feed his habit for counting. He scrawled a short line under each letter to indicate their respective scores and made a silent vow that she wouldn't get any more marks for the duration of his stay.

Then his eyes went back to the floor, and he started to count. First the boards, then the cracks in between.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies again for the shortness of this chapter...I promised longer chapters didn't I? Well there definitely will be after this! I pinky promise! Uni's starting back up again and I wanted to get this up before I get too busy with freshers week (wehey!).

Thank you all for your lovely reviews for the last chapter. Lots of love and wine for all of you! Somehow managed to get over 100 alerts and 50+ favourites so I had a large glass of vino (or three) to accompany this chapter! The wine's back by the way...Yay for Merlot and Grenache!

Hope this chapter was okay...things will start to pick up a little after this...but the romance aspect will be slow, because I'm a realist...Sorry! If anyone has any questions then feel free to email me or my facebook thingy is on my profile page. Oh, and do point out any errors so I can correct them asap!

So yeah...Hope the chapter was okay...let me know what you think! I'm very curious about this chapter and how you think the story's doing so far...And have a glass of wine on me if you review!

Bex-chan

Scent

Chapter Notes

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

Every day she came back to her dorm, and he was there. Ready to drill her brain with insults and complaints, and it was starting to suck the life out of her. She would finish her lessons and return to the Head Girl dorm to complete her homework, knowing the library would be too packed until about eight in the evening, and he was always there. Just waiting; his tongue damp and prepared to goad her into arguments that could last for minutes or hours, depending entirely on how stubborn they both were.

It was always the same scornful words.

Filthy.

Bitch.

Mudblood.

Mudblood...

Sometimes they hurt, and sometimes not so much. She was slowly developing an immunity to them, but every now and then he'd throw something new at her, and it would completely shake her. Then again, she gave as good as she got. They were pretty evenly matched, she figured, but after a week of pulsing headaches and his voice thundering in her ears, she'd had enough.

On the eighth day of his stay – a Friday – during her Arithmacy lesson, Hermione had an epiphany, and it came in her mother's voice.

Nothing annoys a bully more than if you don't react. Or better yet, be nice to them.

She had never really paid much attention to those silly little bits of advice that parents gave, as more often than not they did nothing beneficial, but this she could use. Malfoy was clearly baiting her because he bored, and if she refused to acknowledge him, or simply play nice, it would do his head in. And if he got too aggravated, she could just lock him in his room until he'd calmed down.

She'd never treasured her wand so much.

Just two more lessons and she would be finished for the day. And he would be there. Waiting. And she would ignore him. No matter how much he wound her up, she would not react.

She would not react in the way he wanted.

Just Potions and Herbology to go, and she could test her little theory on the smarmy git.

* * *

There were four-hundred-and-five tiles between the kitchenette and the bathroom. All white, and fifty-six had cracks in them. It had taken him three days to confirm that, what with Granger's bloody interruption and his need to double-check.

He'd gone back to the floorboards then. There were ninety-seven all together, thirty-eight in his room and then he had added all the others in the dorm together too. That was excluding Granger's room, of course. He'd tried to break into her quarters two days ago and had received the same burning sensation he'd had from the main door.

Scolded fingertips. Peachy.

He'd woken up at two today after a very tempestuous night. More nightmares, and they were getting a lot worse. His eyes had automatically gone to his headboard to study his artwork, just as they had done each morning beforehand. As it stood, he had six marks, and Granger had five. According to his memory, and a reminder that on some days they'd argued more than once, he guessed it was Friday.

He'd arrived on a Friday so that would make this his eighth day in hell.

At least he was managing to keep a track on time. Sort of...

It really would have been more sensible to mark the day on his headboard instead of arguments tally. But sod it. He was winning, so it would stay as it was.

He left bed, changed, and went in search of something to do. To count. Just until Granger got back and they could have their usual battle of wits.

Granger...

Her scent was everywhere; clouding the atmosphere like a summer smog. That tee-tree soap she used, a hint of summer rain, and what he had finally established was cherry. Sweet with a bit of spice. Not entirely unpleasant; just bloody suffocating when he had to inhale it all day, everyday. Her aroma had even leaked into his room, and was now permanently wedged somewhere between his sinuses and his frontal lobe.

He couldn't get away from it. From her. And it was dragging insanity into his brain just that little bit quicker.

Making his way into the common area, he grabbed his usual bowl of cereal with an apple and searched for something to count...But there was nothing.

So he simply stared at the clock, and watched the minutes tick by until she came home at twenty to four, as she always did. Like clockwork. Her petite little frame slipped into the room and he indulged in a cruel smirk.

Let the games begin.

"Afternoon Mudblood," he greeted with bravado, not particularly bothered when she didn't react. It took her a while to get riled up to a level he relished. "And how did our favourite bookworm Gryffin-bore find the lessons today?"

"Fine, thank you," she responded evenly, taking her usual spot on the sofa.

He faltered. What, no 'sod off, Malfoy' today?

"I asked you a question-

"And I gave you an answer," she replied calmly. Too calm.

"It wasn't good enough," he criticised, walking closer to her.

She shrugged. Just shrugged and removed some parchment to start on her homework. The silent treatment, a challenge. Okay, he could play with that. She would react eventually. She had to. He'd waited for the spark in her eyes and the sharp retorts for over an hour. He wanted them. Thrived on them, actually.

"What the fuck is this?" he spat, snatching the parchment out of her fingers and examining it critically. "You even write like a malformed Muggle. Can't Mudbloods manage decent handwriting?"

She still didn't look at him, just plucked a book from her bag instead and started to read. He tossed her homework to the side and growled at her.

"You're not fooling me, Granger," he said slowly, standing directly before her and crossing his arms. "I know what you're doing."

"I'm reading," she told him quietly, her cinnamon-glazed eyes trailing over the inky pages.

"You know you want to shout at me, Granger," he drawled, convinced he must be teasing her impulse to claw at him with either fingernails or insults. "Or do I have to bring up the twat who won't die and his orange pet?"

His stony glare shifted to her ever-plump lips and waited for the customary twitch of her mouth. When you were isolated to a room with only one person to pass the time and observe, you noticed the telling signs, and Granger was a rather fascinating specimen to read. All it took was a quick offensive slur about her two 'special' friends, and her lips would always twinge. Then her pupils would dilate and an agitated flush would stain her cheeks before the witty comebacks would tumble out of her mouth.

But there was no twitch today. No, her blossom-coloured mouth didn't move at all. She'd broken her routine. The routine he'd almost memorised. How dare she.

He grabbed the book too, and discarded it with a rough chuck behind him.

"Fucking look at me, Granger!" he demanded arrogantly, one whisper away from stomping his foot. "Now!"

She slowly raised her honey gaze to him, but it was completely blank. Bored even. Ignoring him was actually easier than she'd expected, but then she'd had plenty of practice muffling out Harry and Ron's Quidditch conversations. She took this moment just to study his features as he ranted on about how filthy her blood was; taking note of his china-doll skin. Odd though. Normally it suited him, but she would swear it was almost turning grey.

...Will not be ignored by you!" he continued, but she really wasn't paying attention. "Granger, I am bloody...

She shimmied her eyes up his face and noticed how drained he looked. Not sleep-deprived though. More weak-limbed and glassy-eyed with failing energy. She breathed in and he was close enough that she could smell him.

Apples and sleep. Always apples and sleep.

A thought crossed her mind and her lips parted with interest. She was on her feet in a thud of his heart, brushing past him and heading to the small kitchen.

"Where the hell are you going?" she vaguely heard him demand. "I SAID where are you bloody going?"

He was distant blur behind her as she started throwing open all the cabinet doors and examined the contents, also trying to remember what she'd eaten in the last few days. Merlin, how could she not have noticed this before?

"Hey!" he called, marching up behind her. "Mud-bitch! I asked you-

"What have you been eating?" Hermione questioned sharply, spinning around to find him a little closer than she'd have liked.

He blinked with hot confusion. "What the-

"What have you been eating?" she repeated, harsher this time. "As far as I can see, you haven't touched any of the food except some apples and milk-

"What the fuck is it to you?"

"Is that all you've had?" she asked, finding herself horrified for some reason. "Apples and milk?"

He hooded his eyes to mask his puzzlement and scowled at her odd behaviour. Why exactly was she so offended by his eating habits? "And cereal," he mumbled, unsure what else he should say, but feeling an urge to defend himself.

"That's it?" she frowned, releasing a sad sigh that he really despised. "Malfoy, you can't survive on that sort of diet-

"Why would-

"You're becoming anaemic," she continued, and he suddenly stepped back, as though he'd just remembered that her muddy blood could be contagious. "And you're probably developing a protein deficiency-

"Does this boring lecture on anatomy have a point?" he snapped impatiently, pretending to examine his fingernails.

"You need to eat more," Hermione told him, realising that there was an unnerving hint of concern to her tone again. Curse the do-gooder gene in her system. "Why haven't you...

She trailed off as the reality dawned on her, and she analysed him as his features scrunched up with a warning not to voice the comment at the tip of her tongue. But, Gryffindor bravery and all that jazz aside, she was a stubborn witch.

"You don't know how to cook without magic," she surmised, eyes round and voice a little quieter. "Do you?"

"Fuck off, Granger."

That meant yes. Eight days with him and she already had a little built-in Malfoy translator stashed away in her brain. There were new additions everyday, but 'fuck off, Granger' was definitely code for 'yes, and I will not admit it.'

"Why didn't you say something?" the witch questioned carefully, tilting her head to the side in a way that made Draco want to tear if off. "I could have-

"Could have what, Granger?" he sneered, taking a step so he was in her space again. "Given me that stupid pitying look you have right now? Held it over my head-

"I wouldn't have-

"I don't want your help," he told her with a cruel whisper. "Just leave it-

"I can't," she mumbled, and there was a slight apology to her tone. "You need to eat-

"It would serve your purpose to have me rot away in the corner!" Draco snarled, towering over her so his fruity breath glided over her cheekbones. "Why do you give a shit about-

"I just do!" she sputtered, making up for her lack of height with volume. "It's just the way I am-

"Sodding Gryffindors," he grumbled, pulling away from her quickly with only a disgusted glance to leave behind. She watched him closely as he disappeared behind his door, and the October chill suddenly caught up with her.

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Inside his room and away from her bloody concern, he slid down the door and dropped his face into his sweaty palms. This was definitely a new low; sympathised by her. And things had been different today, there had been a glitch in the routine that he and her had accidentally stumbled into. The walls dragged a little closer again.

He didn't even bother getting up to place a mark on the headboard. As far as he could tell, neither had won that argument.

He stayed in that defeated position for an hour or four, listening to Granger's movements and inhaling her unavoidable scent. He heard the main door close, presumably with her exit, and he shakily rose to his feet, suddenly aware of how lethargic his muscles were performing. He went back to the main area and something else filled the air.

Food. And it smelled bloody glorious.

He eyed the steaming pot of stew on the counter warily. She had blatantly left it for him and his pride was trying to quash the rumbles in his stomach. But Merlin, it smelled amazing, and the temptation was too strong.

There was enough for three people and he ate the whole thing. It was perfect.

And then he felt disorientated. There had been too many changes today and it had thrown him for seven. They hadn't screamed mindlessly at each other like they normally did, and then with the whole food thing...

She's screwing with your head.

And there was nothing left to count! Shit, shit, shit!

He needed to keep distracting himself or he would fall. His eyes shifted to her books and decided it was his only option. Hell, he'd eaten food that a Mudblood had prepared, how much more infected could he get if he read one of her books?

Selecting a simple-looking text on Potions that he had probably read before, Draco began to read.

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"Good, Miss Granger!" McGonagall praised, firing another hex towards the younger witch. "Keep up the shield!"

Hermione could feel the sweat breaking out on her forehead and slithering down her spine. The bicep of her wand arm was aching like torture, but she held her defensive position. This was definitely the longest she had ever held a shield charm and it was beginning to waver, much to her frustration.

Just a little more...

The headmistress shot out another spell, and it penetrated her protection. It scolded her arm and she smacked to the floor with a disappointed grunt. She took only a moment to catch her breath before she was jumping up to her feet. "Again," she panted, crouching back into position.

"That's enough for today," Minerva told her, lowering her wand. "It's getting late-

"It's a Saturday tomorrow," she disputed. "Come on, just one more-

"You must learn to quit while you're ahead, Miss Granger," the greying woman advised. "Anyway, I have some questions I would like to ask you."

"About what?"

"Mr Malfoy," she answered, as though it was obvious. "I thought you'd have a lot to say about him, but you haven't mentioned him once. Is everything okay? I had expected you to ask me to remove him by now."

"I think I'm handling it better than I thought I would," Hermione explained with a tired shrug. "I guess six years of putting up with his mouth has prepared me rather well."

"I knew you wouldn't disappoint me," the professor offered her a rare fond smile. "So he has behaved?"

Hermione couldn't stop her snort. "I think that's going a little far," she said. "But I barely see him between my studies and my training with you. We fight a lot, but it's nothing I haven't heard before and I can handle it."

The older woman considered her for a second. "And has the fighting ever turned violent?"

"He's tried to grab me a few times," she remembered with narrowed eyes. "But I have my wand so I can deal with it."

"Good," the older witch nodded, extending a hand. "Pass me your wand, Miss Granger. I thought of a spell that might help. It's sort of a Muggle-repelling charm to burn the hand of anyone who tries to touch it."

"But Malfoy's not a Muggle?"

"I'm aware of that," McGonagall frowned as she performed the silent spell, and Hermione watched her wand glow green for a moment. "But he doesn't have his wand so it will work just as well. I'll have to renew the spell every nine or ten days."

"Thanks," she mumbled as her wand was returned to her.

"And what about Mr Malfoy's behaviour?" the headmistress continued. "Is he having any odd turns?"

Hermione's damp brow rippled with thought. "I...I don't really know," she mumbled finally. "As I said, I don't really-

"Well, I would like you to pay a little more attention to him from now on," the professor told her student with her familiar clinical voice.

The brunette blanched. "Why would I-

"That boy was imprisoned in a shack for the better part of five months," McGonagall explained slowly. "And now he has been forced to stay in your small room. Confinement can do damaging things to the mind, Miss Granger, and I imagine he has been rather...troubled as it is-

"Well, that's his own problem-

"I doubt dealing with an unstable Draco Malfoy will be beneficial for you," the witch stated wisely, gesturing for Hermione to follow her to the door. "And it might do you well to remember that he was forced into his mission when you are dealing with him."

The young witch chewed her lip thoughtfully. She had known that it had never been Malfoy's idea to kill Dumbledore, and that he had been threatened with death upon his failure. Harry had told her all this, somewhat begrudgingly after she had asked him about what he'd heard that night, but it had never dimmed her hatred for the Slytherin. Mourning Albus and preparing for war had gotten in the way of trying to understand it...Trying to understand him...

She realised then that despite the certainty of Voldemort's wrath, he had still failed to murder Dumbledore, and it completely sobered her. He hadn't done it, even though his life had been threatened if he failed.

She shook her head and huffed as McGonagall led her down the corridor towards the exit, and her stubborn breath fluttered down the passage.

No. It was irrelevant. So he wasn't a killer; that didn't dampen his other vile qualities. He was still a vindictive bully and very much evil.

But...

Nevertheless, something jerked in her head. Something close to the crux of intrigue, and she wondered if that was why she had bothered to leave him a warm meal. She hadn't really figured out where that act of kindness had come from yet.

"Professor," she started reluctantly as they walked. "Why don't you think he did it?"

Hermione couldn't ever recall seeing the headmistress look hesitant or uncertain, but she did at that moment. "I guess only Mr Malfoy knows that," she said finally as they reached the door and paused. "And perhaps the reason isn't so important."

"What do you mean?"

"Maybe the only important thing is that he didn't do it," McGonagall offered, her thick accent rich with a wisdom and age that Hermione always found enlightening. "And I would recommend that you focus on that for the rest of his stay."

The teeth on her lower lip stabbed a little harder. "Alright," she agreed. "I'll do my best."

"And that's all I ask," the ageing witch said. "Would you like me to walk you to your quarters?"

"I'll be fine," she dismissed, taking some steps to leave the headmistress behind. "Goodnight, Professor."

She took her time walking back to her room, considering exactly how she was supposed to keep an eye on Malfoy when all she wanted to do was lock his door and never see him again...Kind of...Her earlier thoughts about Dumbledore made her question if the level of her disgust for him was justified. She would have to think about that.

Hermione half expected Malfoy to be waiting for her; ready to pour the pot of stew over her head for offending him in such a manner. She knew he'd view it as an insult to his pureblood pride, but the guy needed to eat. End of.

If she suffered a stew-inflicted scold for her naïve attempt at kindness then so be it.

But he wasn't there.

And the pot was empty.

He actually ate it...?

Another unwilling smile caused by Malfoy stained her lips, and she felt her intrigue flourish in her chest. Maybe the magnitude of her hatred towards him wasn't justified. Then again, maybe he was just that hungry, and she was always too quick to seek the good in people.

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Fucking hell...

He woke up with salty licks dashed across his face, and he genuinely had no idea if it was sweat or tears.

Sodding nightmares.

The weekend had passed pretty quickly with more steaming meals from the Mudblood and dull passages from two books. Only ninety-nine to go. He'd only left his room to use the bathroom and collect the food. If he didn't run into Granger, then he could pretend that it wasn't her that left the food.

He could pretend that he wasn't accepting her gestures of kindness.

Because the very prospect made him want to slam his head into the wall until he blacked out. Or perhaps vomit, but he couldn't spare the fluids. Especially when he woke up sweating everyday.

He didn't know what was worse; that she took the time and effort to create the food, or the fact that she always thought to make sure it was hot for him, with what he assumed was some sort of warming charm. Why not just leave it to go cold? Why waste her magic on making sure he enjoyed the meal? It was bloody humiliating.

It was Monday, and she was in the shower again, which meant he had woken far too early if she hadn't even gone to lessons yet. The soothing thrums of water danced into his room like a damp dream. He desperately didn't want to return to the nightmares. They were violent now, and he was starting to physically react. They hurt; pulsed in his temple for hours afterwards, and he couldn't stop the trembles that racked his body either.

They were breaking him...

One of her shower-blissed moans shuddered into his room, and he would swear his headache was eased slightly. He licked his lips and waited for the next one, just to check.

Another feminine purr a moment later.

Yes, it was definitely clouding his brain and chasing away the throbbing in his skull. He wanted to question it, but he didn't dare.

Instead, he found himself leaving the bed, tugging the blanket behind him to combat the Autumn morning. He cocooned himself in the thick fabric and settled against the wall which separated his room from the bathroom. He would hate himself for it later, but by Merlin's grave, he was willing to do anything to chase away the painful aftershocks of his nightmares.

With a defeated groan, he rested his ear against the wall and basked in the wet noises and her throaty sounds. One particularly pleasant mew roused a shiver to sprint up his spine, and it was the most relaxed he'd felt since the night at Astronomy Tower.

The water and the witch were lulling him back to sleep, and even while he knew the sounds were pleasing to his ears and psyche, he'd never hated himself so much.

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When Draco woke again, he judged the time by the angle of the cloud-embraced sun. He reckoned it was early afternoon so he shrugged on the usual black trousers and a black jumper, realising his selection of clothes would require washing soon. Great. Another favour from her.

That Gryffindor tie around his throat was becoming far more tempting with every hour-long minute that slipped by. And he didn't mean for fashion purposes. As if he would wear red and bloody gold.

He wandered into the common area to find a casserole waiting in the usual spot by the stove, and another sliver of his pride fizzled away as he opened the drawer to retrieve a fork. He must have opened the wrong drawer because he found himself looking at three little vials of clear liquid and some clear cylindrical tubes with a needle at the end.

What the hell?

He eyed the foreign objects warily for a few moments before coming to the conclusion that they must be some strange Muggle things.

He glanced at the clock then, and groaned when he realised he'd misjudged the time. Just as the thought had carved itself into his brain, the main door opened and Granger stumbled into the room, apparently having a little trouble with her bag.

She looks different...

And she really did. He had no idea what it was but something had definitely changed.

She was the only person he had seen for ten days and he could admit that he had learned her features fairly well, but something was definitely different. She hadn't noticed his presence yet so he trailed his quicksilver eyes across her face to find the change.

Same petal-pink lips.

Same syrupy gold eyes.

Same sun-stained skin.

Same spatter of barely-there freckles across her bridge of her nose.

Certainly the same catastrophic owl-nest she called hair.

She was still struggling with her bag as she closed the door behind her, and after a few more seconds he credited her 'change' to not seeing her for two days. Isolating himself to his bedroom had probably not helped his brain, and it was rather likely that it was playing tricks on him. Wouldn't be the first time.

She snapped her head up, and he found himself stuck in one of those infuriating staring contests he'd refused to participate in when he was a child.

Yes, definitely the same gold eyes.

It took six heartbeats before she shifted her face into a tired frown and turned away from him to shuffle into the room.

"I'm not in the mood for an argument today, Malfoy," she mumbled, collapsing on the couch gracelessly. "So if you-

"Sod off, Granger," he interrupted, noting his voice was a little rusty after his two days of silence. "I have better things to do than waste my time with you."

She had the gall to chuckle. "Oh really?" she scoffed. "And what would that be exactly? Hiding away in your room-

"Hiding from you?" Draco snorted coldly, forgetting his food for the moment. "Don't make me laugh, Granger. I would rather stay in my room than risk seeing your face-

"And what exactly do you do in your room, Malfoy?" she questioned, masking her curiosity with a mocking tone. "I've noticed a couple of my books are missing."

Shit...

He hadn't wanted her to realise that he'd been taking the books. Now she had more things to hold over his head, and his pride would take even more of battering.

"You have a problem with me reading, Granger?" he challenged in a nonchalant tone, deciding that denial was really pointless when he was the only possible culprit.

Hermione paused to consider him for second, and acknowledged that in reality, she really didn't care if he wanted to read her books or not. So long as she didn't require them, it didn't really effect her. The temptation to be petty and cause another argument lingered at the back of her mind, but what exactly would it accomplish?

"No, it's fine," she muttered finally, missing the flicker of shock that splashed across his pale features. "I just wish you would have asked."

He had no idea what to say to that. The prospect of actually asking her for something was just repulsive, and did crushing things to his gut. No, not a chance in this life or the next. If she wanted to prance around and insist on making him food and whatever else, then that was her shovel in the graveyard, but to voice a want from her was something his breeding and pride would not allow.

"You might have ginger bitch and the immortal orphan trained well," he hissed cruelly, although one might note that the familiar bite was a little lacking. "But I can assure you that I won't be asking you for anything."

She simply sighed at him. "That's fine," she offered. "I thought as much. How's my cooking?"

He hadn't expected that, and his eyebrows rose high on his forehead. "What?"

"My cooking," she repeated, perhaps a little shyly, but she hid it well. "Is it okay?"

A small guttural rumble quaked inside his mouth, and the need to answer was an unwelcome prod in his chest. "It's...satisfactory," he offered quickly, instantly regretting it. Especially when a little smile stole her mouth. It was the first he'd seen since he'd been forced to live with her, and it was an unnerving sight. It suited her though.

"Good," she nodded, and the need to change the subject brought back his headache.

"Granger," he started warily, glancing down at the drawer with the odd Muggle items he'd discovered earlier. "What are those things in the drawer?"

"What things?" she asked, rising from her seat to near Malfoy. She realised it was probably the closest she'd been to him without one of them screaming in the other's face, and she felt a little uncomfortable when she accidentally brushed against him. She shook it off, and pulled open the drawer he was gesturing to with a look of understanding on her face. "Oh these? They're my allergy shots."

"Allergy shots?" he echoed, taking a step away from her. Too close to the Mudblood...

"I'm allergic to bee stings," she explained quietly, holding up one of the prepared syringes to demonstrate. "If I get stung, I need to inject myself with some of this. There's Epinephrine in here and have to put the needle in my side-

"Isn't there a spell or something for that?" he questioned.

"There might be," she shrugged. "But I'm used to doing it this way."

His sceptical glare shifted between her and the needle. "That's fucking disgusting," he blurted finally, pushing past her and picking up his casserole and a fork as he headed into his room. "Stupid Muggles."

She rolled her eyes at his prejudiced comment, but she was secretly relieved that they had somehow managed to avoid a fiery argument. It was certainly a first since he'd moved in. Maybe things were looking up.

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The following morning found Draco up too early, and once again resting against the wall with the shell of his ear pressed against it.

He hadn't even tried to resist the dulcet murmurs of her morning ritual this time. It wasn't like she, or anyone else for that matter, could see him listening to her calming chorus of bathing moans. It was just too alluring...Too soothing.

The most effective antidote for his nightmare-heavy headaches. Her ever-present scent was still trapped in his nostrils too...but that wasn't so bad either. Almost like one of those herbal remedies all the Herbologists ranted on about.

And he would swear, just before the noises sent him to sleep, that the walls retreated. Maybe just an inch or two...but the room definitely felt bigger.

Chapter End Notes

Um...Two days and an update...I've barely slept for you people! I read back the other chapter and I just wasn't satisfied with it...filler chapters are always a little disappointing...but necessary in this case sorry! Hope this chapter was better? Yes? No?

Can't believe this story has somehow almost managed to reach 100 reviews already...I didn't reach my 100th review until my fourteenth chapter for Hunted so I'm very flattered...So thanks! Seriously! Have some more wine on me! Or whatever you drink!

In fact, if anyone has any beverage recommendations, leave them in your review! I promise to try them all (it's okay, my friend owns a bar so I can just have little testers!) and let's see if I can find a new drink to write by.

So yeah...Lend me your thoughts please! Read and Review and send me some love for the hellish quick update! No? Meh...

Bex-chan

Tiles

Chapter Notes

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

It was Thursday. Or perhaps Friday. Draco wasn't sure.

Time was slowly turning into an irrelevant and mumbled mess of forgotten hours and questionable days, and Granger's erratic patterns hardly helped. He had no idea where she slipped off to in the evenings, but he was willing to bet it was either the library or the Gryffindor common room. Where else would she go? Head Girl privileges aside, he doubted she would be foolish enough to traipse aimlessly around the grounds with no purpose or point.

Wherever she wandered, she would always return before three in the morning, and he had stopped trying to sleep through it. Her movements always stirred him, so he'd given up and simply started waiting until she got home to even attempt sleep.

He still found himself rousing for her showers though.

He had tried to resist this morning, knowing that his actions were completely insane and somewhat disturbing, but his headache had gotten worse and worse. The noises were like a drug, and a very effective one at that. Just a few of her wet sounds, and the aching in his temple would recede.

He'd yielded to the craving eventually, and that's where the morning found him now; slumped in the usual spot and sacrificing his dignity for his bathroom-moans fix. Merlin knew he'd tried, but he couldn't help it.

He was an addict, and he despised it.

He shot up to his feet as he heard the shower die, suddenly in the mood to scream at the Mudblood until she was either weeping or torturing him with her wand. Granger was the only thing in this prison that was temperamental; that could change and breathe and pulse. She'd continued to play civil with him for the last few days, and he missed the blood rushing to his head and fingertips. He ached for that fire that stirred his witty temper, yearned to see her flushed and contemplating a powerful comeback. He needed to know he could still do Salazar proud and make the Mud-bitch squirm.

He understood agitated Granger. She was normal. He was becoming far too accustomed to shower Granger and her morning songs.

He shrugged on a black jumper and slipped out of his room as quietly as he could, stopping by the bathroom door and watching the handle too intently. He could hear her bare feet padding around against the tile floor, and he tried to think of a topic for their argument.

Screw it, I'll wing it.

The brass doorknob rattled and he felt the excitement begin to tease his senses, adrenaline tickling his gut with the promise of a good fight. The door opened and he burst in before she could leave, purposefully trapping her. The shock was wild across her features as she stumbled away from him, sliding over the damp ceramics and losing her balance. It was instinctive to reach out and attempt to steady her. Just a reflex. Nothing more. But his own bearings were compromised, and in a heartbeat they were sprawled across the bathroom floor in a shallow puddle of water, skidding in opposite directions; him thwacking his head against the doorframe and her stopping just short of the bathtub.

"What are you doing, Malfoy?" Hermione panted, catching her startled breath. "You scared me to death-

"Bloody hell," he mumbled, sucking the air through his teeth as he touched the back of his head. "You clumsy bitch-

"You grabbed me!" she protested, ensuring she was appropriately covered by her fluffy robe. "What in Merlin's name-

"You woke me up!" he lied, flinching when he noticed some blood staining his fingertips. "Fucking hell, Granger. Jumpy much?"

"Well, I don't normally get attacked when I'm leaving the shower," she huffed angrily, trying to lean back on her heels unsuccessfully. "What is your problem?"

You...

He was suddenly aware of how strong her scent was in here; fresh and thick amongst the lingering steam. He couldn't help but take a deep breath, hoping to her it looked more like he was trying control his anger. But fuck, it was intoxicating. It coiled itself around his tongue and he could actually taste her, but the cherry tang reminded him who it belonged to.

He growled. "I don't have a problem-

"Then what the hell did you grab me for?" she questioned hotly. "Merlin, you are such a prick-

"This is your fault!" he argued, although he wondered just how threatening he could be crumpled and damp on her bathroom floor. "You're the one who fell-

"Because you scared me!" she repeated, giving into her childish urge and palming some water to splash him with. She somehow managed catch his face, and she couldn't stop her chuckle as a droplet fell from his arched eyebrow.

"You Gryffindors are so mature," he drawled with perfect sarcasm. "It's really pathetic-

"Oh, shut it," she grumbled, clambering to her feet with a little difficulty. With shaky legs, she shot him a harsh scowl and tried to make her exit, but a set of long fingers snagged her ankle. She fell hard against the floor again, landing in an awkward position that made her tail-bone buzz.

She whined in pain and cradled her back, snapping her eyes open just to catch Malfoy's smug smirk. "And that's mature?" she hissed, stuttering on another groan.

"I don't give a shit," he snorted, but his arrogant expression melted when she flicked some more water onto his face.

She smirked back at him then, too lost in the surreal situation to resist. Hermione couldn't remember exactly how the almost juvenile water-fight had started, but she imagined it would be a bizarre spectacle walk in on. Draco furrowed his brow as he absorbed Granger's amused grin, and while the new bow to her lips suited her well, it was rather unnerving. It was like she had stumbled across one of his secrets and was just waiting for the right time to throw it in his face. He schooled his features back into his comfortable frown, deciding he had allowed this to go on for far too long.

"Stop being such a-

"You're bleeding," she interrupted, and his scowl hardened when she slid a little closer to him. "Right there, by your ear-

"And?" he prompted, watching her every move as she continued to shuffle closer. "What the hell are you-

"Just let me have a look," she muttered, taking a final undignified tumble to kneel at his side. Her breath was warm against his ear and he tried to flinch away. "Hold still," she demanded firmly, reaching into her robe pocket to withdraw her wand. "Let me just heal this. I don't want you bleeding all over my dorm."

He stiffened but remained still as he felt prickling magic soothe the small cut; or maybe it was her breath again, he had no idea. Either way, the sensation was pleasant, and it had felt like forever since he'd had the comforting lick of magic against his skin. But then it had been so much longer since he'd felt something like her fingers against his neck; delicate and completely innocent. His lids lowered a little and he inhaled again to steal some more of the drugging aroma. All it would take was one of her shower sounds, and his senses would cease to cope.

"There," Hermione sighed, pulling away from him to inspect her work. "That's better. Does it feel okay?"

His Slytherin instincts flooded his mind like a defence mechanism, warning him she was far too close. She was doing it again; screwing with his head with gestures of kindness, and he refused to believe she didn't have an ulterior motive. Nobody could be that pure in the current climate; and it's not paranoia when you're on the enemy's territory.

"Get away from me," he snarled, pushing her away. "I told you not to touch me-

"But I was just-

"I said don't sodding touch me!" he yelled, rising to his feet so quickly it made his head spin.

He fired his glare back in her direction, ready to spit the things he had planned to say before, but his voice hitched. Her robe had ridden up high on her thighs from his shove, and it had also drooped to reveal one creamy shoulder with a spatter of freckles that looked deliciously like grated chocolate. Her sodden curls were slicked against her throat and the edges of her face like stretched toffee, and every inch of her exposed skin was tinted with a rosy musk. She was completely different in the afterglow of her shower; more animated and yet still ridiculously innocent in her oversized robe. It was...appealing.

"Fuck this," he grumbled to himself, turning on his heel and stalking out of the bathroom to leave behind a very confused witch.

Hermione blinked as the remains of his shadow abandoned her on the cold floor, leaving her brain to stew over what exactly happened. Malfoy's behaviour had become less and less aggressive with each day that passed, proof that a mother's advice was sometimes worthwhile. Acting civil had clearly been the right way to go. Now, he was simply snappy and bitter, but she couldn't decide if he was simply losing the will to fight or adjusting to his predicament. Adjusting to her.

She hoped it was the latter.

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Hermione found herself stifling a giggle as an image of the ever-graceful Malfoy slipping to the floor stole her mind. As much as she respected Professor Flitwick, she had mastered the Engorgio charm a few months ago, so her concentration had naturally started to sway. The morning had made her realise that her blond houseguest was nowhere near as threatening as he had initially been, and she couldn't help but find the transformation a little intriguing.

He was still a git of epic proportions, yet his temper had simmered. It was barely noticeable but it was there; etched into his pale features and softening his posture. The rage and fire that was always so present when he screamed at her had faded, and she had a feeling that he simply picked fights with her now out of principle and routine. Then again, that might just be her inner optimist, but she couldn't help but think his earlier smirk was a good sign.

"You look a bit more relaxed today," Neville commented, making her jump. "Good news?"

"No," she shook her head, feeling a little guilty. "I just had a good night's sleep, but Harry should be sending me an owl soon. I'll let you know when he does."

"Thanks," he smiled, attempting again to enlarge the figurine he'd been given.

She watched him with a distant fondness as the minutes ticked away. It was the last lesson of the day, and the mention of Harry and Ron had roused her determination to stick her nose in a book to help their task. When Flitwick dismissed the class, she offered Neville a quick nod before she darted for the door, ready to start her reading. But a familiar face in the corridor paused her footfalls, and she felt dread seize her chest as she took in the headmistress' dire expression.

"Miss Granger-

"The boys," Hermione blurted, her eyes going wide. "Are Harry and Ron-

"Mr Potter and Mr Weasley are fine," the professor assured, and the younger witch released a shaky breath. "However, I do have some bad news."

Hermione noted that the woman's face was worryingly reminiscent of how it had been at Dumbledore's funeral, and she nervously edged closer, blocking out the sounds of the students returning to their dorms. "What is it?" she asked quietly. "Is everyone okay?"

"I think it's best we discuss it in my office.

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.He was sat on the kitchen counter again, tapping his index finger in time with the ticks.

The minute hand had just twitched to three minutes past six, and Draco eyed the clock suspiciously. Surely the contraption must have malfunctioned, but then that was almost impossible for magical clocks, yet the prospect of Granger being late was even more unfathomable. He'd finished the vegetable broth she'd left him a good hour ago, anticipating her return as he had plotted to set right his mishap from the morning.

He still couldn't believe how he'd acted, like some idiotic child finding amusement from rain-puddles. Was it any wonder she was beginning to relax in his presence when he was behaving so foolishly? Well, it had to be rectified. Knowing Gryffindors and their fetish for friendships, this would only encourage Granger to be more civil towards him. She was a Mudblood, and imprisoned or not, he was superior. She needed to remember that.

She needed to remember she was below him. Figuratively, of course.

Well, that had been the plan, but she was over an hour late. If he could think of one positive trait to associate with Granger, aside from her pesky intellect, it would be her ability to always remain punctual. He hated people who were late and disorganised.

So just where the hell was she?

The dorm was starting to feel...eerie with her absence, and he wondered again if this would constitute as paranoia. The air felt humid and he would swear her aroma was starting to fade. For reasons he refused to broach, he didn't like that idea. He was contemplating a shower to chase his sudden anxiety when the door finally clicked open.

"Where the fuck have you been?" he demanded, hopping off the counter like a pouncing wolf. She didn't even look at him. "Hey, Granger! I'm talking to you!"

Still nothing. An agitated snarl rumbled behind his tonsils as he advanced on her, cocking an eyebrow when he noticed the defeated fall of her shoulders. The angle of her body and her treacle-tinted locks covered most of her face, and he tried to manoeuvre himself to get a better look, realising then that the witch was trembling. He subconsciously slowed his steps when he heard a throaty breath escape her mouth; not quite a sob, but close.

He paused a few strides short of her, transfixed when the light caught two little droplets that fell from her veil of curls. Tears. He hadn't expected this.

He blinked and silently scolded himself. Here he was again; faltering like some feckless moron. He remembered a time when seeing Mudblood Granger cry would have caused him nothing but pleasure, and wanted to relive that. He needed to relive that lest he completely lose himself.

"I asked you a question, Granger," he continued sharply, scowling when she flinched at his voice. "Why the hell are you late-

"Now is not the time," Hermione mumbled, keeping her face hidden. "Just-

"I don't care if the time not appropriate for you," Draco countered quickly, blocking her when she tried to move past him. "I asked you a question-

"Malfoy, stop," she said, turning away from him before he could glance her face. "Let me through-

"Why the tears, Granger?" he asked, deciding some mockery might goad a satisfying reaction. "Weasley fucking Brown again?"

"Leave me alone," she gargled, her voice heavy with trapped sobs. "Please, Malfoy, just leave me-

"No," he sneered, although her please had been a little off-putting. "What are you crying about? You look bloody pitiful-

"Malfoy-

"Answer me!"

"NO!" she screamed, her head snapping up. "Leave me alone!"

His lip twitched as he examined her features; her cheeks smeared with tears, and her eyes beaten and bloodshot. Her leaking stare was distant and pleading, and his concentration fell to her quivering lips; slightly parted to reveal a line of dents from where she must have chewed the lower one to ruin. It was odd to view her like this. She was renowned for being the collected member of the Twatty Trio, but she was suddenly so fragile. Vulnerable.

He should have relished it. It should have made him feel victorious and provided him with a beautiful opportunity and inspiration to ridicule her. But it didn't. Instead, he found the scene quite...unsettling.

She took advantage of his confusion and brushed past him, evidently in an attempt to lock herself away in her room and ride out her grief in peace. But he wasn't willing to drop it. He had no idea if it was to continue his aimless taunts or feed his curiosity, but they were most certainly not finished.

"I am not done with you!" Draco shouted, marching ahead of her to block her door. "I said I'm not-

"Well, I am done!" she hurled back, choking on a strangled cry. "Why the hell can't you just leave me alone?"

"I like watching you beg," he told her quietly. Darkly. "Answer my question-

"I won't tell you again, Malfoy," she warned, although her current state didn't give the threat the usual flare. "Move, or I'll make you move-

"Go ahead," he challenged, snatching her wrist before she could rummage in her pocket. "Not so fucking mouthy without your wand, are you-

"L-let me go," she sputtered, unsuccessfully trying to reach with her other hand. "You can't use my wand anyway. It-it's charmed to-

"I guessed as much," he hushed her, twisting her arm at an awkward angle to earn a small yelp. "Now, tell me! Why the hell are you crying?"

He'd forgotten her other arm. Stupid mistake really considering the history between his face and her fist. She spun her petite form quickly and managed to catch his jaw; not particularly hard, but enough to make him stagger back and release her. With a swish of her robes, her wand was out and firing a hex that sent him flying backwards to land in the bathroom, a loud smack echoing across the tiles. The wind was knocked out of him and his ribs ached from the hit, but he slowly raised his dizzy head to study her.

His ashy eyes flashed open to find her waiting by the doorframe; her anger only slightly clouded by her mist of tears. The witch's body was quaking more violently now, her muscles seizing up, and her erratic breaths leaving her mouth in loud bursts. He was disorientated from her spell, and he blamed that for the random thought that crossed his mind; she'd never looked more alive.

"I told you to leave me alone!" she shouted, and he could see that she was allowing her emotions to ride her. "You slimy bastard!"

He knew he'd pushed her too far, it was so glaringly obvious in her enraged stance and the uncontrollable spark in her glare. She was just one snarky comment away from bursting at the seams, and every instinct was screaming at him to heed the foreboding angle of her wand. But his inner-Slytherin reminded him of his pathetic and laughable behaviour towards Granger in the last few days, and the familiar insult just stumbled out of his mouth so easily.

"Filthy fucking Mudblood."

Something snapped in her. He actually saw it; the flicker of something dark in her eyes, something almost feral. He tried to shift but another wave of nausea from Granger's attack flushed his brain, and he squinted his eyes to try and focus on her.

"Mudblood," she repeated in a husky hum, raising her wand slightly.

He spat out a startled grunt as she stabbed her palm with the tip of her wand, dragging it across her flesh to create a thin red slit. She stalked into the bathroom then, nearing him and displaying her fresh wound. He watched with a morbid fascination as a ribbon of blood glided down her middle finger, and two ruby pearls rained down to splat against the ivory floor by his feet.

"You find this filthy?" Hermione questioned with a wavering tone, crouching down so she was at his level. "You think my blood is filthy?"

"Granger-

"DO YOU?" the witch yelled, leaning forward to snatch his hand.

"What the hell are you doing?" he asked, accepting that he was starting to panic in response to her dubious movements. "Granger, what the fuck?"

She quickly drew a similar slice across his hand, and a combination of his shock and still-sluggish reflexes didn't allow him to interfere as she slammed their palms together with a wet slap.

"There," Hermione spat, holding their twisted and sticky handshake firm as she spoke. "Now your blood's filthy too!"

Strength surged into his muscles with welcoming heat, and it went straight to his arms, tearing his seeping hand from her grasp and throwing her away from him. She screeched across the floor, much like she had this morning, but he was too busy staring at his red-stained skin to note the irony.

The worst thing was he couldn't distinguish her blood from his. It was all the same shade...and he had no idea what that meant.

His wide and disturbed gaze slowly wandered over to Hermione to find her staring at him, her expression horrified and stunned. The ominous edge that had marred her features was

gone, and her familiar innocence was back in place. Both of them were breathing heavily, and the sounds ricocheted between them as he tried to regain his wits. There were too many emotions swimming under his skin; anger, mortification, confusion...but it was too much to absorb. So he simply sat there, frozen to the spot with their eyes linked and their chests heaving.

The scene was so oddly reminiscent of their strange morning, but the differences were so significant. There were no playful smirks or childish splashes; just them and the blood. He could feel the metallic tang invading his nostrils, and he suddenly missed Granger's natural taste.

"Oh my God," she gasped, her movements jerky as she leaned on her knees. "Oh my God, Malfoy, I am so sorry-

"Don't come near me," he growled, pressing his back hard against the wall as she crawled towards him. "Don't fucking touch me! You crazy bitch-

"I c-can't believe I did that," she stuttered sadly, fresh tears glossed her cheeks and lips. "Here, let me see-

"What have you done?" he mumbled, glancing down at his wound for a moment before he roughly pulled himself to his feet. "WHAT THE FUCK HAVE YOU DONE?"

"I don't know!" Hermione whined loudly, shrinking away from him as he stormed past her. "Where are you going?"

"Away from you!" he snapped as he stomped out of the room, pausing outside the door to give her a final glare. "Don't come within an inch of me-

"Malfoy, please!" she blurted, but he'd already disappeared. "Let me explain!"

All she got was the bitter clap of a slammed door. Her body was shaking violently, bordering on convulsing as she coughed up her cries. Curling herself into a tight ball, her moans and anguished whimpers were barely muffled as she buried her face behind her arms. She let it all go; sobbing until her gut physically burned. And then some more.

On the other side of the wall, Draco settled himself on his bed and listened intently to her grief. Sweet Merlin, he missed her calming shower-sighs. He examined his messy hand with a scowl, searching again for any possible indication that their blood was different. But there was nothing; same colour, same texture...just the same.

I shouldn't have goaded her...

He shuttered his eyes, wondering why the hell he suddenly felt guilty. He should have been roaring with rage and scheming to cause her pain in return for what she had done, but all he could do was question what had made her snap. He wanted to despise her; to charge back in there and bask in her distress.

But he didn't.

He didn't hate her.

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Hermione had no idea how long it took for her cries to subside, but she would safely assume it had been at least three hours. All of Hogwarts' background noise had fizzled out and her dorm was definitely darker. Her eyes fell to her normally pristine tiles, frowning as she studied the telling red smears scattered around her. The crimson fingerprints held her attention for a moment, reminding her of poppy petals in the snow. They were Draco's fingerprints.

She would probably never know why, but she was desperate to apologise to him and try to rationalise her actions. She was so angry at herself for taking things out on him, for losing her head. She was supposed to be the sensible one amongst her friends, the voice of reason, and look what she had done.

Her puffy eyes turned to inspect the slash from her ring-finger to her thumb, and she noted that the blood had already started to coagulate. She realised then that at no point had her self-inflicted gash caused her any pain, and she couldn't help but wonder if Malfoy's hurt. Tucking her teeth into her bottom lip, she forced her hand to remain steady as she healed the damage.

A couple of whispered incantations later, and the bathroom looked completely normal, save the broken witch in the centre. She stayed still for a couple of stolen minutes, desperately trying to summon the scattered remains of her dignity and courage.

She needed to see him. She needed to explain.

Using the sink for support, she dragged herself off the floor and clumsily left the cold tiles on wobbly legs and a pang in her chest. She swallowed a nervous lump away as she faced his door, slowly bringing up her hand to drum her knuckles softly against the wood.

"Malfoy," she called. "Can I come in please?"

"I told you not to come near me," came the gruff response, but she'd expected that, and she refused to be deterred.

"Alohomora," she mumbled, taking a deep breath before she pushed open the door. She edged into his room anxiously, her damp gaze finding him sitting upright on his bed and looking so much calmer than she'd expected. "Malfoy-

"I thought I made it quite clear I didn't want you here," he interrupted evenly, dangerously low and smooth.

"I know," Hermione murmured, taking some more steps towards him. "But I need to explain-

"Get out," he demanded, not once looking at her. "I don't want you near me-

"Draco, please," she begged, tossing her pride to the wind. She'd screwed up and he had every right to know why. "My b-blood won't actually stay in you... Your system will have already-

"I am perfectly aware of how my anatomy works, Granger," he drawled, and she saw his jaw tense. "Leave."

Merlin knew why she decided that crawling onto his bed would work in her favour, but some part of her had seemed to think that if she was closer, he would be more likely to listen. He finally fired his steel-silver eyes in her direction, but still there was no sign of the contempt she'd prepared for. He simply looked at her like he'd never seen her before, and for some reason that bothered her.

Draco had no idea how to act in her presence. Every cell in his muddled brain was telling him to grab her and dump her outside of his room, repeating it until she got the point, but his confusion had somehow beaten his fury, and he needed to know why she'd done it. He knew enough about biology to acknowledge that her Muggle blood wasn't infecting him, but that wasn't the problem. It was her. He would swear he could feel her in his system; dancing in his veins and affecting his mind. That was the problem.

"I'm so sorry, Draco" she sputtered, drawing his attention back to her. "I really am. I'm just...I'm so sorry."

There were two things that made him flinch; the first was her use of his given name, and the second was her practically gushing her apology. He quickly scanned her features, finding only a sincerity that was strangely refreshing when he compared to her earlier emotions. The emotions that had led to this.

"I-I found out that Professor Burbage was killed today," she revealed carefully, and he could see she was trying to resist the new batch of tears behind her almond eyes. "By Voldemort."

He blinked. Her outburst made sense now, but he hadn't heard that name since Snape had abandoned him here. He realised then for the first time that he couldn't consider her an enemy; it just simply didn't make sense when the same...creature wanted them both dead. No, not enemies, but certainly not allies. Just somewhere in between.

"She was a friend," Hermione continued with a slight snuffle. "And when you-you said those things I just...I took it out on you and that wasn't fair."

Draco remained silent because he had no idea what else he could do. The temptation to yell at her for being so stupid was there, but it wasn't pushing through. That infuriating guilt just wouldn't budge, and an annoying little voice in his head kept telling him that he should have never taunted her. Since when did Granger become a factor for his flimsy conscience? If he had to guess, he would venture around the time she'd started leaving him meals.

"I'm so sorry," she said again, a lonely and stubborn tear slipping past her lashes. "I promise I will never do anything like that again."

He regarded her, feeling her honesty wash over him like a sedative. He took a deep breath and ignored the urge to sigh when her scent settled back into his senses. It was a little salty with the influence of her tears, but still undeniably hers. He didn't want to shout at her...it didn't feel right when she still looked so vulnerable. He would over-analyse that decision later, but he just couldn't do it right now.

"Please say something," Hermione implored, leaning a little closer. "Anything."

He chewed the inside of his mouth and arched an eyebrow. "If you ever do something like this again," he started, annunciating each syllable crisply. "You will regret it."

The specifics weren't necessary, he could tell she knew he meant it.

"Okay," she nodded numbly.

"I won't be in here forever, Granger," he told her. "And I will remember everything you do. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes," Hermione whispered, looking more relieved than he'd liked. "I really am sorry-

"I got that," Draco stopped her with roll of his eyes. "Now leave me alone."

She didn't move. "Does it hurt?" she asked, timidly gesturing to his injured palm.

"No."

"Let me clean it," she requested, extending her arm to offer her own hand. "It will just take a second-

"I can clean it myself-

"Please," she cut him off, earning a frustrated sigh from the pale wizard. "It's best if I heal it and-

"Fucking fine," he growled, thrusting his hand into hers and reasoning that it would make her leave faster. "Hurry the hell up, Granger."

Hermione anxiously licked her lips before she angled her wand, gliding it over the gash she had caused. It would take a couple of minutes, she realised, and the silence was too heavy for her. She raised her eyes to watch his face, but his harsh glare made them wander to the rather large pile of books on his bedside table.

"You've read that many already?" she questioned, her brow creasing with interest.

"I just skim them," he revealed in a reluctant grumble. "I've read them before."

"I'm not surprised," she said, her voice still uneasy and laced with nerves. "They're our textbooks-

"From our previous years," he finished for her. "Yes, I had noticed."

"Then why do you read them?"

"There's hardly a wide variety of activity options," Draco scowled at her, realising then that he was effectively holding hands with Granger on his bed. He needed to get her away. Now. "Hurry the hell up."

"Almost done," she muttered, stroking the tip of her wand over the final specks of blood. "There, is that okay?"

He quickly ripped his hand out of her dainty fingers and checked his hand before he nodded his head towards the door. "Piss off then, Granger."

Her honeyed gaze drifted over to his mountain of books again, and she parted her lips to say something. Whatever it was, her Gryffindor courage had clearly gone dry for tonight, and she clumsily left his bed and shuffled out of his room. Only when his door was securely closed did he allow himself to exhale, massaging the bridge of his nose and replaying the odd events of the last few hours in his head.

If ever there was a sure sign that this place was starting to effect his sanity, today had been it.

He looked down and ghosted his fingers across his freshly-healed skin, finding no evidence that she had ever torn open his flesh.

He was adamant he could feel her though; coursing through his bloodstream, and he blamed the invisible flames of her essence for his inability to catch sleep until dawn broke. When he roused at some point in the early afternoon the next day, he did as he always did; dressed in the usual clothes and headed into the kitchenette to see what Granger had left him to eat today.

Cottage pie. One of his favourites.

And next to the steaming pot was a peculiar stack of books, none of which he'd ever seen before.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies, apologies...Alas, reality has clawed its way back in! Surely handing out assignments in the first week of Uni is bordering on abuse, no? Hope the chapter was okay! I know it was a little dark but I did warn you! And this chapter is a little longer to compensate for the wait! Uni or not, I intend to get a new chapter out within ten days, a fortnight tops, so please don't make me relinquish my 'quick update halo!'

As you may have noticed, although this technically ignores the 7th book, I'm keeping some of the stuff in (Burbage in this case) because I think it works...Hope it works anyway...

Thanks for all the people who gave me drinking suggestions! My favourite had to go to Serpent of Slytherin, the Smirnoff apple thins were bloody delicious! But I have nevertheless stuck to my faithful Merlot for this chapter!

Lend me your thoughts please! And I know it's difficult to remain patient for the romance to kick in but it's not that long...and I want out favourite couple to be in character...

Read and Review please!

Bex-chan

Human

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione hadn't seen him for three days.

She hadn't even heard the smallest shuffle from his room, and had it not been for the fact that her cooked meals had always vanished by the time she returned from the library, she might have questioned if he'd been in her dorm at all. The witch had contemplated letting herself into his room again to rush out another string of apologies, but she reasoned that it would probably be a step in the wrong direction. He clearly wanted privacy, and she owed him at least that much after what she'd done.

She was still so mortified by her actions.

She'd never, ever done anything so awful in her life; so wrong. She'd locked herself in her room no less than four times and broken down into uninhibited sobs, cradling her quaking frame. The death of Charity Burbage was still darkening her mind, but she always found herself staring at her palm in those fractured moments, searching for a scar or mark.

She rubbed her forehead as her fingers tossed aside another page. The harsh winds screaming outside the Castle had exiled her to the sitting area, seeking some solace with one of her books. The wind was her weakness. She could happily sit through a colourful thunderstorm, or listen to the beats of thrumming rains, but when the wind sounded like a strangled human, it petrified her.

She'd tried Silencing charms, just like she had in all her previous years at Hogwarts, but they would always waver as her concentration was swallowed by oncoming sleep. The breezy roars would shock her awake, and she would be back where she'd started.

Hermione had quickly abandoned the idea of gaining any sleep too close to her window and was now huddled up on the couch in the window-less living room; reading Lord Byron's poems, one of her guilty pleasures. She pulled the blanket a bit tighter around her as she moved on to *She Walks in Beauty*, stealing a quick glance at the clock and grimacing when she realised it was half three.

And the bloody wind gave no hint of fading any time soon.

She sucked in a loud breath when a small click broke the air, and her syrupy gaze trailed over to find Malfoy slowly leaving his room. He looked annoyed when he glanced at her, expelling an agitated breath as he headed towards the kitchen, apparently choosing to ignore her completely.

She thought twice before she spoke, but the words hurried out before she could think thrice. "Did I wake you?" she whispered, unsure if he'd heard her or was simply deciding not to

acknowledge the question. Merlin knew why she thought asking again was a wise idea. "Did I-

"No," he growled as he poured a glass of water, keeping his back to her.

"Well, then why are you-

"I was thirsty," he offered, pivoting on his heels and heading back to his room.

"Malfoy, wait," Hermione said quickly, straightening her back and wondering exactly what she'd intended to say. She had no clue why he stopped short of his door, but she didn't dare question it, lest he remember his constant desire to get away from her. "Can I ask you a question?"

He sighed like she was interfering with his non-existent schedule. "Make it quick."

She hesitated and licked her teeth. "Are you still angry about...well...about the other day-

"When you cut my fucking hand open?" he clarified in a stoic tone, turning to face her. "Does it matter?"

Hermione watched with trance-treacle eyes as he brought his glass to his mouth, the moisture glossing his lips. "I guess it does," she confessed shyly, averting her attention to her lap.

Suspicion and shock almost made him choke on his drink, but he caught himself. "Why?" he snapped bitterly. "What difference does it make?"

"I'm not really sure," she murmured, carefully rising from the sofa.

Draco's jaw twitched as the blanket tumbled to her feet, leaving her in a simple t-shirt and baggy pyjama bottoms. He found himself holding his breath as she started to move, but she simply headed towards the kitchen, and he briefly wondered exactly what he'd done if she had walked in his direction. By the flimsy flickers of candlelight, she looked different; more peaceful and slightly surreal. It was the darkness toying with his vision and perceptions that made him linger, studying her closely as she plucked two mugs from a cabinet.

"Hot chocolate is better to have before bed," she spoke softly, using her wand to boil some water. "Would you like one?"

He didn't respond. She'd clearly decided that she was making one for him anyway, and the smell of powdered cocoa mingled deliciously with Granger's natural scent. He toyed with the sleeves of his jumper while she finished the beverages, and once they were complete she carried them both over to the sofas and placed them on the coffee table. He raised an eyebrow as she wrapped herself back up with the blanket and relaxed into the couch; his cautious stare shifting between her and the steaming mug that was meant for him.

"Are you going to sit?" she asked, and he could tell she was forcing her tone to be nonchalant.

"I'll drink it in my room," he said with a low grumble, taking some strides towards her.

"I was...", she started awkwardly. "Well, I was hoping you might answer my question...and maybe sit with me a while?"

That caught him off-guard. Of all the things she could have said, he would have gambled away his inheritance that those words would never pass her lips in his company. It was certainly an intriguing development to the shitty situation, and he couldn't help but consider seeing where this would lead.

"Why the hell would you think that?" he drawled lazily, resting his palms against the back of the couch opposite hers. "And I don't have to answer your question,"

"No, you don't," she agreed. "It was simply a request-

"A stupid request."

She frowned and raised her head to eye him wearily. "Never mind then-

"No," he stopped her. "I'm curious to know why you would even ask me to join you-

"You didn't answer my question," she reminded him pointedly, reaching out her arm to stroke the rim of her mug. "So why should I answer yours?"

Draco didn't have a reason, but that was fine because a wind's cry sliced the silence. He saw it then; the flash of fear that streaked across her hazels. He couldn't ever recall seeing her look scared. Uncertain maybe, and sometimes wary, but never scared. Even her demented episode in the bathroom had only stained her features with shame and shock. This little early-morning encounter was turning into right little trove of surprises.

"What's up, Granger?" he questioned cockily, a smirk pulling his mouth. "Don't tell me one of the fearless Gryffindors is scared of a little storm."

He expected defiance and irritation, but she simply pulled her blanket a little tighter around herself. "Not storms," she mumbled after a moment. "I just...I don't like the sound of the wind."

His expression scrunched up with confusion. She was actually owning up to her fear? Admitting to phobias was simply not done in his circles, and especially wouldn't be mentioned in front of an enemy. Broadcasting any form of weakness was just plain foolish, and yet she'd done it so easily.

Trusting and naïve idiot.

But she was suddenly more real...more human, and it sobered him like a blast of winter. She was a personality and less...No, she was definitely still a Mudblood...But she was a Mudblood with a character...Kind of. Possibly.

He observed her with more attention than was probably appropriate as her shoulders relaxed when the wind died. Back was the rational Granger with seemingly no issues with weather conditions, but it was there behind her amber gaze. She lifted her hot chocolate from the table

and brought it to those rosy lips of hers, forming her mouth into a small ring to blow the steam away. It shouldn't have held his attention. But it did.

"Your drink will get cold," she murmured, regarding him quietly as she took a sip.

He inhaled sharply before he climbed over the back of the couch and collapsed into the cushions, eyeing her impatiently. "How can you be scared of the wind?"

"It's not so much the wind itself," she answered evenly. "I just don't like the noise."

"That's just stupid," he scoffed.

"Everyone's scared of something," she reasoned carefully. "Aren't you? It's human nature."

He scowled like the suggestion was absolutely ridiculous, but he couldn't help but consider her words. The idea of disappointing his family, or more specifically his father came to mind, but he was guessing she meant something more specific and clinical. Either he simply didn't have one, or he was subconsciously choosing to ignore it. Still, he hated her for making him think.

"No," he stated simply, leaning forward to grab the mug.

"Maybe you just haven't realised yours yet," Hermione offered with a non-committal shrug. "Will you answer my question? About the other day? When I...you know."

His eyes narrowed. "I doubt it would be possible for me to hate you any more than I already do," Draco told her calmly, his lips twitching. She looked slightly troubled by his words, and the need for him to say something else buzzed around his tongue. He clenched his eyes shut and scorned himself for what he rushed out next. "Consider it dealt with, Granger."

A fascinating mixture of relief and surprise stole Hermione's face. "Really?"

"It would serve you well to just not mention it," he said squarely, having long decided that the incident was best tucked away at the back of beyond. "Unless you would have me bring it up-

"No," she shook her head hastily. "No, I'd like to forget it."

He gave her a brief nod and swallowed a soothing gulp of the hot chocolate, and Hermione resisted the urge to say thank you for agreeing to forget the topic. If she remembered correctly, she had apologised and said please more than she should have on that awful day. If she started spewing out words of gratitude to the arsehole then it would be a step too far.

But as he was now; sat on the other side of the coffee table and looking more calm than she could remember, it made her instinct to despise him waver. She had always believed, and witnessed, how a person's personality could effect how people perceive their appearance. If someone was ugly on the inside, her brain would convince her that ugliness was reflected on the outside. Now, with her hatred for Malfoy slightly dented by the odd calm that had settled between them, she accepted that he was a rather striking wizard.

The dim light caught his pale features well, and the orange glow waltzed in front of his silver irises. The angles and lines of his face were sharp and defined, as though each detail screamed for attention, but it made the eyes dance and she quite liked that. She could argue that he was too pale, almost like he'd been mastered from ice, but she realised he probably hadn't felt a ray of sunshine in Merlin knew how long.

"Have you read the books?" she asked carefully, deciding the silence had been breaching the fringes of discomfort. "The ones I left on the top."

She could see his hesitation to answer her. "Yes," he admitted cautiously.

"Which one are you reading now?" she pressed.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I'm just curious," she shrugged honestly, wishing his suspicion towards her would simmer.

Draco exhaled loudly. "Titus Andronicus."

"Good play-

"It's alright," he corrected her quickly, nursing his drink between his palms. "Some parts are sloppy."

"I'd agree with that," she nodded thoughtfully. "It was one of Shakespeare's early plays."

"You gave me a lot of books by him," he mumbled slowly, giving her a stern glare. "I assume he is a Muggle author."

Her eyes widened. She'd expected nothing short of blinding rage when her little experiment came to his attention, but he simply seemed irritated by it. "You knew I gave you Muggle books?"

"It's pretty obvious, Granger," he rolled his eyes. "I didn't recognise any of the authors and it seemed like something you would pull."

"And you still read them?" she pushed with a disbelieving tone. "Why?"

His scowl hardened a little. Truth be told, he hadn't touched her Muggle literature for two days, simply eyeing them with genuine disgust. But boredom was too powerful and sanity-draining, and he'd yielded on the third day, rationalising that it was either the reading or a mental breakdown. He'd intended to have the books feed his revulsion for Muggles, providing him with proof that they really were uncultured and uncivilised beings who would struggle to pen a decent paragraph.

But...

But it was actually okay...Good enough that he'd continued to turn the pages and be subconsciously impressed. It was so unnerving and sickening, and it had made him question...things. Only for a moment, but he had. No, he had never believed all that

propaganda shit about Muggles being feral, but he'd been convinced on some level that they would be less able with the arts, but this Shake-something guy was...adequate. He couldn't very well tell Granger that though.

"There's nothing else to read," he growled, realising he'd taken too long to respond.

Hermione sighed, watching him under her eyelashes as she took another sip. Her heart thudded with her inquisitive nature, and she wanted to know how far she could test this. "And what do you think of the play so far?"

He snorted. "It's violent," he said as though it was obvious, which she guessed it was. "Which is...entertaining, but it proves how barbaric Muggles are."

"Barbaric?" Hermione repeated, reining in the urge to scream at him. "How so?"

"Well, it's just mindless bloodshed-

"As oppose to all the Wizard Wars?" she pointed out quickly. "Violence is present in all races and species, Malfoy, and especially in humans. Magic or not-

"The guy killed his own son," Draco remarked, cocking his head proudly to the side as if that had been the winning blow. "That's an indication of how uncivilised Muggles are."

Hermione didn't skip a beat. "But Voldemort killed his family."

The blond's haughty expression faltered, and he hated that she witnessed it. "That's different," he mumbled defensively. "That was-

"And Crouch killed his father-

"It's different!" he repeated adamantly, but he knew the argument was weak.

Granger looked neither smug nor arrogant as she raised her head to meet his peeved stare, but simply dampened her lips with a quick flick of her tongue. "How is it different, Malfoy?"

He rummaged through his brain, hunting for a satisfactory argument or reasoning that would knock her back into place. He felt agitated and perturbed, but also a little smidgeon of respect for Granger slithered into his conscious, and that just pissed him off more. This would definitely earn her a mark on his headboard. Shit.

"It just is," he muttered, taking another swig of her rather perfect hot chocolate.

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* * *

The stiffness of his neck was his first clue that he hadn't slept in a bed.

Whatever his head was resting on was too hard to be a pillow, and as his eyes slowly blinked open, he focused on a different ceiling to what he was used to. Draco awkwardly shifted to find himself outstretched on one of the sofas, propped up by the armrest. It was still rather dark, but there were no windows in this space, and a brief check of the clock told him it was almost seven in the morning.

He groaned and rubbed his face, slowly rising into a sitting position that caused his back to click like crackling embers. His sleep-blurry vision focussed on his surroundings as he tried to recall just how and when he had fallen asleep on the couch, and his winter-grey eyes moved to the other side of the coffee table.

He stiffened.

She was cocooned from neck to toe in her blanket, her clumsy curls splashed across the cushion in coffee swirls. With her eyes shuttered and her features so relaxed, she looked the embodiment of comfort and peace. Gone were the stressed muscles consistently stretching under Granger's skin, and he couldn't ever recall seeing a person who looked so smothered by sleep. Her slumber-slow breaths hummed in his ears and snatched him from his trance, leaving Draco to silently scold himself for letting the morning fuzz his brain.

He snapped his eyes away from her, finding himself studying her unfinished and cold mug of hot chocolate. And her wand. Just lying there, taunting him.

He dragged his body away from the sofa and meandered his way around the table as silently as he could, knowing all the while that this would probably lead to nothing. She'd told him herself that it was charmed to repel him, but it could have so easily been a well-placed bluff. He shuffled closer to her wand, crouching down and moving into a position just in front of the sleeping witch.

Her breath skimmed over the sensitive skin of his throat, and he fought the shiver that kissed down his spine. Reaching out, all his hope for a chance of escape died when warning magic buzzed against his fingertips before he could even touch it. He'd expected it. With a defeated huff, he leaned back against his haunches; Granger's dreamy sighs still whispering across the fine hairs on his skin.

He closed his eyes...relished the feeling...the smell of her this close...close enough to touch...

And like an army of flames, he was blasted back to reality. He flinched violently away from her, as though she was laced with poison, cursing himself to Salazar's tomb and back.

This was what her sodding blood experiment had done to him.

She was crawling through his system and into his head, screwing up his senses. It wasn't her muddy blood, it was something deeper; something carving his bones and drowning his cells. It was her. Granger. Her substance, her innocence; just racing though him and throwing

shards at his sanity. Revolted by his actions, he fled her company on slightly shaking legs; praying some distance would purify him of her.

Hermione was startled awake by the angry slam of his door.

Shame really; it had been the best night's sleep she'd had in weeks. Even if had only been for a few hours.

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The winds were calm for the next four days, and he successfully managed to avoid her while he convinced himself more and more that she was festering beneath his flesh. On the Friday, exactly one week after their blood-bathroom incident, the walls had started to close in again. A craving for interaction with another human settled into his pores and, of course, Granger was the only option. He needed to hear another human's heartbeats because his own were getting too loud with his solitude.

Of all the fucked up things to plague his brain, needing someone else's presence was definitely the the thing that let him know he was going mad. He wanted an argument, or just something to remind him there was life beyond his bedroom door. He rationalised it by pointing out it was entirely circumstantial.. If there was anybody, and he meant anybody, other than her that could chase away his demons, then there would be no need for this.

Anybody, except Weasley. Pureblood or not, if bitchy McGonagall had shoved him into a room with that orange tumour of Wizarding Society, there would have been slaughter by the second hour.

That mental image cheered him a little.

He could hear her shuffling around in the kitchenette, clanging around with various utensils and causing more noise than was probably necessary. Combing his hands through his ice-blond hair and releasing a weary breath, he left the four-walled prison-come-bedroom to find Granger fussing with some pans and vegetables.

Hermione felt his presence before she saw it, and she spun around to give him a curious look. "Let me guess," she said evenly. "I was making too much noise again?"

"Yes," he grumbled, taking a few steps towards her. "What the hell are you doing, Granger?"

"Just sorting out some food for tomorrow," she explained with a delicate shrug. "I probably should have asked you this before, but are you allergic to anything?"

"No," he shook his head, hoisting himself up to sit on the counter. "Just you."

He'd meant the comment to be cold and crisp, but it had lacked that snide edge that had taken him years to perfect. Instead it sounded more...teasing? Well, Granger certainly seemed to find it harmless judging from her amused snort and the slight curl of her lips. He considered calling her Mudblood just for familiarity's sake, but something in his rather warped mind told him not to, and she spoke before he had a chance to question it.

"Have you finished reading Titus?" she asked, evidently a bit uncertain about how she was supposed to act around him. At least they had that in common.

He scoffed. "Give me some credit, Granger," Draco mumbled, resting his elbows against his knees and eyeing her back. "I was almost finished the other day. Of course I've finished it."

"Okay," she nodded, using her wand to help her finish her cooking. "And what were your thoughts on the ending?"

"Too rushed," he stated simply, his tone critical and brusque. "It was a rather amateur ending."

She hummed in thought as she turned to face him, crossing her arms over her chest. "I agree."

"What?"

"I agree," Hermione repeated, catching his stare with an uncertain flush. "It was too fast. Have you thought about reading another?"

He was already half-way through another one of her Muggle books. He'd decided to move away from that Shake-whatever guy, adamant that he would find some level illiteracy amongst her offered Muggle texts. He'd settled on some creepy-looking cover by a Muggle named Wilkie Collins, and had been pretty much absorbed by the pages from chapter one, much to his inner-disgust.

"The Woman in White," he offered with a rushed breath, noting that her grin stretched slightly.

"One of my favourites," she told him. "And how-

"Don't get all bloody enthusiastic," he warned her with a low tone. "The level of writing is below that of Wizard and Witch authors."

Her smile fell and she turned her back to him to complete the preparations for what appeared to be stew. "Do you really believe Purebloods to be superior to Muggle-borns, Malfoy?"

He quirked an eyebrow at that. His stony eyes roamed her shoulders and spine, searching for any clue as to why she had asked such a stupid question. "You know I do, Granger," he answered proudly, but there was an odd throb in his chest as he spoke. "Don't ask piss-poor questions when you're meant to have some brains in there."

An almost disappointed sigh left her mouth. "Then can I make a suggestion please?" she murmured softly, fidgeting with the hem of her too-big, red jumper.

There was her sodding please again; unwelcome and just another reminder of how pathetically pure she was. Somewhere at the back of his brain lingered the memory that he'd intended to argue with her, but here he was again; conversing with her in a way that should have made him vomit. But at least he felt slightly more normal. More human. Just like her shower-sighs, these...almost civil moments seemed to remedy his pulsing headaches.

"You can make all the suggestions you want," he shrugged nonchalantly, his scowl wasted on her back. "But the likelihood of me agreeing to any of them is obviously next to nothing."

She turned back around and her features were calm and soothed, but he could see the flurry of thoughts spinning behind her eyes. She really was so interesting to observe at times such as these; like a cryptic puzzle with no obvious reward. Everything that buzzed in her heart was so willingly reflected in her autumn-hue gaze, something he just couldn't get his head around. It would be wise for her to keep as much hidden as possible; especially from someone she despised. Someone like him.

"After you've finished the book," she spoke slowly. "I would like you to read Martin Luther King's autobiography."

His brow lowered with caution. "Why?"

"I think you would find some of the concepts interesting," Hermione offered, her eyes raking down his body from head to toe. "It's just a suggestion."

With that, she wandered out of his sight and disappeared into her room, leaving Draco reluctantly intrigued by her random request. He wouldn't read it, of course, if only out of spite.

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Hermione didn't have time to mull over her conversation with Malfoy, as she was greeted by a very familiar owl pecking relentlessly at her window pane. She rushed over on anxious feet, throwing open the latch to let the beautiful bird inside.

"Hedwig," she cooed affectionately as Harry's faithful pet dropped the letter in her palm and gave her knuckles a soft nuzzle. "Give the boys my love."

The Snowy Owl never waited for a response as it was too risky to waste the precious time, but Hermione always felt disheartened as she hastily took back to the skies. She would have

given anything to write a reply, but it had been agreed that it was far too dangerous to exchange more parchment than could be helped. If she ever discovered anything that could be useful for the boys, she had to pass it on to McGonagall, and she would find a means to deliver it to Harry and Ron. These rules were strict, and she naturally followed them; albeit begrudgingly.

Merlin, she missed them...

The letter was scratchy in her palm, and as much as she wanted nothing more than to tear it open there and then, she couldn't. She'd promised Ginny at the beginning of term that they would read all the messages together. If there was one person who was coping slightly worse than Hermione, it was the Weasley sister. It was her boyfriend and her brother after all, the girl had every right to feel lost.

Hermione shrugged on her robes and carefully tucked the letter and her wand into the pocket before she left her room. A quick scan of the kitchen and the sitting area informed her that Draco must have retired to his room for the remainder of the evening, so she quickly left her dorm, heading for Gryffindor Tower.

Ten minutes later and she was sat on Ginny's bed with the redhead at her side, nervously fingering the ends of her fiery locks. The only other resident of the room, Parvati Patil, was conveniently absent, possibly shacking up with Dean Thomas after their recent attempt at a relationship. The privacy was welcomed by both witches as the letters tended to rouse some emotional reactions, and only a select few knew that her two best friends were in contact.

"Ready?" Hermione sighed, not waiting for a response before she ripped away the envelope and unfolded the parchment, her eyes scanning the brief paragraph.

Girls,

All is well. Not much to report.

Working on something but it might be nothing.

As always, don't worry.

Miss and love you both.

H&R

As always, it was short and to the point, lacking any detail in case it was intercepted. The words were scribbled in Harry's handwriting this time, and Hermione watched Ginny trace her fingers across the blunt sentences with tears already beading between her lashes. She felt her own eyes burn with the inevitable pining, and it wasn't because of what was scrawled across the parchment. It was because of what wasn't on the parchment.

The boys would never talk like that, and the lack of personality behind the words was what she missed the most. Just to read one of Ron's dull jokes or to have a comforting line from

Harry would have been bliss. Hell, she'd have probably screamed with joy if they'd have written something about Quidditch. She just wanted her boys back...

"Can you stay tonight?" Ginny blurted over a sob. "P-Parvati's not here, and I don't want to be alone."

Hermione gave her friend a sad nod and pulled her in for a strong hug. "Of course I'll stay."

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Where the fuck is she?

As Draco had noted so many times before, Granger was a girl of habit; sticking to her strict routines with nary a glitch. He'd heard her leave not long after their encounter in the kitchenette, just like every other day; leaving him to his own devices for the evening. He'd read some more of the Muggle novel and had a quick shower before preparing himself for bed, waiting for Granger's return.

And there was the glitch.

He knew from his isolation that the habitual twitters of birds usually started at five in the morning, and she was normally home by three. With a confused glare at the window, he left his bed and headed into the living room, checking the clock to find it was exactly ten-past-five, and Granger had definitely not come home.

Home...?

He could think about that later. For now, all he felt was a heavy and dense weight pulsate in his chest, and it chased away any other notions he could have had. It felt like panic...Yes, that was panic. Questions quickly clogged his brain, painfully hammering against his temple.

Where was she?

If something had happened to her, would he be stuck here?

Forgotten?

Alone?

What would that do to his mind?

What would he do without her scent or showers...?

He needed to get out.

No way in hell was he staying in here; left to rot away like a peasant with no worth. He marched quickly to the main door, ignoring the familiar and irritating static against his palm, warning him not to grab the handle. But he did anyway.

His fist clamped down on the brass, and the pain was instantaneous. It burned his hand and sparked up his arm; scorching his flesh from the inside and searing across his bones. His instincts screamed at him to let go, but his alarm was too strong. He gnashed his teeth in an effort to ignore the pain and tried to push down, but then the fire shot down his spine like blazing scratches. His back arched and he roared with agony; but still, he refused to let go.

He could feel himself weakening; the violent flames burning away his energy and convulsing his muscles. He knew he was spasming with uncontrollable jerks, and another tortured yell tore out of his throat. With one last feeble attempt to escape, he put everything he had into opening the door.

The heat raced right back up his spine and attacked his head, flaring at the nape of his neck before it all went numb. He didn't even feel himself crash to the floor; trembling wildly and writhing as the fit rocked every inch of him with dangerous twitches. And then he was unconscious.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for two things...First, for the late update. And second, for the semi-cliffy...insert evil cackle here...By the way, did anyone else shed a tear when watching the new Deathly Hallows trailer? One glimpse of the Lynx and I became a bit emotional...Anyway...

Hope this chapter was okay because there was a lot of character development for Draco and Hermione, which I am keen to know your opinions on! Can't believe how many great reviews this fic has already had, and they're all very lovely, so many thanks! Somehow also managed to pick up 100+ faves and just under 200 alerts...That's pretty cool considering I haven't even reached the tenth chapter yet...Major grateful...

Texts mentioned were Titus Andronicus by William Shakespeare (my soul mate...we even have the same birthday...If it weren't for those bloody 400 years between us, we'd have been very happy...), The Woman in White by Wilkie Collins, She Walks in Beauty by Lord Byron and The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr. by Martin Luther King Jr. (Obviously...).

Lend me your thoughts on the chapter and, as always, have a glass of your usual on me! Have two if your usual is wine!

Read and Review please!

Bex-chan

p.s. For those of you who read *Hunted*, I am working on a final Epilogue, but it's a sodding huge chapter so it's going to be a bit longer. Apologies for the wait.

Touch

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione hadn't managed a blink of sleep.

Ginny had become inconsolable fairly quickly, and Hermione had simply rocked her back and forth, stroking her hair until the redhead had become too exhausted to remain conscious. She knew Molly comforted her daughter in a similar fashion, and she'd spent the majority of the night thinking about her own parents and how much she missed them. Her weary brain had then naturally dragged her to thoughts of Harry and Ron, and finally, Malfoy.

In her defence, it was impossible not to think of her cold houseguest when he was always there, but he'd been a little easier on her strained thoughts as of late. Despite his arrogance, prejudices, and the rest of the complicated recipe of flaws, Malfoy was certainly more bearable than he'd been before. She'd even found herself – accidentally, of course – leaving for the library later than usual so she could spend more time in his presence. It was all for studious purposes of course; McGonagall had asked her to keep an eye on him, and she found it somewhat fascinating to witness all the subtle changes.

Plus, it felt good to have a consistent male presence again, even it was forced, and said male was a prat.

Still, watching him adapt to his surroundings, and to her, was so intriguing, and she had secretly challenged herself to influence him as best she could. Hermione was almost certain that if, and that was a massive if, she could break his prejudices, then he wouldn't be so bad to live with.

Then again, probably not. Her Gryffindor optimism could be a pain in the backside at times, but she'd try anyway; if only to erase the word Mudblood from his vocabulary.

Her lack of sleep was clearly starting to muddle with her head, and a glimpse at the clock told her it was already half six in the morning. She checked that Ginny was completely out before she carefully moved her to the side, reaching out with the hem of her sleeve to brush away some dreamy tears from the younger witch's face. Hermione silently headed to her friend's desk and scribbled a quick note, apologising for leaving and explaining that she needed some rest.

With a parting sad look at the pretty redhead, she crept quietly away from her former living space and wandered down the lonely corridors back to her dorm. It was only a short distance, but her steps were slow and thoughtful as she noted, yet again, just how dead Hogwarts seemed. Yes, the halls were still bleak with the winter morning, and it was too early for anyone to be up on a Saturday, but she had always adored Hogwarts for feeling so alive and warm. Now, every brick looked darker and every room was colder, and the entire Castle had a similar atmosphere to that of a graveyard.

It was a haunting comparison...One that constantly reminded her of how dismal everything was. It would be the 1st of November on Monday, another month since Dumbledore's death. Half a year, and it still made her heart shrink.

With a troubled sigh, she mumbled her password to the pride of lions, but the door didn't open all the way. She frowned and pushed against it, feeling resistance from the other side. She slipped in sideways and instantly tripped on something; something fleshy that sent her tumbling to the floor with a shocked gasp. With a frustrated breath, she chucked her hair out of her face and glanced over her shoulder, her eyes going wide when she noticed what, or who, had caused the obstruction.

"Oh God," she whispered, pivoting on her knees and crawling over to him. "Malfoy? Draco!"

He looked dead. It was as simple as that.

His skin had turned a ghostly shade of grey and his lips were a chilling blue smudge across his face. With his eyes sealed, and his expression a foreboding semblance of peace, Hermione felt intense alarm and dread clog her throat. With jittery movements and panic-clumsy hands, she fumbled with his wrist, grimacing when she noticed his palm was a swollen mess of blood and scorched flesh.

The loud and violent thuds pounding in her ribcage calmed when she felt Draco's steady pulse against her fingertips. She released a shaky breath and relished the feeling of his heartbeats for a second, allowing her terror to subside. It only took another glimpse at his mangled hand and his position by the door for her to deduce what had happened.

He'd tried to escape.

Malfoy, you bloody idiot...

Kneeling at his side, she forced herself to gather her wits; surprised when she realised her cheeks were damp. She'd cried? Well...panic could do that to people, and she could think about it later after she'd kicked the shit out of him for being so stupid.

"Wingardium leviosa," Hermione said quietly as she got to her feet and withdrew her wand, manoeuvring the unconscious wizard to one of the sofas.

She crouched next to him with her wand lingering over his chest, ready to wake him, but she hesitated.

Her fawn-like eyes slowly drifted up to his face, and she realised she'd never had an opportunity to see him like this. This close. He looked so normal then, like he was simply sleeping. There was no trace of the anger and turmoil that always seemed to stain his features; no hint of how fractured his life was. He appeared relaxed, and she was completely transfixed by him. She reached out a curious hand to brush aside his snowy-blond fringe, and her fingertips moved on their own from that point; sweeping across his brow and up his cheekbone with probing barely-there strokes.

Something wedged in her chest as she studied him further, and she found herself thinking it was such a shame. He was handsome and smart, but his upbringing had ruined him, and it was so sad...Such a waste...

Some of the colour returned to his face as she grazed his skin, and she couldn't help herself as she brushed her thumb against his lower lip. He was...warmer than she'd expected...

She snatched her hand away and gave it a horrified glare. This was what insomnia did to her; messed with her brain and encouraged to do stupid and inappropriate things. Shaking her head and privately scolding herself, she placed her wand back against his chest and prepared for Malfoy's inevitable temper when he woke up and found her leaning over him.

"Enervate!"

Draco sprang up with a loud gasp, his eyes snapping open into wide and stormy pools, and his chest heaving with urgent sputters. He didn't even notice the witch as his side as he stared straight ahead, blinking wildly and trying to regain his composure.

"Malfoy!" Hermione shouted his name, placing her hand across his arm. "Draco, calm down. It's alright."

His frantic stare shot over to her, and she could have sighed when she saw him relax and his breathing slowed to a regular rate. She was about to speak again when he quickly reached out with his injured hand, and she managed to resist the urge to flinch away in surprise. It happened too quick to understand, but his sticky palm was suddenly against her cheek, intimately slicking her skin with his blood. Her lips parted in shock as she tried to comprehend the gesture, and he was trembling so badly that the tremors vibrated against her face.

And then, as if nothing had happened, his hand dropped, and he was simply staring at her with a blank expression. Snapping out of yet another trance, Hermione examined his shivering body nervously, listening to his chattering teeth as the shudders became increasingly worse.

"Malfoy," she breathed as calmly as she could. "Your body needs to recover, okay?" He didn't even attempt to answer over the rhythmic claps of his teeth, just continuing to watch her with completely empty eyes. "I'm going to get you some Dreamless Sleep Potion, alright? I'll be back in a second."

She rushed to her bedroom without waiting for a response and flung open the chest at the base of her bed to rummage as fast as she could for a vial of purple liquid. With the required potion in her fist, she grabbed a blanket from her bed and raced back to him, finding his body quaking at an alarming rate. She dropped the blanket and stumbled back to his side, desperately tugging away the cork and bringing the vial to his lips.

"D-Draco," she murmured over her anxiety. "Can you keep still so I can give you this?"

No answer. Just more shaking...

Pausing for only a second, her free hand went to his face again, cupping his cheek and using her thumb to pry apart his lips. "It's okay," she muttered distantly, oblivious to how tender she was being. She ignored the pain as she shoved her thumb between his vibrating teeth so she could pour the potion down his throat.

When the small glass was empty, she tossed it over her shoulder and settled her palm over his lips, absently rubbing her fingertips across his face as she waited for him to swallow. No less than twenty seconds later and he went completely limp, though he was still shivering slightly. She pulled the blanket over him and ensured he was substantially covered before she collapsed back on her haunches with a relieved sigh.

Dear Merlin, she'd been petrified...petrified for him...But she'd done all she could.

Stealing a glance just to ensure that he was sleeping soundlessly, she rose to her uneasy feet and literally felt the exhaustion smother her like a freezing wave. Dragging her protesting limbs towards the bathroom, she hunched over the sink and tried to gather her thoughts, but a glance at her reflection made her breath hitch.

There it was. His crimson handprint; bold and oddly beautiful across her cheek like some territorial mark that still felt blissfully warm. She stared at it for a long minute before she flicked on the tap and rinsed his blood away with a strange flutter in her chest. With a final glance at her reflection, she trudged into her room and began to discard her clothes. She hurriedly changed into a t-shirt and her pyjama bottoms, tucking her wand into a pocket at her thigh.

She could have cried over how comfortable her bed looked. So, Godric knew why she decided to grab another one of her blankets and head back into the sitting room.

Settling herself down and hugging her body under the covers, her heavy-lidded gaze focussed solely on the slumbering wizard across the coffee table on the opposite sofa. Again, he looked so different, but she had a feeling it had nothing to do with his calmed features this time.

This would change things, but she had no idea how.

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* * *

.Hermione woke first to the sounds of wandering students outside her dorm.

She checked the clock to find it was almost midday, meaning she had miraculously managed five hours sleep; one of her longest rests in ages. It also meant that Malfoy would be waking soon if she'd measured out the potion correctly, and her sleepy stare drifted over to him.

The whole incident seemed like a weathered whisper across her memory, somewhere between reality and a forgotten dream. She could have been watching him for minutes or hours when signs of life began to slowly influence his body; just little twitches and a rousing sigh before his eyes opened with a flutter of blinks.

She half-wished he didn't notice her, because she knew it would lead to one of the most awkward moments of her life. Just as she was contemplating closing her eyes and pretending to be asleep, he cocked his head, and their eyes locked.

She'd expected nothing but rage and embarrassment, but she saw only irritation and a hint of shame swirling in his rain-cloud eyes. The silence seemed to spark between them as the eye contact refused to shatter, and Hermione's voice found her before she could turn it away.

"How do you feel?"

He looked away then, and she honestly didn't expect him to answer. "Like shit," he muttered, his voice a little hoarse.

The witch observed him intently as he pulled himself into a sitting position with some difficulty and a reluctant grimace, keeping his injured hand under the blanket. He bent his knees and clenched his eyes shut, bowing his head and massaging his temple with lean fingers. She chewed her bottom lip and silently scolded herself for leaving her couch, gathering the blanket about her shoulders as she neared him.

What the hell are you doing...?

She could have sat on the floor next to his sofa. It would have certainly been a more rational idea than nervously settling herself on the couch by his feet. If he had screamed at her then, she wouldn't have blamed him, because she had no idea why either. But Draco barely moved. This was one of the most bizarre situations she could ever remember getting herself into, and considering the last six years of her life, that was saying something.

"What were you thinking?" she blurted before she could douse the urge, frowning when he still didn't lift his head. "Do you have any idea how dangerous the wards are? You could have died, Malfoy-

"You didn't come back," he interrupted with a low mumble.

What the-

"What?" Hermione breathed, trying to study every detail of his face to gain a clue. "What do you-

"You didn't come back," he repeated, finally glancing at her from under his eyelashes. "Last night."

"I...I don't understand-

"Nobody else knows I'm here." he hushed her, his words strained and quiet. "If something happens to you then I am royally fucked-

"McGonagall knows your here," Hermione pointed out. Her voice was soft and patient, as though she was comforting him, and Draco was too confused to be disgusted by it. Despite his best attempts to ignore it, there was something about Granger's proximity that steadied the remains of his tempestuous soul, and for the moment, he didn't want her to leave. Not yet.

How could he have forgotten McGonagall? It was all that ancient cow's fault he was imprisoned here in the first place.

"And if something happened to her?" he questioned harshly. "I would just rot away in here until some fucking third year noticed the smell?"

"Draco," she gasped, flinching at his bitter words. "If anything happened to McGonagall, the wards would stop working and you would be able to leave."

He blinked.

Hell, he'd never even thought of that, and now he felt like bloody fool for his dramatic escape attempt. He snapped his glare away from her and despised himself for getting into such a state. If he thought that Potter wandering into the bathroom last year had been the most degrading thing that could happen to him, he'd been wrong.

But...

But she was different to Potter. That immortal prick had been nosing around and trying to interfere, as he always bloody did, whereas she looked genuinely concerned for him. The very thought should have repulsed him, and his fingers itched with the instinct to shove her as far away as possible, but he didn't. Instead, he scrutinised her heart-shaped face for any indications of trickery or deception, but the witch practically glowed with sincerity.

"Why would you help me?" he asked her, narrowing his eyes into suspicious slits.

"Because you needed it," Hermione shrugged, as though it was nothing. "The wards are strong and dangerous, and you could have-

"You hate me," he hissed, perhaps more to himself than to her. "We loathe each other, Granger. Why the fuck would you-

"I don't...I don't think I really...hate you," she stuttered shyly, and Draco clamped his mouth shut with an audible snap. "Hate's a strong word. I would never wish anything fatal on you-

"Wouldn't you?" he growled cynically.

"No, I wouldn't," she affirmed with that familiar determination of hers. "And I would hope you wouldn't wish it on me."

Draco snorted, but she would be deaf not to notice the lack of conviction there. A memory of the Quidditch World Cup invaded his mind, and he recalled himself warning Potter to get her away from the chaos. It had been a random impulse that he had questioned relentlessly for weeks afterwards, but there was no escaping that he'd considered her safety, and he still had no idea why.

"Let me check your hand," Granger's voice stole him back to the current predicament. "It looked pretty bad this morning-

"It's fine-

"No, it's not," she cut him off with a stern glare, extending her hand. "Look, I'll just Petrify you if you insist on being difficult. Wouldn't you rather we just got this over with?"

Draco scowled at her and clicked his tongue. "You will not tell a soul about this, Granger."

"I couldn't even if I wanted to, Malfoy," she reminded him. "Everything that happens in this room remains between us."

Something about the brunette's comment made his throat run dry, and he gulped down a scratchy swallow as he reluctantly revealed his hand. As he settled it in her cupped palm, he grimaced when he realised it was a lot worse than he'd expected. There was a deep gash slicing across the centre, clotted with half-dry blood and still oozing in some areas. His skin was folded back like grotesque petals, and little red lines branched away from the large cut and spread across the rest of his hand like roots; stretching up his fingers and wrist.

Draco could feel residual magic crackling under his flesh, and the weeping scold burned like torture. His smoky eyes shifted to Granger, half expecting to find her choking on the fumes of vomit, but she was simply nibbling her lip. Her hazels were calculating the damage, and he watched the clogs of her brain churn with too much attention. He noted that they were, once again, effectively holding hands, the smell of blood lingering between them, just like the first time on his bed after the bathroom incident.

"This will take a couple of minutes," she murmured, pulling out her wand and beginning the work on his wound. "Does it hurt?"

"No," he lied through gritted teeth, eyeing the golden glow at her wand's tip. "Just hurry up, Granger."

She dampened her lips with a flick of her tongue as she healed the mess, starting at his fingertips and working her way down to the gaping slash. Ignoring the searing sensations sparking in his nerves, he focussed instead on her gentle touches and found them the perfect distraction. They sat in a silence that oddly bordered on comfortable, and he was too lost in the soothing exercise to do anything when she tugged up his sleeve.

Granger's harsh breath broke his trance, and his head snapped down to find her amber eyes round and shocked. He wanted to melt away at that moment; disintegrate into nothing. He followed her stare down to his arm, knowing full well what had shaken her. His Dark Mark.

No, no, no...

He didn't want her to see it...It just didn't feel right. She was too pure for it, as if just looking at the ugly scar would somehow taint her. Salazar strike him down, he didn't want that; he didn't want her anywhere near it. He tried to snatch his arm away, but her grip on him tightened, holding it in place.

Hermione studied the hideous brand intently, realising she'd never been this close to the Dark Mark before. She had read countless texts about Voldemort and his trademark spells; particularly the Morsmordre and the inky emblem that Death Eaters bore, but there was something off with the mark on Malfoy's flesh. The skin surrounding the skull and snake was still raised and red with irritation, but Dumbledore had been dead almost six months, which meant the swelling should have gone down by now. Unless...

"Wait," she whispered absently as she leaned a little closer, oblivious that her breath ghosted across his forearm and caused him to shiver. Draco observed her warily as a rather striking flash of understanding danced in her eyes, and he held his breath as she parted her lips. "You weren't willing."

He actually coughed in bewilderment. "What?"

"You weren't willing," she repeated, lifting her chin to give him a long look. "Not completely, anyway."

"What the fuck are you-

"Your body rejected it because you didn't want it," she explained, gesturing to the inflamed skin around the tattoo-like symbol. "This would have calmed by now if you had been completely obedient."

Draco had no idea how he was supposed to respond to that, because the infuriating witch was, yet again, right. He'd had too many reservations to count during the ceremony, and he'd regretted that fateful night with aching pores ever since. He'd been far too influenced by a reckless urge to avenge his father's imprisonment, but the moment he'd stepped into Borgin and Burkes, he'd sealed the painful transaction that had left him with this disgusting scar. And what had come from it? Nothing but haunting nights, breaking down in the Prefects bathroom, and his six-month hell of hiding.

He knew all this; had long accepted that it was a fatal mistake which had led to the most degrading and awful moments of his life, but he didn't want her to know that.

"What the hell would you know?" he challenged with a condescending sneer, ripping his arm away from her and covering the brand back up with his sleeve. "Let me guess; one of your precious books, Granger? You should know better than to trust everything you read-

"I know it wasn't your choice, Malfoy," she argued in a calm tone that only infuriated him further. "And I didn't have to see your Mark to figure it out-

"Spare me your philosophical bullshit, Granger," he spat, but he couldn't stop his features twisting into a pained grimace as a sudden bout of nausea hit him.

"Are you okay?" Hermione asked quickly, reaching out. "Here, let me-

"Just leave me be!" he snarled, attempting to rise from the couch, but the fuzziness in his head wouldn't allow it. "For fuck's sake-

"It's the magic," she sighed, shuffling a little closer to him across the cushions. Maybe too close. "Let me finish healing you-

"I don't think so-

"I won't touch the Mark," she offered with a meek shrug. "I swear, I won't even mention it. As I said, what happens here remains between us."

Had it not been for the biting prickles still swimming beneath his skin, a wonderful insult would be tumbling out of his mouth by now. Instead, he cautiously surrendered his arm to her again, careful to keep his features hard so she wouldn't allow herself to believe he was at all comfortable with it. Her fingers were on him again; lulling little caresses that seemed to linger across his fine hairs like static. True to her word, she kept her reaction indifferent as she pushed his sleeve back up, careful to keep her wand and eyes away from the black stain.

The lip-chewing witch was doing everything she could to ignore the Dark Mark, but she would swear she could feel it glowering at her; judging her Muggle heritage and her loyalty to the Phoenix. She half-sealed her eyes and took a deep breath, catching a breeze of Malfoy's scent. It was different now, no longer cider-sweet from his apple diet, but masculine and refined. There was a hint of that new book smell she'd always found appealing, and a dash of her minty soap, that merged perfectly with his earthy, male spice. It was nice...

"Okay," Hermione mumbled somewhat breathlessly, lowering her wand and releasing his arm. "I think that's it."

"Good," he breathed, finding his arm suddenly felt rather cold without her touch.

"How do you feel?" she asked, tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Any dizziness or-

"No," he lied bitterly, steeling himself with the meagre scraps of his dignity to leave the couch. He put everything he had into making his movements as fluid as possible, and was almost safely inside his room when Granger's voice stalled him. Merlin forbid she leave him in peace.

"Malfoy," she called him, a nervous scratch to her voice. "Can I...Can I ask you something before you go?"

He cursed his curiosity to the other side and back as he leaned his shoulder against the wall and shot her a fierce glare. "Make it quick, Granger."

"Well," she murmured with obvious reservations. "Do you remember when you first came here and you asked how I felt about you? And I said-

"You had a rant about how much you despised me," he finished impatiently, rolling his eyes. "Yes, so?"

"But I...I said just now that I didn't hate you," Hermione continued, fidgeting anxiously. "That hate was a strong word-

"Bloody hell," he growled through connected teeth. "This pointless memory exercise better have a point. Get on with it, Granger!"

"How do you feel about me now?" she asked in a staccato rush, unable to look at him. "I mean...do you still hate me?"

His eyes were a stormy mix of agitation and confusion that made her feel just that little bit more idiotic. The question seemed to ring in his ears and stir memories of his obsession with her showers, and the almost civil talks that they'd accidentally stumbled into as of late. Did he hate her? Yes, just not in the same way. He hated her now for confusing him and screwing with his predefined perceptions of her. He hated her because she had somehow become borderline tolerable, but he hated her most because she made him think; made him question himself.

"Do I hate you?" he repeated with a flawless patronising snarl. "More and more each day."

He didn't wait to witness her reaction and barged his way into his room, just managing to reach his bed before he collapsed with still-struggling muscles. He brought his hand up to his eyes and inspected it, one again acknowledging that Granger had done a decent job with fixing a wound. His skin was unblemished ivory again; but he would swear he could still feel an unnatural buzz across his wrist and palm.

It wasn't like the crawling sting from McGonagall's wards, but more...more like the pleasant remains of Granger's soothing fingers...

It was a ridiculous and dangerous notion, and he balled his fists and slammed them into the mattress with a revolted grunt.

He'd been wrong; this was what he loathed most about her. She was polluting him like a blissful virus, infecting him inch by inch; sense by sense. He went through the motions in his head, listing her invasion of his senses. First it had been her smell, closely followed by her shower sounds. And then his eyes had come to acknowledge that she wasn't the ugly Muggle-spawn she was supposed to be. And now, he could feel her; her touch across his skin and her essence still waltzing in his veins from the day on the bathroom floor.

That was four; smell, sound, sight and touch. What was the fifth?

Oh yes. Taste.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies for ending it there, but I have certain...intentions with the next chapter which requires that ending! It's been...three days since my last update! You can't say I'm not good to you people...I hope? Also wanted to get this up quick as I have two lengthy bastard assignments to do this week, so next chapter will take a bit longer...Sorry! But can I get some love for the fast update...? No? Bugger...

Thanks so much to everyone who reviewed; particularly CammyFan for your honesty and always great-to-read reviews! And to TheThirdWheel for going back and reviewing each chapter. It's very kind so thanks!

You have no idea how much fun I had writing this chapter with my usual glass of goodness, (Merlot this time!) so I hope you liked it too. Please let me know how you feel about the chapter...And apologies once again for it being rather short!

Review please!

Bex-chan

Venom

Chapter Notes

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

Draco thumbed the book's spine and examined the cover critically, searching for any clues as to why Granger was so anxious for him to read it.

It seemed innocent enough; the main cover a still, Muggle photograph in black, white and all the shadows of grey in between. The main focus was a seemingly educated, dark-skinned man – evidently a Muggle by his attire – with an expression that seemed worn with wisdom and experience. He checked the back and noticed it wasn't technically an autobiography, more a collection of this King bloke's writings and letters, arranged by another man called Carson. There wasn't really an explanation of what the book contained, which irritated him, but he was ridiculously intrigued about Granger's interest in the text.

With a stubborn huff, he tossed it aside and buried his face in his palms, digging his fingernails into his scalp and wondering when all this would end. He heard Granger leave her room and head to the bathroom for her shower, just like she did every other morning. He yielded to his own disturbing routine, and left the bed to slump against the usual wall, cocking his head so his ear would tingle with the vibrations of her inevitable sounds.

A few moments later, with the musical hum of pulsing water to accompany her, Granger began to feed his unhealthy obsession. Just subtle gasps and morning-raspy purrs to begin with, a build-up to her crescendo of moans that always dragged him back to this place. He inhaled a calming breath as his headache eased to her noises, and allowed himself to be lulled into a dazed state.

As he always did.

But...

But something within him stirred; a warm little twitch just below his naval that sent fast and eager blood between his thighs. He knew the feeling well, but it had been a while; being forced to plot a man's death tended to consume the mind and steal any thoughts of release, and six months in hiding had hardly helped.

Still a little lost in Granger's moans, his hand moved instinctively and absently to the growing bulge between his hips. His fingers barely managed a pleasing stroke before his eyes shot open and he snapped his hand at his side with horror carved into his features. He tore his body away from the wall with an undignified jerk and slammed his palms over his ears. He was shaking with self-loathing and shock as he desperately tried to shove her out of his senses, clenching his eyes shut and grinding his teeth.

In a trembling heap at the foot of his bed, he didn't move; didn't dare move, until the click of the main door slipped through his fingers and told him that she'd left for classes. He opened

his thunderstorm eyes and his arms fell from his head as his chest heaved with revulsion and panic.

What the HELL was that?

His forehead was glossed with a mist of sweat, and his throat was scratchy and dry from his mortified panting. He felt dirty; sullied by the way his body had reacted to that fucking bitch. Merlin's grave, what was wrong with him? Had his psyche become that withered in this Granger-infested cell that he would actually respond in such a sickening manner?

NO!

No.

No, it didn't mean anything. Not a sodding thing.

It had been long months since he'd gained any physical satisfaction, and that wasn't counting the fistful of times he'd tossed off in the Scottish shack when Snape had left to get provisions. It was only normal that his baser instincts should come into play when he was living so closely to a female.

Mudblood or not.

It was inevitable, but he could control it. He had to.

He raised his head and found King's autobiography near his feet. With a loud swallow to get rid of the sandy edge in his throat, he grabbed the book with still-quivering fingers and flicked to the first page. Distraction was essential.

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"Reading?" McGonagall echoed with a thoughtful expression. "Yes, I suppose that would be an ideal way for Mr Malfoy to keep busy."

"I have given him some of my Muggle books," Hermione confessed. "I...I thought I could perhaps change his view on Muggles-

"I admire your tenacity, Miss Granger," she sighed, leaning back in her chair. "But I would advise you don't get too carried away with that idea. Mr Malfoy seems pretty fixed in his ways-

"I know that," the brunette cut in. "But I don't think he's as bad as he makes out. He's intelligent, and I think if I could just feed that seed of doubt, he might see some sense."

The Headmistress pursed her lips and tapped her finger pensively against her chin. "Your opinion on Mr Malfoy has changed," she said slowly; a statement, not a question.

"Well," Hermione started awkwardly. "I just think I understand him a little better, and I think he's adapting well to me too. I'm pretty sure his perception of me has changed in the last month, so maybe I could convince him that his prejudices have no basis."

McGonagall considered the younger witch carefully. "If you must," she breathed hesitantly. "Then I would recommend that you don't get your hopes up and just be careful. But I trust your judgement, Hermione."

"Thank you," she nodded with a small smile. "That means a lot, Professor."

"And how has he been doing otherwise?" the older witch asked. "Any odd behaviour, or outbursts of any kind?"

Hermione's brain was instantly harassed with flashing memories of Saturday, and coming home to find Malfoy passed out on the floor. She'd assured him that his escape attempt would remain between them; Merlin, she'd pretty much promised him. In hindsight, it had been a rash decision, and while her loyalties to McGonagall were resolute and infinite, she couldn't break a promise.

Malfoy or not.

"No," she shook her head, ignoring the guilt. "No, he just spends most of his time in his room."

"Okay," the Professor spoke with a slightly sceptical tone. "Well, keep me informed on his behaviour. And how are you doing, Miss Granger?"

"I'm fine," she responded automatically, tilting her head to give McGonagall a curious look. "Why do you ask?"

"I'm just checking you are feeling well," she offered in an even tone. "I understand that things are difficult at the moment and I just want to ensure that you are doing okay."

Hermione shrugged. "I know I have it easier than a lot of other people," she answered honestly, licking her lips. "I'm really okay, Professor."

"If you say so," McGonagall muttered with obvious concern. "But I'd like you to know that you are free to discuss anything you wish with me whenever you like."

The young Gryffindor forced this smile. "Thank you."

"One more thing," the greying witch continued. "I need to make a trip to Hogsmeade this weekend and you and Mr MacMillan are welcome to join me to get some things. You might want to ask your friends if they need anything."

"Okay," she said, rising from her seat. "I'll see you Saturday, Professor."

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It was late, and the wind was wild again; howling through the abandoned library like the prayers of dying men.

Hermione shuddered and surged a bit more magic into her Lumos charm, drawing her limbs in a little tighter to battle the chill. Her breath left her lips in ghostly mists as she tried to concentrate on the passage-laced pages, willing her heavy eyes to stay open. It was useless; the wind was too bold and her body too exhausted to remain here.

She hadn't returned to her dorm after classes like she normally did, as Neville had near-begged her for some help with a Transfiguration assignment, and she'd seen no point in leaving once he had finished. Her uniform had become scratchy and musky from her too-long day, and she'd barely managed a cheese and pickle sandwich after her meeting with McGonagall at lunch. She was starving, stiff and frustrated that the night had denied her any progress. Just like every other night.

Another shrill wail of the weather rattled her nerves and she slammed the book shut with a forlorn sigh. The sounds screamed around her and she hurriedly packed up her belongings, casting wary glances at the surrounding shadows. With quick and silent footfalls, she rushed down the hollow and menacing corridors with her heart pounding against her chest. Catching flimsy reflections of herself in the windows and convinced that she could feel a stranger's footsteps behind her, she moved into a full sprint.

"Ad Lucem!" she hissed at the yawning lions, ploughing into her room and sealing her stare as she sank to the floor and tried to regain her scattered composure.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

Hermione flinched away from the voice, her eyes wide and a hand at her chest to calm her fright. "Bloody hell, Malfoy!" she scolded over her flustered wheezing. "What are you doing?"

He regarded her with viper, calculating eyes, and his previous plans to ignore her at all costs, decided after his...problem in the morning, dissipated. It was too tempting to rile her up when she looked all jittery and vulnerable, and he relished her unpredictability. A month in her presence and he still found her impossible to read, and despite that twitch under his stomach reminding him it was a potentially risky decision, he found himself desiring to see how this played out.

He took a little comfort in seeing Granger all ruffled in her uniform; skirt conservatively below the knee, unlike many of the other girls who flashed some leg, and her shirt buttons all neatly fastened. The girl wouldn't have known how to dress provocatively if her life depended on it, and it deluded him into believing that this morning was nothing more than an anatomical glitch.

Surely no harm would come from toying with the little Gryffin-dick, if only to douse some boredom?

"What are you doing on the floor?" he countered coldly from the kitchenette. "And what's got you so bloody jumpy?"

She gulped down some of her panic when another blast of wind sounded too human. "I...I'm not jumpy-

"Oh, of course," he smirked cruelly, analysing her features expertly and recognising all the telling signs. "I forgot about your pathetic issue with the wind-

"Shut up, Malfoy," she snapped, rising to her feet and straightening her posture to regain a little dignity. "Why do you always have to lurk around-

"I'm not lurking," Draco calmly argued, leaning against the counter and folding his arms. "I'm simply standing here-

"Well...why?" she questioned clumsily, ditching her bag by the sofas. "You're not normally awake when I get home-

"Wrong again, Granger," he interrupted. "I am always awake when you get home. I'm just usually in my room."

She looked puzzled and agitated, and his smug smirk widened slightly. "You're always awake?"

"Trying to sleep through your heavy-handed noise is impossible, Granger," he told her bluntly. "As I said before, it's like living with a Dyspraxic Giant-

"I am not heavy-handed! I am-

"Loud and annoying," he finished with a bored tone. "And a pain in the arse-

"Wait," Hermione mumbled quietly. "Then...you're having trouble sleeping too?"

Shit.

Draco realised his mistake too late. "I sleep fine," he said, giving her pointed look. "Even if your Gryffindor beds are ridiculously uncomfortable."

The brunette paused and tilted her head; her honeyed eyes dancing up and down the length of him cautiously. "So...what were you doing in the kitchen?"

"I was trying to make a drink," he rolled his eyes, gesturing to her kettle. "But your fucking Muggle shit is broken-

"It's not broken," she muttered a little distantly, shifting her weight. "I'll get changed and I'll make us some-

"I don't want you to make me-

"Oh, don't be so childish," she frowned, but it faltered when the wind roared again. She dented her bottom lip with anxiety as she weighed up her pride against her fear and sudden loneliness. "Look, I need to ask you a few questions anyway, so-

"Questions?" Draco echoed. "Why should I answer any-

"Malfoy, stop it," she scorned with an irritated huff. "I'm not trying to pull anything-

"Sure-

"The questions I have are about your stay and how to possibly make it more...comfortable for you," she explained, heading to her room. "So, stop being so-

"You have ten minutes," he warned, leaving the kitchen and collapsing heavily into the couch he had slept on the other night. "Hurry up, Granger."

It took Hermione less than two minutes to change into a baggy t-shirt and her loose bottoms, and she also gathered her blanket, knowing the bellowing night would banish her to sitting room again. Draco tapped his foot impatiently against the coffee table's leg as she prepared two cups of steaming chocolate, and Hermione nibbled at her tongue to halt the biting words at the tip.

"Right," the witch exhaled, setting down their mugs and relaxing into the opposite couch. "I'm going to Hogsmeade this weekend and I thought you might want me to get some things for you-

"I don't need you to get anything for me!" he spat, rising from his seat with furious movements. "How many times do I need to tell you, Granger? Are you bloody deaf? I don't need anything from you-

"I knew you'd react like that," she told him, her tone prim and controlled like this was simply a business meeting. "Look, it's not my money; it's Hogwarts' money, and seeing as your father was one of the Governors, it's technically your family's money."

It wasn't true. Hermione would be paying for anything that he requested, assuming it was within her price range. She'd expected that he would take her offer as an insult to his pride, and had invented her little white lie to convince him. She wasn't sure why, but she wanted him to have a few comforts to call his own; perhaps to possibly calm his mood, or maybe it was something else that she couldn't quite put her finger on.

The pretty Gryffindor couldn't help but look at him differently after his escape attempt, and the way he had cupped her cheek with his bloody palm. She'd never once considered the

possibility that Malfoy could be gentle in anything that he did, and his sticky caress had completely thrown her; made her more aware of his needs and feelings. Seeing the Dark Mark should have appalled her and reignited her anger towards him, but it hadn't. Instead, she found McGonagall's voice swimming in her mind.

It might do you well to remember that he was forced into his mission when you are dealing with him.

Hermione told herself she didn't care, not quite anyway, but she'd moved from hatred, to indifference, to something else. She just didn't know what. She studied him with her calm gaze as he warily retook his seat, resting his chin against the back of his knuckles.

"And you're offering to collect these things for me?" he asked sceptically. "Why?"

"Purely selfish reasons," she grinned. "If you have some luxuries, you might be a bit more pleasant."

Draco scoffed. "It will take more than some toys to make me pleasant towards you, Granger," he told her firmly, eyeing her with a half-lidded stare. "Aside from that unlikely notion, you're not expecting anything in return?"

"I know you wouldn't agree to anything I asked anyway," she shrugged. "And you have nothing I want."

He felt his jaw twitch. "Fine," he rasped out. "I am getting rather sick of those red bed covers, so get me some green ones. And that sodding shampoo of yours-

"Hold on a second," Hermione said, reaching for her bag. "I'll write this down."

As she removed her parchment and her quill, one of her allergy shots tumbled out of her bag and rolled across the floor to tap Draco's feet. The pale wizard picked it up with his lean fingers and analysed it carefully, turning it over and cocking an eyebrow at the illustrations along the cylindrical object.

"What, Muggles can't read now?" he mocked. "Should have guessed-

"They're directional pictures," the brunette retorted angrily. "If I have an allergic attack and someone finds it, the pictures explain how to give me the shot."

"Why don't you just do it yourself?"

"If I reach a certain stage I won't be able to," she explained. "They're a precaution-

"And if you don't get the shot?" he asked, shooting the witch a wary look and realising he was too interested in her answer. "What happens then?"

"I could die," she stated, and Draco didn't like how flippant her comment sounded. "Just chuck it here, Malfoy. Let's get on with your list."

Draco looked away from her with an unsettling sensation fluttering in his gut, and his grey-ice stare went back to the strange item in his grip. He inspected the images one last time before he tossed it over to her and licked his teeth thoughtfully, clasping his hands together.

"So, you're scared of the wind, and a measly bee can kill you," he reiterated in his husky voice. "I thought you Gryffindors were supposed to be indestructible, or does that annoying trait only apply to that scarred prick you hang around with?"

"I'm human," she whispered quietly, meeting his sullen stare purposefully. "I have flaws, just like everyone else."

Draco frowned and snapped out of his unwelcome thoughts. "Whatever," he growled. "Anyway, I want green bedding and some new shower stuff. That cheap shit you use is starting to grate away my skin."

"Don't get my hopes up," she mumbled sarcastically, earning her a sharp glare as she scribbled down his requests. "Anything else?"

"A few boxes of Bertie Bott's beans," he replied. "And some Toothflossing Stringmints."

"Nothing else for your room?"

"I doubt there's anything in Hogsmeade that could make that room any less tragic," he muttered cynically. "The bedding will do."

"Fine. Anything else?"

The Slytherin prince paused and cocked his head with consideration. "If Tomes and Scrolls has anything new, get me something to read. Your Muggle shit is starting to give a migraine."

She narrowed her eyes. "I thought you said it wasn't that bad-

"I'd rather read some decent Wizard literature," he scowled at her. "That book you told me to read is just fucking bizarre."

"You're reading the Martin Luther King book?" she asked, her fawny eyes wide with interest. "What do you think of it?"

"I assumed that you would have told me to read it in some futile effort to brainwash me into liking Muggles," he hissed with distaste, regurgitating the words with a venomous look. "But your stupid little plan backfired because all it did was prove how fucking disgusting Muggles really are."

It took everything she had not lunge across the table and slap him. "Okay," she breathed with obvious strain. "Why do you say that?"

"Because according to that book, Muggles enslaved black Muggles and treated them like shit," he spat, apparently very angry at the notion. "Unless I have misinterpreted the book?"

"No," Hermione sighed. "That's right."

Draco sneered at her. It was a preposterous and alien concept that had instantly grasped his disgusted attention, and something that he had never even considered an issue within any society. Discrimination against skin colour was unheard of in Wizarding history, and the thought just made him despise Muggles that little bit more. Blaise, possibly the only one of his friends who he respected, was dark-skinned, and the idea that he would have been mistreated because of the tone of his skin infuriated him, and simply concreted how barbaric and inferior Muggles were.

"Fucking morons," he grumbled, curling back his lip as he watched her. "And you defend this scum?"

The witch inhaled another calming breath and decided she would have to choose her words very carefully if she wanted this to work in her favour. "It was a shameful period that Muggles regret-

"Shameful is an understatement," Draco told her, tapping his foot with agitation. "I thought you were the clever one-

"I never once said I thought it was right," she defended quickly. "I'm saying that it happened and-

"Well, it's a bloody joke," he snarled, his breathing slightly elevated with his ire. "I can't believe you would side with a species that would segregate according to skin colour. It's just skin. It's not something anyone can control."

There it is...

Hermione swallowed away a nervous scratch in her windpipe and squared her shoulders. "Yes," she said as steadily as she could. "It's unfair to judge a person by something they can't help, isn't it?"

Draco snapped his head up and wanted to inhale the words back into his mouth. The topic of their heated conversation had instantly crested into a sensitive territory; her blood.

The creases of his earlier rage slowly dissipated from his snowy features, leaving wide silver eyes and slightly parted lips. His fair eyebrows drew together with ill-veiled confusion and something that bordered anxiety seized every muscle in his sinewy shape. He was tense and stiff, but when Hermione took a closer look, she could see the small, volatile vibrations of his clasped hands, and she stilled her breaths. The silence was humid, and Hermione didn't dare flinch when a rumble of wind sliced it in half.

"You sly bitch," Draco murmured quietly, his expression blank. "You did that on purpose-

"I simply gave you some history and facts," she reasoned with deceptive composure. "You came to your own conclusion-

"It's different, Granger!" he interrupted adamantly, banging his balled fist onto the table with a shrill bash. "The circumstances are completely fucking different!"

"The circumstances are always different," she said slowly, ignoring the compulsion to back away from him. "But...but the point and the problem are always the same-

"Fuck you," he growled. "If you think this has changed my opinions towards Muggles then you are bloody wrong, Granger!"

"That's up to you," she shrugged with forced nonchalance, but she could see the doubt behind the silver flecks in his stormy glare, and that was what she had wanted. "Is there anything else you'd like me to get from Hogsmeade?"

Draco relaxed his mouth and leaned back into the couch, warily keeping his attention on her innocent features. "You know, you're quite a conniving cow, Granger," he told her blandly.

Despite the gravity of their previous words, Hermione couldn't stop the feminine giggle that trickled from her lips. "That from a Slytherin," she remarked. "I might be tempted to take that as a compliment from you, Malfoy."

"Don't," he said, his tone notably calmer but still tense. "And need I remind you that it is the Slytherin House that receives the most negative preconceptions? So, you can jump right off that high horse of yours, Granger, because you judge too."

The tawny-haired witch blinked in uninhibited surprise. "I...I guess you're right," she admitted begrudgingly. "But unfortunately, you conform to the stereotype-

"But you made that decision before you ever met me," he argued back. "And you made the same assumptions about every other Slytherin."

Hermione licked her lips and took a deep breath. "Okay," she started slowly. "Then I apologise for jumping to conclusions." She paused to fix him with an almost sad gaze. "It's a shame you lived up to them."

Draco tore his eyes away from her and stared at his woven fingers, feeling yet another odd flicker within his chest; roused by something she had said or done. His body and brain continued to react to her with unwelcome twitches and sensations, and he wondered briefly if it was simply psychosomatic. Either his sanity really was seeping out of his ears, or Granger was less...annoying.

He had no idea which option he preferred.

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It was an accident.

Draco hadn't meant to fall asleep on the sofa again; lulled into a too-perfect sleep by her musical breaths. He'd woken up with an inappropriate stiffness between his legs and a twisted urge to steal a touch while she slept.

Maybe a taste...

Her scent was stronger in the mornings and deliciously musky, and it embedded itself into his sinuses. It reminded him of Summer outside; the Summer he had missed cooped away in Scotland, and he craved it. Her. With silent gratitude to Merlin that he'd woken first, he hastily headed to his room to nurse away his bone-hard erection, unable to resist a small stroke of her chaotic hair with slightly trembling fingers.

Her lips had never looked so inviting at that moment; slightly dry from sleep with an invitation for him to moisten them. But he didn't yield to the revolting temptation, and quickly ripped himself away, silently scolding himself all the way to his room.

He collapsed in a lonely corner of the room and buried his face in his palms, letting his self-disgust burn him from the inside out with throbbing heat. He had no idea who he hated more at that moment; her or himself.

And the worst thing; her little trick last night had left questions chewing at his mind even in his sleep. Granger was...altering things, plucking away thoughts like dying petals and muddling them up for her own amusement.

What the fuck was she doing to him?

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Hermione had batted her lids by the morning and felt blissfully rested and warm, if a little disorientated. With no recollection of actually falling asleep, she wondered when exactly Malfoy had left, but a quick glance at the clock had told her she was running late on her morning routine and she didn't have time to mull over it. She skipped her shower and settled on a Scourgify to fake some freshness, before hurrying down to Herbology. Her classes passed by slowly, and she spent her lunch in the library with company in the form of a ham sandwich and her studies on Horcruxes.

Another couple of hours amongst the creaking stacks and aisles after her lessons, and she decided to head back to her dorm. Thoughts of Malfoy invaded her as she meandered down the empty corridors, dredging up memories of their heavy conversation last night. It had been one of the most intense discussions she could ever recall having, and while she was certain that she'd successfully managed to get through to him on some level, it felt like a hollow

victory. He'd looked puzzled and lost, and it hadn't suited his striking features or his demeanour at all.

Too focussed on her blond houseguest, Hermione didn't notice the incessant hum around her head, nor did she notice the red blotch on the back of her hand until she reached for the doorknob.

She'd been stung.

"Oh shit," she whispered, barging her way into her dorm and burying her hand in her bag.

She could feel it now; the venom rushing skywards and bubbling in her throat, triggering the anaphylaxis. Her wind passage was starting close up and restrict her breathing, and she sputtered and coughed as she frantically rummaged through the contents of her bag. Her head began to throb and swell, and she could feel her knees buckling with fleeting energy as she struggled to suck in more oxygen.

"Malfoy!" she wheezed out desperately, sinking gracelessly to the floor and dragging her bag with her, scattering her belongings across the floorboards. "Draco!"

There went the remains of her strangled voice, as the fringes of her vision started to blur and her surroundings began to wilt. Distantly, she heard a door open, and a tall shadow lingered at the edge of her view, but it was too distorted for her to make sense of it.

That was how Draco found her; dangerously jerking with unstable heaves of her chest and a terror-wide stare. Common sense kicked in and convinced him that this was a reaction to her allergy, but he remained frozen to the spot for a long moment.

He could honestly say that he considered turning around and leaving her for dead; shutting himself away in his room until the infuriating little Mudblood had choked on her last heartbeat. Maybe it would all stop then; her slow onslaught on his senses and that breakdown of his mind. Perhaps if she was eradicated and cut out of his existence, he could regain a sense of his self, or maybe he would just go insane that little bit quicker.

He moved before he could stop himself, hurling his body forward to land on his knees and sweeping his hands across her littered things. His eyes darted around for the illustrated tube, finally finding it tucked between the pages of a book. Swivelling on his kneecaps, he turned to face the fading witch and held the shot up to her.

"Granger," Draco snapped harshly. "Tell me what I'm supposed to do." He got no response; not even a flash of recognition in that golden gaze of hers. "Fuck."

Fumbling with the cylinder, he examined the small set of images and tried to quash his alarm in an effort to understand them. After the fourth inspection and a gargled gasp from his female companion, he gathered his nerves and shuffled closer to Hermione. He hesitated for a second before he leaned over her and parted her robes, his fingers slightly quivering as he started to tear away her buttons. He bunched the material up around her ribs and checked the shot one final time before he stabbed it into her side, just above the hip, and pressed his thumb against the tip.

His reluctantly, panicked pulse thundered in his skull as he waited to see if his attempt had worked. With his other hand braced against her bare waist, he instantly felt her breathing pattern start to change. He kept his fist gripped around the syringe and his palm flat against her satin skin, his eyes intently roaming across her dazed features.

Draco noted every detail of her fascinating face as the dubious seconds and minutes ticked away; from the rosy tint returning to her cheeks and the awareness seeping back into her eyes. He was close enough that his elevated breaths flicked at the loose hairs framing her face, and he couldn't halt the sigh when a throaty whimper escaped her lips and pushed into his mouth.

It tasted like sugar and sun.

He swallowed it down as she blinked a few times, and he half-expected her to shove him away and scold him for being too close. But he should have known better than to predict anything Granger did, and instead he found her gentle palms either side of his face, her thumbs absently brushing his cheekbones. She looked up at him with exquisite, glazed eyes, and he didn't dare move to break the contact.

"Thank you," she whispered tiredly, and he got another mouthful of her against his tongue.

He had no idea if it was true, but he would swear on Salazar's grave that she leaned in first.

Chapter End Notes

Text mentioned was 'The Autobiography of Martin Luther King Jr.' by Martin Luther King Jr. and Clayborne Carson. I realise this text was printed in 1997/1998 so it may be a few months out of the fic's time-scale...but I needed it for the chapter...So we'll just overlook that...

So sorry about the wait...as expected, reality had hindered me...Sad times! Hope the chapter makes up for it! Apologies for the slight cliffy...but it has to be done! This chapter is dedicated to Tiadorable for being...well...just awesome! Thanks for being an angel, and being patient with my shoddy email-replying-skills!

Also, massive thanks to Seriana14 for your reviews that always leave me laughing and blushing! And thanks to Kite1011 for your lovely review and mentioning the possibility of doing some fanart (I practically cried...). And finally, thanks to wine for keeping me awake until three in the morning and helping me write this chapter!

Hope it was okay...? Let me know what you think...

Bex-chan

Taste

Chapter Notes

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

It was nothing.

Barely an anything.

But it was a beautiful nothing.

Just a small clash of breaths and closed eyes as Draco's upper lip fell between both of Hermione's, and his tongue ghosted across her lower lip. Just a little connection of flesh and taste that lasted all of two clicks of the clock's quickest hand, before reality and cruelty shattered it.

Wild, grey eyes snapped open, and Draco lunged away, ripping his face out of her hands like he'd been scolded; scrambling away from her with frantic movements. His chest was heaving with confusion and shock that burned his bones and pounded in his skull. He could hear her panting too, and his eyes went to the exposed skin of her stomach as that fucking lusty twitch by his groin hit him again.

Everything was slowly coming back to him; sights, sounds, just everything beyond her. He glanced down and scowled at the empty allergy shot in his grip, and he hadn't even realised he's tugged it out of her as he'd pulled back. He chucked it away with disgust, blaming it for dragging him into this situation. This vile and revolting situation.

How could he have allowed this to happen?

How could Granger have allowed this to happen?

And why the HELL wasn't she moving or talking?

All that sliced the silence between them was their volatile and bewildered breathing. He could still taste her in his mouth; his top lip damp by her barely-there suck. He hastily dragged the back of his arm against his mouth, repeating it several times until the friction started to burn.

With a final horrified look at Granger, who was still frozen on the floor, he pulled himself up and stumbled into his room, only leaving the shrill slam of his door for her to remember him by.

He would have happily sacrificed the entirety of the Malfoy fortune to put more than one wall between them, but it would have to do. At least he couldn't see her now, but his tongue and nose still buzzed with her essence and scent, and he didn't know if he wanted to melt in the bliss of it or block his nostrils and tear out his own tongue to be rid of her.

He was vibrating with anger and mortification; his face covered by his palms as stubborn flashes of her yielding lips and bare skin pulsed at the backs of his lids. A growl rumbled at the front of his throat and teased his tonsils as he tried to shove the images to the back of his brain, but they wouldn't shift; wouldn't leave him be. Merlin, he hated her. Hated himself. Hated every sodding detail of the events that had led to this humiliating and degrading incident.

Draco knew then that he'd gone mad. Funny though; he'd never felt more real.

And she'd tasted dangerously delicious.

Fuck...

.

* * *

Hermione flinched by the bang of the door and dragged in a shaky breath. She wanted to fade away into the floorboards, or beg McGonagall for a spin of the Time Turner to erase the incident from existence. The worst thing was she had no idea who had initiated their...thing; their demi-kiss.

Oh God...

She couldn't help but lick her lips and savour the leftovers of his taste; something close to citrus and masculinity, with a dash of peppermint. She could feel the warm remains of his palm-print against her abdomen, and she was certain she could still sense his weight leaning over her. Malfoy had returned to his healthier shape since she'd started cooking him meals, and he'd felt safe and sinful that close.

Since the night of Bill and Fleur's wedding, when her and Ron had lost their virtues to each other in a clumsy tumble, she hadn't enjoyed any male company that could be considered remotely suggestive. All that she could really remember of that night was sweat-clumsy gropes and an awkward goodbye as he and Harry had disappeared to start the Horcrux hunt, and she'd been left behind with one-third of her heart and too many questions.

And before Ron?

Some interesting kisses with Viktor, and some unfortunate lip-locks with Cormac. Great...

She knew she wasn't the most feminine girl in Hogwarts, and she would have to undergo a complete lobotomy before she was anything close to a confident and promiscuous tart, but she still had needs and desires. She adored that pleasing sensation of intimate proximity and, Godric curse her for it, Draco had felt like a dreamy quilt of blissful sedatives that had

numbed her brain in a wonderful way. It had been instinctive and impulsive; a reminder that she still felt something other than despair.

But now...

Well, now she just felt like she'd betrayed everyone she held dear, including herself. For the supposed brightest witch of the age, she had just done the stupidest thing possible. She needed to get some air; needed to gather her thoughts, and it was probably best she head down to the infirmary to ensure her allergic reaction was completely medicated.

There was a gloss of sweat across her forehead and above her mouth as she carefully pulled herself up into a sitting position, moaning as her weak limbs protested. She was trembling, although it could have been from either her allergy attack or Draco's lips; she had no idea. Her fingers flew to her shirt and frantically refastened the buttons, finding them still warm from his touch.

Battling a shiver, she grabbed her wand and struggled to her door, thanking forgotten deities that her room wasn't too far from the Hospital Wing. Stumbling with difficulty along the lonely corridors, she weaved around the necessary corners and had the second shock of her afternoon when she found the infirmary bustling with activity. She froze in the doorway and her eyes danced across the busy room, her confused gaze immediately falling to her blonde friend, perched on one of the beds.

"Luna," she called, dodging two third years as she neared the Ravenclaw. "What's going on?"

"One of the Herbology hives collapsed," she replied in her usual bored tone. "A lot of people have been stung, although I think Dennis Creevey actually has a case of tychfil poisoning."

Hermione didn't even blink at the odd comment. "Is everyone okay?"

"I think so," Luna nodded, gesturing to the small rash on her forearm. "Madam Pomfrey's just finishing up with Laura Madley and I think I'm next."

"And how many are after you?"

"Those people over there," she mumbled, pointing to a crowd of no less than fifteen students. "I'm guessing the bees came into the castle because of the cold. Why are you here?"

"I was bitten."

And then I kissed...

"Aren't you allergic to bee stings, Hermione?" the other witch interrupted her thought.

"Yes, I was just-

"Your lips look a little different," the blonde commented calmly, and Gryffindor's princess felt her blood burn her cheeks. "And your eyes are a bit glazed."

She swallowed hard. "It's just-

"Oh, Miss Granger!" a new voice interrupted, and Hermione glanced up to find a rather flustered McGonagall approaching her. "There you are. Mr Longbottom said you would be in the library, the silly boy. Have you been bitten? Are you okay?"

"I-I think so," the brunette stuttered. "I mean...yes, I was stung, but I-

"Right," the headmistress interrupted, motioning for Hermione to follow her. "Come on, I'll double-check you now. Can't be too careful with your allergy."

"I'll come and find you after, Luna," she whispered to her friend as she trailed behind the older witch. "Professor, I need-

"Sit on the bed, Miss Granger," McGonagall bade, pulling the curtain to seclude them. "Now, where were you bitten?"

"Here," she replied, showing the other witch the swollen skin between her knuckles and wrist. "But I-

"And you managed to give yourself the allergy shot in time?"

"No, I-

"I'll have to get Poppy to-

"Professor," Hermione whispered sternly, keeping her voice as low as possible. "Draco gave me the shot."

The Headmistress' eyebrows rose high on her wrinkle-laced forehead, and Hermione heard her murmur a quick silencing charm before she turned back to her. "Mr Malfoy?" she clarified sceptically. "You are certain?"

"Yes," she sighed, shifting her weight with discomfort. "He...he helped me."

The eyebrows went a little higher. "Well," McGonagall breathed. "I must say I'm rather surprised-

"Maybe this is a good sign," Hermione said with rushed but uncertain optimism. "Maybe I'm getting through to him-

"Miss Granger," she interrupted with a small frown. "I warned you not to get your hopes up concerning this...little project of yours-

"But I-

"It's possible that Mr Malfoy didn't want to be blamed for anything that happened to you," she continued with thick reason, and the younger witch's face scrunched up with doubt. "Nevertheless, at least you are well. Let me just check your hand."

Hermione absently did as requested; her thoughts stealing her away as McGonagall inspected the bite. She could remember little about her anaphylactic shock between the fluttering levels

of consciousness and the panic that had throbbed in her head, so she had no idea how exactly Malfoy had found her or the specifics of him injecting her. All that battered her brain was him and what had happened afterwards...

Godric. Godric. Godric...Have I really been that starved of company?

She would admit that her desire to alter and erase his prejudices had become somewhat of an obsession, but Dumbledore had seen something in Draco that was redeemable, and she saw it too now. Her loneliness didn't exactly help their predicament, and she had a feeling that it had contributed to her fascination with the small changes she'd noticed in him recently. Those changes were only minuscule but she was fixated on them; fixated on him.

She couldn't help it. She couldn't help that she'd started to kiss him back...

She'd allowed herself to get steered by a breathtaking situation, and it would never happen again. Ever. She was still determined to break his brainwashed mindset, but she needed to keep her brain in check and remember herself. Malfoy was still Malfoy, and she had to maintain a sensible distance with him, even if his lips had felt like...

...like water-damp feathers...

She would have never guessed he would feel so soft.

Hermione blinked when she realised McGonagall's mouth was moving. "W-what?" she stuttered, giving her professor an apologetic look. "I'm sorry, I didn't quite hear you."

"I said that despite Mr Malfoy's questionable reasons for helping you," the Headmistress spoke, concentrating on the younger witch's wounded hand. "I hope you thanked him appropriately."

Hermione could barely manage a slow nod as she averted her eyes, silently deciding that her gratitude towards the spiteful Slytherin had been far from appropriate. "Yes, Professor."

"I do have some news which might cheer you up," she offered with a rare grin, and they were getting even rarer these days. "I received a letter from Nymphadora-

"Tonks?" she asked, her head snapping up with interest. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine as far as I know," the professor assured. "She's coming to visit for a couple of days to discuss some safety measures for Hogwarts-

"Will I see her? Please let me see her, Prof-

"Calm down," McGonagall sighed. "She wants to keep her head down, so she's staying in The Three Broomsticks, and I'm happy to give you permission to stay with her for a couple of nights-

"Oh, thank you," Hermione smiled, relieved for this distraction in her otherwise troublesome day. "Thank you so much, Professor. When is she coming?"

"Next Thursday and she'll be leaving on Saturday," she explained, finishing up with Hermione's hand. "I expect you to attend all your classes, but I doubt you would have missed them anyway."

"Of course not, Professor."

"Then I have no issue with it," the Headmistress said. "And I think it might...do you some good to see her. You're looking a lot more troubled recently-

"Wait," the younger witch frowned as Draco slipped back into her head. Lips. "What about Malfoy?"

"What about him?" she replied calmly. "You said yourself he spends most of the time in his room. If anything, I'm sure he will be pleased to have some time on his own, and I would recommend you make the most of this little break from him. I know that you must find living with him difficult."

You have no idea, Professor...as of today, it just got that much more difficult...

"I guess," the brunette whispered, realising she had yet another secret, and this one was possibly the worst. "Are we still going to Hogsmeade this weekend?"

"Of course," McGonagall nodded. "I imagine many of your friends have asked you to bring things back."

I only asked Malfoy...

"No," she murmured, sealing her eyes to hide her guilt. "Just the one."

.

* * *

."Don't you think it's sad?"

Hermione arched an eyebrow at her bright-haired companion. "Do I think what's sad?"

"That all those bees are going to die," Luna said quietly, adjusting herself in the library chair. "Twenty-two people were bitten, so that's at least twenty-two bees."

She offered her friend a weak but affectionate smile and privately thanked the pretty blonde for providing her with some level of a distraction. The library was cold and empty save two fifth years stashed away in the other corner, and the winter evening was starting to cast a navy darkness into the musky space. Surrounded by enchanting books and in Luna's innocent

presence, Hermione found her tempestuous thoughts about Malfoy had calmed a little, although she knew it was only temporary.

"Don't worry, Luna, it's just a myth," Hermione told her warmly. "Only female Honeybees die after they sting, and Hogwarts only keeps Bumblebees."

"Oh, that's good news," she mumbled, raising her head and trailing her lazy eyes over the other girl's features. "Your lips still look different, Hermione."

"No they don't," the hazel-eyed witch defended. "They are fine-

"But your hand is all healed," she continued absently. "Perhaps you've reacted to something else a little stronger."

That was the thing with Ravenclaw's angelic sweetheart; while her tone remained consistently bland, she would often mutter a seemingly innocent comment that would leave you feeling either enlightened or paranoid. It was definitely the latter in this case.

"I can't think of anything," Hermione replied stiffly. "Does it matter?"

"Only if it's bothering you," she shrugged, turning the page of her book. "Would you like to stay in the Ravenclaw Tower tonight? I know you don't like to be alone when it's windy."

It was a tempting offer. She'd been purposefully putting off returning to her dorm; to him, and here was the perfect opportunity to prolong that separation. This was where her Gryffindor courage became an impediment; stubbornly telling her that avoiding her own home was a cowardly option. Her commonsense also jumped in and reminded her that she would have to confront the situation eventually, and the longer she avoided it, the more she would lose face.

"No, it's okay," she sighed reluctantly. "I find it difficult to sleep in a different bed."

"Okay," Luna agreed blankly, slowly packing up her belongings. "Well, if you change your mind, I'm sure you'd be able to crack the riddle."

"Thanks. Do you want me to walk you back?"

"I prefer the walk alone," she replied, rising from her seat and giving the Gryffindor a long look. "I don't know what has made your lips look different, but it suits you, Hermione."

The older witch couldn't stifle the flinch. "You're imagining it," she replied with forced nonchalance, unable to feel a sliver of impatience towards the girl as she turned to leave. That paranoia was back though. "Goodnight, Luna."

"Goodnight," she replied over her shoulder as she disappeared amongst the aisles.

Hermione pursed her lips and would swear she tongued a whisper of Malfoy's fruity taste as she did. Dear Merlin, this was hard. That barely-nothing-incident had turned her into a fumbling fool with dangerous thoughts that were too quick and wild to really grasp. The worst thing was, she had no idea if she would choose to eradicate it from her memory, or if

all the confusion was worth the pleasant tingle inside her mouth. Had it even counted as a kiss?

"Oh, sod it," she whispered to herself, gathering her things and a couple of extra texts on Dark Magic and Horcruxes before she left the library.

The November winds would almost certainly discard her to sleep on the sofa again, and she highly doubted that Malfoy would be joining her this time. She wasn't sure how she felt about that. While she was quite content to have as much distance from him as possible, the two nights that she'd slept near Draco had been her longest and most relaxing rests since Harry and Ron had left. She told herself it was simply because his company provided some level of security, but there was something hypnotic about his breaths in the night...

She paused as she came to her room, realising she was shaking slightly and her heart was rattling loudly inside her ribcage. She inhaled until it started to burn and released the air as slowly as possible, nervously flicking her fingernails and practically eating her bottom lip.

"Godric, give me strength," she mumbled, offering the curious lions her password. "Ad Lucem."

With vibrating fingers and a lost heartbeat, she pushed open her door and found the room painted in darkness. Scanning the jumble of shadows warily and finding only familiar shapes and outlines, she made her way to her small kitchenette and concluded a hot chocolate would ease some of her nerves. Assuming Malfoy was in his room and would be for the remainder of the night, she rolled her shoulders and allowed herself to relax. Silently igniting some of the candles, just to create a nice pre-slumber glow as she fixed herself the steaming drink, the witch was completely oblivious to the pair of serpentine eyes watching her every movement.

Draco observed her from the couch, missing the darkness that had shielded him before Granger had brought a little light into the room. Typical. She hadn't noticed him, which was odd because he would swear she'd looked straight at him when she'd shuffled past the door, but then maybe it had been darker than he'd thought.

Ensuring his breaths were quiet and steady, he openly stared at her back; starting at her jumbled mass of curls, and sliding down her spine to end at the feminine flare of her hips just visible under her robes. He'd intended to disturb her now; perhaps scare her and threaten her for his own amusement and to prove that his earlier slip meant nothing. That had been the plan, but yet again it simmered as a distant mist glossed his gaze as he studied the frustrating witch.

She tilted her head and gave the nape of her neck a slow rub before she slipped off her robes and tossed them onto the counter. He couldn't help but focus on the barely-visible bra straps beneath her white shirt, and he was just able to make out they were light blue. Simple and serene; typical Granger, but that spasm between his hips twitched again anyway. He left his seat carefully; slinking around the furniture and shadows with inaudible footfalls as he edged a little closer to her.

Perhaps if he could get near to her, he could inhale enough of her scent to imitate her taste...

Catching himself and the dangerous thought, he reminded himself how repulsive she was with her inferior blood. An image of that Muggle book she'd insisted he read flashed across his lids, but he shoved it away and planted a scornful sneer on his face, just to reflect how much he really despised her.

And he did. Honestly; he did. Really.

And she needed to know that.

Slipping into the kitchenette, he was now close enough that he could touch her, and the innocent little witch was oblivious until he scuffed his foot against the floor.

Hermione spun around so fast she knocked her mug across the side, and sent it smashing and pouring to the floor with a loud crunch. Her hair was whipped across her face; caught between parted and damp lips as her eyes blazed with stormy surprise. She was panting frantically as she stumbled back, and his hand darted out to grab her wrist.

"Draco," she gasped, trying to pull away and shield her face. "What are you-

But she was cut off as he grabbed her other hand and placed them sternly at her sides; backing her up until she was trapped between him and the counter. She felt panic bubble in her chest; not because she thought he would hurt her, but because he was too close. Her alarmed breathing was sucking in his drugging and masculine smell, and she found her body swarming with heat as their proximity ached beneath her skin.

She watched with wide eyes as he seemed to falter and pull away a little, swaying on his feet with small but seductive movements. The air was wedged in her throat as he towered over her with his features set in a tense scowl and a growl humming in his windpipe.

"I want to get some things straight," he snapped bluntly, and she jumped at his voice. "I didn't help you because I give a shit about your life-

"I-

"Shut up," he hissed cruelly, gripping her wrists a little tighter. "I am deadly serious, Granger. I know how your pathetic little head works, and I am telling you now that it didn't mean a bloody thing!"

"Then why did you help me?" she asked as effortlessly as she could, schooling her expression into a controlled mask. "Why bother-

"Because I bloody had to!" he shouted. "If you had died then I-

"Would have been blamed," she finished in disappointed tone. "Except you wouldn't. You have no magic, Malfoy. Do you honestly believe they would have pinned a bee sting on you-

"I think you and your precious Order would do anything to get rid of me-

"Well, you're wrong," she bit back quickly. "They wouldn't-

"I don't care!" he spat, dipping his head a little closer. "I'm telling you here and now that I don't give a flying fuck if you live or die."

It shouldn't have hurt her, but it did. She felt something in her chest shrink and shrivel like burning parchment, but she did everything she could not to let it show.

"You helped me, and I helped you," Draco continued crisply. "We're even, so let's just leave it at that and return to hating each other."

"Then we're back where we started," she sighed, hating the edge of sadness to her whisper.

Draco blinked at her odd comment as a heavy and humid silence settled between them. Her little puffs of air were brushing across the skin of his face, and it was taking every stitch of his self-control not to glance down at her mouth. She felt so charmingly vulnerable and petite against him, and he blamed it yet again on this claustrophobic hell and the remains of her blood still waltzing in his veins. He needed to sever this discussion with her; he could feel that incessant and unwelcome hunger for a lick of her beginning to cloud his sanity again. He needed to get away from her...

"We are done here," he snarled, releasing her wrists and striding towards his room. "And as I said, Granger; don't let that overworked brain of yours read too much into this."

Hermione felt the cold wrap around her quickly as he headed away, and something niggled in her head as she watched the fine muscles across his shoulders flex. She wasn't satisfied with the way he had ended their discussion, and that Gryffindor bravery combined with her own curiosity was a dangerous mixture at times like these. The question jumped past her teeth before she could help it.

"And what about what happened after you helped me?"

She knew her voice had wavered, but she didn't care as he stalled abruptly before he could reach his door. The air in the room instantly grew thicker and uneasy, and her fawny eyes were glued to him as he slowly turned to shoot her a fierce glare that took her breath away. Looking somewhere between incensed and disturbed, she found herself yet again noting his aristocratic and infuriatingly striking features. He really was so...

"Nothing happened," Draco growled slowly, taking steps back towards her and pointing a rage-trembling finger at her. "Do you hear me, Granger? Nothing fucking happened-

"Then I must remember things differently," she fired back, lifting her chin defiantly. "Because I recall-

"Shut the hell-

"That you and I-

"Don't," he barked, close enough now that his senses were once again overpowered by her. "Nothing happened! And nothing ever will happen! So, you just shut your filthy Mud-

"Mudblood mouth?" she finished evenly, tilting her head boldly to the side and folding her arms over her chest. "I know I've struck a nerve with your prejudices against Muggles, Malfoy, so you can use that silly little word all you like, because I know you are starting to doubt yourself-

"You are so bloody stupid!" he countered, but there was a hint of hesitation there that he hoped she couldn't hear. "I loathe you and your kind, and you and your Mudblood mouth have only proved to me how vile you all are-

"Well, you kissed this Mudblood's mouth!"

"NO, I FUCKING DIDN'T!"

The flushed and agitated pair froze when their noses brushed softly; gold and silver eyes going round and confused. Hermione didn't dare move as his delectable little breaths fell into her mouth again, and that warm throb in her chest returned. Draco looked horrified and perhaps a little...fearful as the silence stretched around them, as he did everything he could to smother that almost instinctive urge to steal another taste.

He closed his eyes.

Yes; he had definitely gone mad.

Praise Salazar for the little spark in his brain that jolted him back to reality, and reminded him who and what she was.

Mudblood. Mudblood. Mudblood.

He ripped himself too quickly and stumbled on clumsy feet, shooting her a look a pure contempt and bewilderment as his head spun. Granger looked a little too...inviting then; mouth slightly parted and a rosy blush staining her cheeks and the skin across her collarbone. Too human. Too normal. Fuck, he needed to get to his room.

"Nothing happened," he repeated between the panicked heaves of his chest. "You understand, Granger? And if you ever need help again, I swear to you on my name as a Malfoy that I will watch you suffer and enjoy every second of it."

His dark and steady words stabbed her like ice-cold darts. "Draco, I-

"Just stay away from me," he threatened in a low whisper, retreating back towards his room. "Stay the fuck away from me!"

And Hermione was left alone, guiltily wondering if she'd have let him kiss her again.

On the other side of the door, Draco sank to his knees and cradled his aching head in his palms, cursing her to Merlin's grave and back for reducing him to this pathetic excuse for a wizard. With no magic and his sanity in a fragile state, he determined that this was lowest point of his life, and the worst thing was, only she seemed to ease the tempest in his brain.

With that disconcerting notion misting his mind and another migraine coming along, he would have surrendered the flimsy crumbs of his pride for another taste of her; if only to chase away the demons that would make sleep impossible.

What the fuck is she doing to me?

And why did he have a feeling that things would only get worse from here?

Chapter End Notes

Okie doke, let me just make a few things clear...As said in the summary, this fic is compliant until DH, and in my fic, the Ministry and Hogwarts are not under Voldemort's control...yet. Bill and Fleur's wedding wasn't interrupted by Kingsley's lynx and there will be a few more little dips and changes along the way! Hope that's okay!

Thanks so much for the amazing response to the last chapter! It was highest number of reviews so far for this fic and they pushed my past the 300 mark so thanks so much! Like, really...It's a huge compliment and I'd snog you all if I could! Massive thanks to waterflower20 for going back and reviewing each chapter, and also to uncontrollableranter for your lovely review. Thanks also to all the new reviewers for the last chapter and I hope you're all liking the fic so far.

I really enjoyed writing the dialogue with Luna for this chapter and the kinda-kiss scene so lend me you thoughts!

Read and review please!

Bex-chan

Doubt

Chapter Notes

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

Fucking hell.

This was hard.

So hard...

After the longest night of his life, during which he hadn't managed one second of sleep, he was basking in the morning sun seeping in through the window. He felt blurry today; still confused and agitated about the incident with Granger, and weary with insomnia. In a random moment of spontaneity, he'd stripped away all his clothes to see if the cold air or the warm rays would make him feel more alive; more real, but he felt like a ghost.

A flimsy creature on the crest of reality, but not quite there.

It must have been pushing into sociable hours because he could hear Granger starting to stir, and a pained cringe stole his face. This was what he'd been dreading and yet waiting for all night; his favourite part of his degrading routine. A sheer gloss of sweat broke out across his naked skin as he listened to her move into the bathroom, and when he thought he caught a dash of her taste in his mouth, that sensitive spot under his stomach twitched. A-fucking-gain.

It was so hard...

He tried to shove it away, but his head was too muddled to really resist the pull on his body. He heard, what he assumed, was her clothes thudding to the floor, and he gulped down a throaty swallow. Closing his sleep-deprived eyes, his imagination inflicted him with colourful and dangerous images of her. He succumbed to them quickly; too tired to put up a decent fight and too captivated by the fantasies to ignore them.

He was hard...

Having indulged in many a sexual fancy, this one was different; simple and without unnecessary exaggeration. In his head, Granger was exactly how she should be, with her mussed curls around her shoulders and a thoughtful expression on her familiar features. Her body...well, he had no idea if the image matched the subject, but he would guess he was close as his subconscious began to discard items of her clothing. He heard the shower start to run, and he inhaled a shaky breath as his hand shifted lower.

He was too far gone to heed the Slytherin voice in his skull and realise what he was doing; and any whispers of doubt were kicked aside as the first of her bathroom purrs reached his ears. Keeping his eyes firmly shut and focussing on fantasy-Granger's lips, he grabbed the steel-stiff length below his navel.

Merlin's Soul...

Draco needed this. He needed it bad.

In his head, Granger was in the shower now, and he tightened his fist and began to pump away his tension. Weeks and months without this release let him know that he wouldn't last long, but he didn't care. He didn't give a shit that his head was full with forbidden thoughts of her, or that his room was, as always, clogged with her addictive scent. It didn't matter that the witch was the catalyst to his lustful strain right now, nor did it matter that he made his fantasy-Granger slip her hand between her thighs to accompany her next moan.

The image sent him over the edge, and a husky sigh-come-roar thundered out of his throat as the hot fluid splashed across his abdomen. His eyes fluttered open and fantasy-Granger simmered away from his mind, leaving him satisfied and panting like an Arctic fox who had snagged his prey or a mate. His heart was drumming against his ribcage as he tried to gather his wits; blinking away some beads of sweat tucked between his lashes.

The high didn't last long, but then it never did.

And what was left behind was self-disgust that was physically painful. He wiped away the remains of his orgasm with a pair of boxers and turned over; curling up into a defeated semi-foetal position. He could feel the cold clawing over his skin now, but he didn't cover himself with the blanket. There was no excuse for what he'd just done, and the cold brought reality back that little bit quicker.

The worst thing was, he had no idea if he wanted to slam his skull against the wall until his imagination tumbled out of his ears, or give himself another ride.

He didn't cover his head with a pillow to block her out. He should have done, but he didn't. Instead, he let her shower sounds numb his brain and distract him from the reality.

He'd just masturbated to Hermione Granger.

The Mudblood.

"Fuck."

He rolled over and grabbed the nearest thing to him; the Muggle book by the King bloke. He turned it over in his hands and analysed the cover for the hundredth time, recalling their discussion about prejudices and the trap he'd walked straight into. Curse her to the Veil and back, but it had made him think, if only for a moment.

He had wondered how he would see her if it weren't for her dirty heritage, and now he was doing it again.

Double fuck...

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* * *

Neville had pretty much dragged her to dinner in the Great Hall, ignoring her protests and insisting that some time amongst friends would cheer her up. Apparently the distress about her flashbacks of Malfoy's lips was scrawled blatantly across her face, as Neville usually left her and her melancholy alone. He'd commented that she looked worse today, and she'd eventually agreed to join him and the others, reasoning that some lazy banter might distract her from the ugly truth.

And an ugly truth it was; brokenly beautiful in an odd way though. Like Draco.

How could I have kissed him?

She was sat on the outskirts of the small crowd, finishing a paragraph of an assignment that could have waited until later. She lifted her head and glanced around the group, moving her distant gaze across Ginny, Lavender, Dean, Seamus and to Neville at her side, frowning when she realised that someone was missing.

"Neville," she mumbled quietly, keeping her voice low to avoid interrupting the others' conversation. "Where's Luna?"

"We noticed that too," he told her. "She disappears at lunch sometimes, and I don't think she stays here at weekends either, you know. One of the fifth years said she saw her leaving the grounds last Saturday."

"Where does she go?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "None of us do actually. She must have permission from McGonagall though."

"That's odd," she sighed, turning away when one of the other boys said something that caught her attention. "What did you say, Seamus?"

"I was talking about the rumours going around," he answered with a whisper, leaning in so only the six of them could hear. "A lot of people think that Voldemort is going to infiltrate the Ministry soon."

Hermione raised a sceptical eyebrow. "Rumours are sometimes just that, Seamus. I wouldn't pay too much attention-

"It could be true though," he insisted. "And if they get control of the Ministry, they get control of Hogwarts, and we will all be fucked."

"Emphasis on the if," she said calmly. "If McGonagall thought Hogwarts was at risk, she would have figured out an alternative location for us by now-

"Who's to say she isn't thinking of that?" he shot back quickly. "And where else would we go? My Mum said it could happen-

"And your Mum also believed all that rubbish they wrote about Harry in the Prophet," Hermione reminded him, rising from her seat. "There are a lot of rumours going around at the moment. Let's just stick to what we know."

"Where are you going, Hermione?" Ginny asked, looking a little disappointed as the brunette gathered her things. "You haven't finished your food."

"I'm not that hungry," she offered weakly, giving her friend an apologetic look. "And I need to see McGonagall."

"Well," the redhead continued. "If you like, you can pop up to the Tower tonight? Or I could come visit you-

"No," Hermione argued too quickly, cringing at the urgency to her tone. "No, my dorm is a complete mess. I'll try to come and see you later."

She gave the other Gryffindors a polite nod before she turned away and left the Great Hall, calculating she had a good thirty minutes left to see the Headmistress before her lesson started. She walked with long and quick strides to McGonagall's office and muttered the password to let herself in, knowing the older witch usually stayed here during the dinner hour.

"Miss Granger," the older witch greeted from her desk. "This is unexpected. Is everything okay? You look a little down today."

Malfoy...

Hermione hesitated and settled in the seat opposite; pursing her lips in thought. "I'm not sure," she murmured. "I guess I have some questions I need to ask you."

"Very well," McGonagall nodded, leaning back and giving her student her full attention. "What is bothering you?"

"Well," she started awkwardly, wondering where to begin. "Seamus mentioned that there was talk about Voldemort infiltrating the Ministry, and I was wondering if there's any truth to that?"

The witch tensed her mouth and exhaled a long and weary breath. "There have been talks about that since Dumbledore died," she admitted carefully. "However, not much detail is known. All I can tell you is that it's a possibility."

Hermione felt something in her chest sink. "And if it does?"

"Then we will have to evacuate many of the students," she supplied with a sad tone. "Particularly Muggle-borns like yourself-

"Oh God-

"Try not to worry so much about it," McGonagall advised warmly. "As far as we can tell, the Ministry is holding fine against the Death Eaters, and we have precautions if the worst were to happen."

Hermione folded her arms around herself; suddenly feeling very cold and alone. A part of her had always suspected that the Ministry could be effected by Voldemort, but it was easy to lose track of everything outside of Hogwarts when she was buried in her books or involved with confusing lip-locks with someone she shouldn't be.

"I'm not having much luck with trying to figure out what the other Horcruxes are," she whispered with loud disappointment. "I've been trying to see if I can find a link between the Diary and the Ring with any other objects that would make sense. And we know the Locket is one but we just don't know where the real one is and-

"Miss Granger," the Headmistress interjected her rant. "I am well aware that you are trying your hardest, as are Mr Potter and Mr Weasley. I'm sure it will come eventually. You must not get too stressed-

"There's going to be a war soon-

"We have technically been at war for months, Miss Granger-

"Well the final front then," Hermione clarified with frustration and unease. "I can feel it coming, and I don't know if we will find all the Horcruxes in time-

"We are all doing our best to prepare," she interrupted again, giving the young witch a sullen look. "Hermione, there's only so much we can do. Remember that you are human, dear. You are doing brilliantly and I could ask no more of you. Please try not to get so stressed. It won't help."

The hazel-eyed witch released a forlorn sigh but yielded to McGonagall's logic and soothing words. It wasn't the first time she'd had a pseudo-panic-fit in the Headmistress' presence in recent months, and it probably wouldn't be the last. Most of the Order members and some of her fellow students had been subjected to mini-breakdowns as of late; it was only natural considering the current climate, and Hermione was grateful that her professor could always calm her volatile thoughts. Even if it was only temporary.

"Do you feel better now, Miss Granger?" McGonagall asked. "Or do you have another question?"

"I have a thousand questions," she breathed, pausing to consider before a thought fluttered in her mind as she remembered what Neville had told her. "Actually, there is something I'm a little curious about."

"Go ahead."

"Neville mentioned that Luna has been leaving Hogwarts on the weekends," she explained, frowning when the Headmistress averted her eyes. "Can you tell me why?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't," McGonagall said after a pensive pause. "I can confirm that Miss Lovegood does sometimes leave the premises at weekends, but she told me her reason in strict confidence, and I assured her that I wouldn't tell anyone."

"Is she okay?" Hermione questioned. "She's not in any trouble or anything?"

"She's absolutely fine," the witch replied. "I can assure you that she is completely safe."

"Then why is she-

"It's a personal matter," McGonagall finalised brusquely. "If you want to know more, you shall have to ask her yourself."

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The Hogwarts pupils were scattered randomly around the library, squeezed between the aisles and shelves, and huddled a little closer than normal to fight the cold. The sky was already winter-dark at seven o'clock, and Madam Pince had lit a few extra candles and cast a rather weak warming charm to accommodate the forty-or-so snug students.

Hermione sat by herself in the dark corner near the restricted section; lost in a lonely bubble that silenced the surrounding noise. She tried to focus on the scribbled pages in front of her, but she couldn't stop thinking about Malfoy and what had happened.

How could I have done it?

Every method of distraction she'd attempted had failed and left her with itching lips and more confusion. She wanted to know why and how it had happened, but she could hardly suggest a discussion about it with her Slytherin dorm-mate. What made it worse was she felt like everyone was staring at her, burrowing into her head and stealing her naughty secret and secretly despising her for it.

Paranoia is such a parasite.

But that wasn't even the worst thing. No matter how much she tried to reject the absurd notion, she couldn't help but think she'd been cheated in some way. It hadn't been a real kiss, and she felt like she'd missed out on some kind of conclusion or...climax.

It was like she'd been to Hell and not experience the lick of flames.

She shouldn't have wanted to, but she really, really did. Her curiosity was getting the better of her and she wanted more. She wanted...

"Hermione."

She started with a harsh gasp and gave the source of the interruption a sharp look. "Merlin's grave, Michael," she mumbled. "You scared me to death."

"Sorry," he chuckled casually in a way that made her think he wasn't sorry at all. "I was just wondering if you'd finished the list of duties for the prefects?"

"Oh," she breathed absently, shuffling in her bag for the requested list. "Yes...sure. Here."

Michael Corner accepted the sheet of parchment and gave it a quick scan before he turned back to give her a concerned stare. "Are you okay, Hermione?" the Head Boy asked. "You seem a little distant."

"I'm fine," she shrugged, bowing her head to hide her uncertainty. "Is there a problem with the rota?"

"No, it looks good," he replied. "I just thought you might like some company."

"I'll be leaving in a minute," Hermione answered, trying to be as polite as she could, despite her foul mood. "Sorry, I'm rather tired."

She made a mental note to apologise to Michael for her sour behaviour at a later date. She normally enjoyed a light conversation with the Ravenclaw, who had matured exponentially in the last year, particularly after he'd broken up with Cho. Initially, Hermione had been extremely wary of working with him, having heard some rather unflattering comments from Ginny, but he was nice enough, if a bit too competitive at times.

"It's no worry," he offered weakly, clearing his throat. "We need to organise a meeting to discuss the Christmas dance soon-

"Is that really necessary?" she groaned, slamming her book shut. "There are more important things we should be thinking about than some silly little Ball-

"I think McGonagall's just trying to keep spirits up," Michael reminded her. "Come on, Hermione. It wouldn't hurt to have a bit of fun at Christmas. The people here need cheering up."

"I guess," she sighed sceptically, packing everything into her bag and rising from her seat. "We can discuss it in Hogsmeade this weekend then. Is that okay?"

"That's fine," he nodded. "Would you like me to walk you back to your dorm?"

"No, don't be silly," she dismissed with a wave of her hand. "I think Terry and Anthony are trying to call you back anyway. I'll see you Saturday."

Hermione turned away before he could answer and stalked towards the exit, keeping her gaze low to ignore the looks of the other students. She would swear they were casting her suspicious glances again, and she hurried away with a heavy heart. Despite her desire to avoid her dorm – or more precisely, the blond Slytherin who was lingering inside – her

strides led her there anyway. She trembled with anxiety as she whispered the password and slipped inside; her nervous hazels scanning every inch of her quarters critically.

As always, the room gave no indication of his presence, and she quickly concluded that he was in his room. With a relieved sigh that any confrontation would be postponed for the time being, she rushed towards her room with every intention of hiding away until morning, uncaring that it could be considered cowardly.

She stopped short when three steady knocks tapped against the main door, and she released a startled yelp. Merlin, she was on edge...

"Who is it?" she called, her voice wavering slightly.

"It's Michael."

She frowned at his insistence and fired a cautious look at Malfoy's room, wondering if it was wise to have a visitor when he was supposed to remain unseen. "What do you want?" she asked loudly, keeping her eyes fixed on Draco's door. "I'm a little busy."

"You left one of your books behind," the Head Boy explained. "Are you okay?"

She grimaced and slowly headed towards his voice, casting a final glance over her shoulder before she cracked open the door; just enough to prop her head against the frame and keep her body hidden.

"I was just about to have a shower," she lied when he gave her a puzzled look. "I'm in my dressing gown."

"Sorry," he grinned sheepishly, holding up the book for her to take. "Are you certain you're okay, Hermione? You've been acting a little off today."

She managed to force her mouth into an uncomfortable smile as she plucked her book out of his fingers and chucked it to land on her table. "I'm just really tired," she told him, closing the door a little and hoping he would get the hint. "I think I'm going to have an early night, but thanks for bringing me the book."

"Are you sure?" he persisted, and she fought hard not to get irritated with him.

"I'm sure," she said bluntly. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight, then. I'll see you Saturday."

Hermione released a haggard breath and rested her forehead heavily against the door, willing the oddly loud thuds in her chest to simmer. She knew that Michael's intentions had been completely innocent and her reaction had been too defensive, but she just felt like everyone was trying to corner her today and delve into her thoughts; her secrets, and she didn't want a soul knowing what she had done.

"Who the fuck was that?"

Her head whipped around so quick she almost lost her balance, and her chest felt ready to tear open when her heart recommenced its wild pounding. She subconsciously retreated until her back was pressed up against the door, and she placed a hand over her heaving chest; fixated on him as he leaned against the doorframe with a thunderous expression. His features were contorted into a fascinating mixture of scorn and resentment, and something else that she couldn't quite identify that made her breath clog her throat.

"Why do you have to do that?" she gasped angrily once she'd found her voice. "Do you enjoy scaring the-

"I asked you who that was," he spat between clenched teeth, and she noticed then how tense his muscles were. "And you'd better give me a decent fucking answer, Granger."

She flinched as he pushed himself away from the wall and shifted towards her, with slow and calculated movements that reminded her of a wolf. She'd noticed that Malfoy had a defined grace and elegance that she couldn't help but admire and envy; as though every step was intentional and preplanned to be intimidating, or even seductive. She should have found it disconcerting or unpleasant but, Godric forgive her, she couldn't help but be intrigued.

"Are you bloody deaf, Grang-

"It was just Michael Corner," she murmured, shrugging off her robes and heading to the sofas. "He's in our year and-

"I know who he is," he ground out, his tone still low and dark. "Dull Ravenclaw. Shit Quidditch player. His only redeeming feature is that he's a Pureblood. What did he want from you?"

"He was returning my book," she explained uneasily as he continued to near her; arms folded arrogantly over his chest. "Why do you-

"And why would that sad little prick think you would be meeting him on Saturday?"

She raised her eyebrows. "You were eavesdropping?"

"Just ANSWER the fucking question!" he demanded harshly, slamming his palms against the back of the other couch. "Why would you be meeting him?"

"What business is it of yours?"

He clicked his jaw and shook his head, like he was catching himself before he did something foolhardy. His storm-cloud eyes flickered between her and the floor while he chewed his tongue and seemed to gather a few soothing breaths. She studied him closely and dampened her lips with a flick of her tongue, waiting nervously for his response.

"It's my business when he's inviting himself here," he answered carefully. "If he saw me, he could go shitting that information to anyone-

"He didn't see you-

"And if you plan on slagging it around then-

"HOW DARE YOU!" Hermione screamed, rising from her seat and marching towards him. "You have NO right to talk to me in that way-

"I can talk to you however I want," he countered calmly, craning his neck to loom over her. "If you don't tell me, then I'll draw my own conclusions-

"This is ridiculous!" she hissed. "I told you I was going to Hogsmeade this weekend and-

"And you're going with that?" he growled, as though the notion revolted him and left a sour taste on his tongue. "So you are fucking that repulsive piece of-

"Oh, for Godric's sake, Malfoy!" she shouted, oblivious to how close they were with her frustration. "Michael and I are the only people going because we're the Heads!"

His mouth snapped shut with an audible clap, and she felt like he was stripping her with his glare as his eyes darted over her face. She realised how close he was then; close enough that his breath stirred some of the hairs by her forehead, but she didn't move despite every instinct screeching at her to do so.

Remember what happened last time you were this close...?

If he was bothered by their proximity, he didn't budge, and she would swear that something close to relief washed across his pale features. He tilted his head slightly and dropped his shoulders, and the room seemed to fill with static as his earlier rage dissipated.

"You're telling me that useless dickhead is Head Boy?" he drawled sceptically. "What a fucking joke-

"He's actually very good," she argued, noting his upper lip twitch as she spoke. "Are we done here, Dra...Malfoy?"

He frowned at her mistake, and the witch tried to hide her embarrassed flush with little success. She turned to leave, but his cold grip coiled around her wrist before she could get any distance between them.

Just shove him away...Too close...

"What now?" she asked, refusing to look back to him. "I have answered your questions and put up with enough of your-

"I'm not finished," he muttered, clenching her arm a little tighter. "I have another question."

She scoffed. "I see no reason why I should-

"Why did you make me food this morning?" he rushed out with obvious qualms.

Hermione blinked to herself and slowly twisted her neck to give a confused look. "What-what do you mean?" she mumbled. "I always make you a meal in the morning-

"I thought after our fight last night," he said reluctantly. "That you wouldn't have-

"We fight everyday, Malfoy-

"Last night was different."

The room felt like a vacuum, and Hermione would swear she actually felt the air being dragged out of her lungs. Draco's eyes looked softer then; like milky smoke, and she was completely fixated on them. After his infuriated rant and outright denial of their demi-kiss last night, his words had completely thrown her. They both knew what he was referring to when he'd said different, and it crackled between them like dangerous flames; too hot to touch but too powerful to ignore.

The kiss...

"I wouldn't have you go hungry because of...that," she broke the silence awkwardly. "That would just be cruel-

"It would be normal," he argued, and she watched with disappointment as his features returned to the bitter and sharp scowl she knew so well. "And I'm sure you want to lecture me with some tedious Gryffindor moral about kindness or some shit but I really couldn't give a fuck-

"You asked me the question," she protested, tugging her wrist free from his hold and walking away from him. "I'm going to bed. Goodnight Malfoy."

Draco clenched his fists as Granger disappeared into her room, wondering what the hell had caused him to act so pathetically. It was humiliating and unacceptable, and he blamed her for it wholeheartedly. From the moment she had infected him with her muddy blood and swamped him with her scent, everything had deteriorated, specifically his mind. Now, he was being subjected to haunting fantasies of her, and tempted by almost kisses that left him feeling both revolted and yet...starved.

It was breaking his brain into disturbed little fragments that made him question himself, and how far he was willing to go before his inappropriate craving for her taste was sated.

The rage he had felt when that sodding Ravenclaw had turned up had been vicious and explosive, and he had physically quaked, but he had no idea why.

It's not jealousy...

Just rage. Possessive rage, maybe.

His luxuries and stimulants were limited in this prison, and her taste and scent had somehow become some of those...needs, and he would not share them with anyone beyond that door. While his taste of her had been brief, it was his now, even if he never wanted it again for the sake of his dignity. And he didn't want to touch her again. Really, he didn't, but if Michael twatty Corner thought he was entitled to a lick of Granger, he was fucking mistaken.

He didn't understand his dangerous emotions towards her, nor did he like them, but they were powerful and almost instinctive, and impossible to ignore.

He stormed back to his room and silently pleaded with Salazar that he would be rid of his...obsession with the Mudblood soon. It was degrading and mind-sucking, and he feared he would act on it.

I will not act on it...

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The wind was screaming like tortured toddlers tonight, and Hermione was convinced her clock was lying.

If it really was three in the morning, then she had been staring blankly at her ceiling for four hours and that just wasn't healthy. She had secluded herself in her room and adamantly refused to leave, amusing herself with finishing every essay that was due from now until Christmas. That had lasted for three hours, and since then she'd tried desperately to manage some sleep, but it was all in vain.

And it wasn't the wind tonight...

No matter how hard she tried to eradicate Malfoy from her mind, she couldn't; be it stubborn flashbacks of their pseudo-kiss or just general musings about his behaviour. She found herself fascinated by him as much as she tried to reject it, and she'd noticed he's refrained from calling her Mudblood for a while. A month in his presence had effected her and she found herself more determined than ever to tackle his prejudices, although she couldn't help but wonder if it was now for selfish purposes.

She wanted him to view her differently, and she was fairly certain he was starting to.

At least she hoped he was.

She sat up and rubbed her face with her palms, wondering if her interest in him was really appropriate or healthy. Probably not.

A shiver chased up her spine and she grabbed her wand to renew her warming charm when a thought stole her attention. She had three blankets and magic to battle the November chill, but what did Draco have? He'd only been supplied with one blanket...

What if he's freezing?

She realised then that she cared, when she really shouldn't have. She knew it was in her nature, but this was something else; a genuine concern for his comfort that left her questioning when she'd started to actually care.

She left her bed and wrapped herself in her bathrobe, trying to decide what exactly she could do. The options were simple; chose to ignore it and let the cocky prat deal with it himself, or yield to her desire to provide him with some warmth.

"What the hell am I doing?" she whispered to herself as she crept lightly out of her room.

With at least two minutes of hesitation outside his door, she swallowed away her nerves and angled her wand in its direction.

"Alohomora."

Chapter End Notes

I can't begin to apologise enough for the delay...And I'm apologising now for the next few weeks as my updates are going to take a little longer. I have a lot of Uni work due, and while I would happily discard my assignments to give you chapter after chapter as soon as I can, real life is being a dick! I shall try and let people know on my Facebook profile (it's on my profile page if you're interested) how late I will be with chapters. You can also ask me any questions there or via review or email, or if anyone isn't a member of ffnet, I put up my recent updates on that profile too. Blah blah blah...

Thanks for the reviews! This story is getting so much more positive feedback than I expected! Blush...I can't believe I'm close to the 400 mark already...If I could bring myself to scream like a girly girl, I would! Massive thanks to new readers Shannon520, Keyda841 and elecurls for your wonderful reviews and being lovely! Also thanks to GemFire90 for reviewing every chapter, it's very sweet of you!

Hope this chapter was okay? About the Luna thing...it is significant, but I won't be giving you answers to it for a long time...Sorry! Lend me your thoughts on the rest of the chapter! Thanks again, you lovely people! It's almost three...and I have three glasses of wine in me and a lecture at nine...Fun times!

Read and Review!

Bex-chan

Sleep

Chapter Notes

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

Dear Godric, what am I doing?

Hermione grimaced as the door creaked open a little too loudly for her liking. She pushed some magic into a dim Lumos charm; just enough to discern bistre shapes and outlines. The air seemed colder as she shuffled nervously inside, and she bunched the fabric of her dressing gown at her chest as her eyes settled on the bed.

She paused her footfalls. She could hear them now; sleep-slurred protests and elevated breaths.

Draco was having a nightmare, and as she stared a little harder, the glow from her wand caught a silvery sheet of sweat across his forehead. His features were creased and pained, and the vulnerability she saw then was absolutely breathtaking. He looked...beautiful, and it made her chest burn. She blinked away her trance when he writhed under the covers and released a distressed grunt.

Get a grip, Hermione...

She continued towards him warily, and gazing with a fascination she couldn't censor. Something about his thrashes and squirms sent wonderful little tingles to her fingertips that bade her to touch him, but she resisted.

He must have been cold. She could see he was wearing only a vest to cover his torso, although it was hard to tell if he was shivering or quaking because of the inevitable disturbing images tumbling around in his head. With a hesitant frown, she shrugged off her robe and Transfigured it into a thick blanket. She edged anxiously closer to drape it over him and accidentally caught his frosty skin. She froze when he flinched at her touch and a sleep-slurred mumble passed his dry lips.

"I have to kill you...otherwise, they're going to kill me."

Hermione gasped and her eyes darted up to his face to find it contorted with anguish. He looked like he was being tortured, and she felt her stomach twist with concern and care that shouldn't have been there. She leaned over and studied him closely, forgetting the chill for a moment.

"Draco," she whispered before she could question herself. "Draco, it's me. Wake up."

If anything, his throaty growls became worse, and she carefully raised her hand to rest against his damp forehead. The moment her skin touched his, smoky and wild eyes snapped open. Hermione barely had time to release a startled yelp as he grabbed her wrists and pulled her down; flipping them so she was trapped beneath him and straddling her hips. He was panting

heavily with confusion and the aftershocks of his nightmare, and he loomed over her with bared teeth; close enough that some of his hair tickled her brow.

"Draco," the witch breathed, unafraid of the slightly unhinged look in his eyes. "Calm down. It's me."

His features barely softened, but she felt the grip on her wrists give, and she quickly lifted her hands to his face. Her palms rested either side of his head as she brushed her thumbs over his cold cheeks. He didn't tear away as she'd expected, but then he looked completely out of it; tired and tipsy with exhaustion, but still jittery.

"It's okay," she soothed softly with stoking fingers. "It's okay."

His lids drifted lower so his eyes were thin and almost hidden, and his breaths calmed against her face. He'd stopped shaking, but she kept her hands against his cheeks, willing him to wake up completely. He swayed a little with unbalance before his distant gaze darted back down to hers. His eyes were misty and absent as he slowly lowered himself, and Hermione would reluctantly admit that she didn't even consider protesting as his mouth caught hers.

While their first demi-kiss had been light and questionable, this connection felt heavy and firm. There was desperation between their mouths, and Hermione couldn't stop herself from giving up more when he licked her lower lip. She matched him with some small but bold sucks, and their wet sounds mingled for twenty thuds of her heart before they paused. He dropped his forehead against hers and kept their lips almost touching as Hermione fought hard to ignore the thunder of questions trying to burst out of her ears and chest.

She slowly opened her eyes and found that Draco still looked half-asleep but blissfully calm. She savoured the remains of his peppermint taste and kept as still as she possibly could.

"Granger..." he mumbled sleepily, as though he wasn't sure if it was her.

She didn't dare move as he slowly eased himself off her and settled to the side. She watched him intently, searching for any indication that he was horrified or even aware of what they had just done. He sealed his eyes and gathered the blankets back around him, and Hermione shifted to make her exit, but a sleepy murmur made her falter.

"Stay."

She blinked and turned to face him, wondering if she had misheard his plea, but he looked completely dead to the world. Had she imagined it? Hell, had she managed the whole thing? She wanted to stay...

Against her better judgement, she tucked herself under the covers, and tried to ignore the voice at the back of her skull telling her that this foolhardy decision would smack her in the face come morning. She put a fair bit of distance between them, hopelessly reasoning that this would make things better. She made herself comfortable and cast a quick warming charm as her own exhaustion kicked in.

Her eyes lingered on his face as her lids fluttered, and just before she succumbed to her own dangerous dreams, she brought her fingers to her still-thrumming lips and released a sweet sigh.

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Draco was vaguely aware of morning birds as he started to break away from sleep. Some sliver of his subconscious told him that this was the first morning in a while when rain hadn't been hammering against his window, but it was the odd texture of his pillow that made his eyes finally drift open.

What the...

His cheek was cushioned under Granger's curls, and then he remembered the dream he'd had last night. It had been a welcomed change to his usual nightmares of murdered wizards and towers; a kiss with Gryffindor's Princess. It was a blurry memory without specifics, as most of his dreams were, because it had only been a dream. Just a dream.

Odd though; his lips felt a little sensitive this morning.

He raised his bewildered stare to his bedside companion and secretly decided that her delicate and charming features were easily the best thing he'd woken up to in the long months he'd been hiding. She looked bloody alluring, almost surreal; only a breath away with tousled tresses surrounding her relaxed face. His weary eyes fell to her slightly swollen mouth and he wondered...

Don't be such a fucking idiot.

If he'd thought his room had been heavy with her scent before, he was practically drowning in it now, and it was delicious. He was contemplating whether or not to touch her; wondering if his fantasies had become a full-fledged hallucination, but her amber eyes slowly flitted open before he could. They simply stared at each other for a long minute; her looking slightly embarrassed and him with a suspicious glare.

"What are you doing here, Granger?" he broke the quiet, steeling his features. He watched her with glassy eyes as nerves seemed to spark in her head and she dragged in a shaky breath. "Granger-

"I..." she started quietly. "I thought you might be cold."

He frowned at her answer. "What-

"I brought you an extra blanket," she explained with a wavering voice. "And...and you asked me to stay."

He scoffed, but a foggy flashback shattered his concentration. That pesky little dream of his suddenly seemed more like a memory. He shoved the disturbing notion away and was about to argue that he would never have asked her to stay, but her next mumbled confession made his brain disconnect.

"I...I wanted to stay."

His black-ice eyes widened a fraction and scanned her features quickly before a lusty impulse he couldn't deny overtook him. He grabbed her with strong hands and kissed her hard, rolling his body atop of hers and realising their position felt wonderfully familiar. Her hands toyed with his neck as he poured himself into her mouth; all his frustration and anger falling past her lips as he gorged on her taste. She met him with equal and perfect indulgence that tempted his hands to get lost in her hair.

A feminine sigh tickled the back of his throat and he pushed harder into her, relishing her body heat and the feel of her beneath him. She whimpered, and the sound reminded him of those addictive showers of hers that sent blood rushing south. But the flicker under his stomach felt too real now; too alive, and it brought him crashing back to the frosty reality.

He snatched himself away from her with a furious growl and sat at the edge of the bed; hunched over with angry vibrations crawling up his spine. He felt every muscle flex across his shoulders and down his arms as he balled his fists and rested his head against his knuckles. This was a new level of humiliation and self-disgust; possibly the pinnacle in this fucked-up little tug-of-war between he and her. He certainly hoped it was the pinnacle...Possibly...

He heard and felt her weight shift on the bed, and he willed her to leave before his temper caught up with him. He could sense the anger, at her and himself, sizzling behind his eyes like volatile embers that were ageing into flames. He could feel that she was off the bed, so why the hell couldn't he hear her leaving?

"Draco-

"Just leave," he rasped out coldly, keeping his head bowed. "Leave me the fuck alone-

"But I-

"I TOLD YOU TO BLOODY LEAVE!" He stood with a rapid snap of his body and whipped around to confront her with a grave sneer carved into his face. "NOW-

"NO!" she shouted back, straightening her back defensively. "I want to talk about this-

"There is nothing to discuss!" he argued. "Nothing happened-

"You are so pathetic!" the witch accused with a trembling finger pointed at him. "Why do you have to deny that this is real-

"BECAUSE IT ISN'T FUCKING REAL!" he roared with conviction. "Nothing that happens in this prison is real-

"What are you-

"It's all false!" he continued. "This arrangement is shitting all over my brain! I would NEVER lower myself to touch you if it weren't for this head-fuck bullshit that I am being forced to live in-

"The circumstances are irrelevant-

"Bollocks!"

"You are still in control of your actions!" she fired angrily. "And the sooner you accept that-

"And what about your actions, Granger?" he questioned in a sinister tone. "How does sleeping in the same bed as a Death Eater fit in with your pro-Mudblood crap?"

Her scowl hardened. "I blame ill judgement and a moment of insanity-

"Then I blame you and that old bitch for my insanity!" he yelled, pausing for a moment to narrow his eyes suspiciously. "Is this some sick little plot of yours, Granger? Are you and that shrivelled hag doing this on purpose?"

"What the hell are you talking-

"I'm talking about you and McGonagall!" Draco ranted with a slow snarl. "Do you have some piss-poor plan? Seduce the Death Eater and get some information on Voldemort with a little effective whoring-

"Fuck you-

"I'm sure that was part of the plan," he hissed bitterly. "Screw me, and then blackmail me for some revealing pillow-talk-

"You are being ridiculous!" she huffed impatiently.

He hesitated and bared his teeth. "Yes, it is sodding ridiculous," he growled. "I'm sure even McGonagall has noticed you have the sexual appeal of a shit-smeared Troll!"

He caught the hurt that flashed in her eyes, and almost regretted that comment.

"There is no plot," she said after a sad silence. "You can believe what you want, but all I ever wanted was for you to realise that Muggle-borns are people. That I am a person."

He remained still and willed his features not to soften with uncertainty. He had no idea about other Muggle-borns, nor did he really care; all he knew was her. And she was definitely a person; a character with traits and emotions that he didn't always understand, but couldn't help but be fascinated with. She was a person who was swapping around preconceptions in

his skull and making him question what had been bred into his bones. She was a person with a kiss that lingered and burned...

"I'm leaving," she mumbled, turning on her heel and heading for the door. "But I want you to consider this, Draco. If I was a Pureblood with exactly the same personality, would you be so quick to discard what happened this morning?"

Before a scolding remark could roll off his Granger-flavoured tongue, she yanked open the door and slammed it with her exit, leaving him confused and cold. Her question rolled around in his skull, alongside his thoughts on the King book and everything else that he'd started to question since he'd landed in this inescapable hole.

Would he be so quick to ignore their kiss if she was a Pureblood?

No. Fuck no.

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Stashed safely away in her room, Hermione choked on a stubborn sob despite her best attempts not to. It wasn't so much his insulting remarks that had pushed tears past her lashes, but more so her reaction to them. She shouldn't have cared about his opinion of her; should've been more than used to his biting words but, by Godric's grave, that had hurt. She would swear she could feel little puncture-wounds in her chest, and she hated him for ruining a moment that had felt...well...nice. Blissful even...

She guessed she should be grateful for that really; at least one of them had had the sense to break the contact.

But why did he have to be such a bloody bastard about it? Why did he have to make everything so hard? And why the hell had it happened in the first place?

Why am I doing this?

It was simply an accident...although could incidents still be considered accidents when they were repeated? Possibly not.

She stroked away her tears with trembling fingertips and sniffed away the scratchy feathers in her throat. A quick glance at the clock told her it was barely six in the morning; too early for classes, but she needed to get out of this room. She dressed herself as quickly as she could in some comfy clothes and her robes, and sprinted out of her dorm, trying hard not to glance back at Draco's bedroom door. She charged down the hollow and dark corridors until she burst out of the castle and into the cold dawn.

It was stunning; a wonderful sky of pinky greys and navy shades that should have stolen her breath, but her mind was far too distracted to pay it any attention. She cast a quick warming charm when she noticed how thick her breath was, and wandered across the quiet grounds until she found a fractured-looking tree that was iced with frost.

She collapsed amongst its roots and leaned heavily against the trunk as her tears began to leak down her cheeks again. She could openly sob here without a care for nosy stares, but she still felt like a fool.

She had to face the facts, even if they were completely shattering and wrong. If she was this affected by Draco's harsh dismissal of her this morning, then clearly she felt something towards him; be it compassion or something else. She couldn't recall feeling this rejected since Ron's short-lived relationship with Lavender, but she ignored the dangerous connotations that came with that thought. Perhaps she was simply this troubled because Draco was the only person she had spent a considerable amount of time with since Harry and Ron had left. Perhaps.

She'd gradually dropped her guard around him, and it had come back to crush her.

Perhaps it had been foolish of her to settle into an almost-comfortable routine with Draco and assume that his attitude towards her would change, but she had hoped...

She had hoped for them to become something...different...

"Hermione."

She was too drained to be startled, and she slowly craned her head to give the familiar voice a confused look. "Luna," she sighed as the young blonde neared her. "What are you doing here?"

"The sky is beautiful," she supplied quietly, kneeling opposite Hermione. "It's also the best time of the day to see Ceffyls. Why are you up so early?"

"I needed some air," she sighed tiredly, quickly rubbing away any remainders of her tears. "What are-

"Your lips look funny again," Luna interjected calmly. "Another bee sting?"

"What? Yes. I mean no," Hermione stuttered clumsily, trying to regain some composure. "No, it's nothing to do with bees. I think it's a reaction to something else."

"What would that be?"

"I'm not sure yet," she shrugged, raising her inquisitive fingertips to see if her lips felt any different. "Clearly, it's bad for me."

"I think it suits you," Luna grinned to herself, her eyes fixed on nature's light-display to the East. "Looks like you might be having a stronger reaction this time though."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, your cheeks are flushed this time," she told the older witch blankly. "And your eyes look a little glazed-

"That's probably just the cold," Hermione defended weakly.

"No," the Ravenclaw shook her head. "It's something else. You look very pretty by it though, Hermione."

She offered her friend a weak smile. "Thank you," she mumbled.

"I heard you're taking a trip to Hogsmeade on Saturday," Luna said slowly, and Hermione watched the first glows of morning dance over her friend's face. "With Michael, yes?"

"Yes," she nodded. "Would you like anything?"

"Would you mind getting me some Liquorice Wands from Honeydukes?"

Hermione frowned. "I didn't think you liked them?"

"I don't."

The brunette cocked her head to the side and observed her companion slowly, noting that Luna herself looked a little different. While the pretty blonde's eyes were striking, yet normally absent, recently they seemed to hold that curious twinkle of a girl with a secret. A good secret.

"Can I ask you something, Luna?"

Ravenclaw's angel slowly twisted her head to give Hermione her full attention. "Of course," she replied. "I'll try to answer."

"Some of the others have noticed that you aren't here at the weekends and some other days," she told her carefully. "Where do you go?"

If Luna was phased, she didn't show it. "I didn't think that people would notice my absence."

"Oh Luna," Hermione grimaced. "You know we care about you a lot. Of course we would-

"I didn't mean it in that way," she interrupted as a slight twitch toyed with her mouth. "People tend not to notice others' behaviour so much in times of War. It's only normal. I'm actually quite touched that anyone has realised."

"So where do you go?" she persisted. "If you are in any trouble then we can help you."

Luna released a soft giggle and Hermione raised her eyebrows. "I am fine," the younger witch said. "I am very well actually, but I'm afraid I can't tell you where I go."

"Why not?"

"It would not be safe for the other party involved," Luna murmured, her expression turning thoughtful and almost concerned for a second. "I'm sorry. It would be too risky to tell people, and it's not only my secret to tell."

While Hermione understood Luna's reasoning and rationalised that she had no right to demand knowledge of secrets when she was concealing a Death Eater in her dorm, something in her friend's voice had her intrigued.

"You care about this other person?" Hermione questioned hesitantly. "You must if you are willing to take these risks for them."

"Aren't we all taking risks these days?"

"I'm just worried about you," she continued with a sad tone. "This War-

"Sometimes, Wars can bring good things," Luna said as she got to her feet. "They can teach people to hold on to what feels right, even if there are risks involved."

Hermione stared at her friend as she made her way towards the castle, and tossed Luna's parting words around in her skull. As always, the blonde had left her feeling somewhere between bewildered and enlightened, and wondering if Luna commanded one of her imaginary creatures to spy on her at night. She turned her head to give the half-risen Sun an appreciative gaze and gathered her limbs closer around herself as she huddled under the withered Oak.

She needed to concentrate on her tasks for the Order and toss aside these hopeful thoughts about Draco. It was inappropriate and completely naïve, no matter how tempting it was to analyse it in her head.

But it was too hard to ignore.

She was late for her first class after a stubborn daydream managed to mist her mind, and she cursed her brain for letting him slip in. Again.

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For two days, he successfully avoided her by remaining secluded in his room, except for bathroom trips and to grab the warm meals she continued to leave for him. He guessed she was also doing her best to steer clear of him, and that would have been fine, if he wasn't starting to lose his grip on reality.

It wasn't the claustrophobia this time either.

No, he could feel the change in his blood and bones. It was a craving; perhaps just for human interaction, or perhaps specifically for her. It throbbed in his veins and made his muscles spasm with unhealthy jerks. He'd broken out in cold sweats, shivered until his spine had felt like snapping, and had almost vomited. It felt like withdrawal, but maybe the cold weather had simply caught up with him.

The only medicine seemed to be a desperate wank to the sounds of her showers, but then that only lasted for thirty minutes in his day-long Hell.

He'd been awake for a few hours now, waiting for her usual purrs to ease the strain in his body. If he had to guess by the place of the Sun, it was broaching the afternoon, which meant that another weekend had oozed into his stay with her.

He remembered then that Granger had told him she was heading to Hogsmeade with that Ravenclaw fucktard, and he felt fury flicker under his flesh. His chest felt ready to cave in from the sheer weight of his sudden and powerful anger, and when he finally heard her move to the bathroom, he couldn't chase away his volatile thoughts to relish her as he usually did.

Instead, suspicious and unwelcome images of her pruning and preparing herself to meet that joke of a wizard hammered in his head. The idea exaggerated itself and he gnashed his teeth, as wave after wave of disgust rocked him. His fingernails pierced the skin of his palms as he clenched his fists, and he didn't dare move until she had returned to her bedroom for ten minutes before he heard the main door close with her exit.

He was on his feet in a heartbeat with seething breaths steaming from his mouth and pupil-blackened eyes. He started with the closet and the desk, chucking them onto their sides and kicking them until wooden shards were decorating the floor and the furniture was dented beyond recognition. He worked on the bedding next, tearing it into a tattered mess of fabrics and pillow-feathers that did nothing to soothe his temper.

With a final roar of jealousy-powered rage, he grabbed the chair and hurled it at the window, only to watch it explode into a rain of splinters. He eyed the charmed and unscathed window bitterly as he sunk to the floor amongst the littered remains of his outburst, and rested his back against the foot of his bed. He stayed there for hours, battling cruel imaginings of Granger enjoying her time with Corner.

In his lonely heap on the bedroom floor, he came to a conclusion that quaked his core. Either Granger was wrong, and he had every right to despise Muggles and Mudbloods for their inferiority, or if Granger was right, as she so often was, then he had been a brainwashed bastard...

Her words from their post-kiss argument throbbed in his brain.

All I ever wanted was for you was to realise that Muggle-borns are people. That I am a person.,,

You are still in control of your actions...

I wanted to stay...

What if she was right?

What if it had all been for nothing?

What if he, and all his family, were wrong?

Then...then maybe it was okay for him to want to touch her, but why the fuck should she allow it?

If she was right.

He didn't have a clue what to believe any more.

He remained still for hours and hours. The thoughts swarmed around in his head too loudly for him to realise that she had returned, that she was knocking on his door, or even that she was calling his name.

That was how Hermione found him as the day turned to evening; slumped in a defeated position, surrounded by a self-made chaos. Her wide stare scanned the wreckage with confusion before her eyes were drawn to Draco in the centre of the room, and she felt a glitch in her chest. She could see he was shivering, yet he was making no attempt to warm himself, and his eyes were eerily absent and unfocused. His vulnerable and distorted shape instantly reminded her of the night she had found him mid-nightmare, and how it had led to two forbidden kisses.

The concern came so naturally to her as she dropped her bag and rushed to his side, sinking to her knees and grabbing his face between her frosty hands. A flash of recognition and life flashed in his grey gaze and she sighed in relief as her thumbs instinctively stroked his pale face.

"Draco," she whispered close to his lips. "Look at me, Draco. What's wrong?"

He swallowed loudly and lidded his eyes. "How long have I been here, Granger?"

Hermione blinked in bewilderment but quickly added up the dates in her head. "Just over five weeks," she offered after a moment. "Thirty-seven days, I think."

"It feels longer," he mumbled.

"Why did you trash your room?" she asked quietly, taking back one of her hands to remove her wand from her pocket. "Draco-

"I don't know," he blurted, and she felt him relax a little more into her palm. "I don't know."

"I'm going to clean up the mess," she told him as she flicked her wand. "Stay still, okay?"

He didn't respond as all the evidence of his tantrum slowly started to rectify itself around them. He wondered if there was some irony there; Granger fixing something he had demolished for a reason he couldn't quite understand, but his brain was too laden with doubt

to pay the thought any heed. Instead, he just studied her features, searching once again for any indication that she was inferior but, once again, he found none.

Not a trace of anything he could hate, no matter how hard he tried.

"You're cold," she commented, bringing her attention back to him. "Let me-

"No," he said without his usual bite. "I'm fine, Granger."

She frowned but didn't argue, knowing better than to aggravate him in this instance. "I got the things you asked for," she told him, summoning her charmed bag. She swished her wand again, and Draco watched with half-hearted interest as his drapes and bedding were replaced with rich green fabrics, and his requested selection of sweets landed on his repaired desk.

"Draco, what's wrong? Why did you trash-

"I told you, I don't know," he repeated quietly. "I just did."

"You don't look very well," she murmured, bringing one of her hands to his forehead. "Let me get you some-

"Don't," he stopped her, clenching his eyes shut. "Just...don't go."

"Draco, you're worrying me-

"Why should you worry about someone you can't stand?"

Hermione tilted her head to catch his eyes. "I told you I don't hate you-

"You should," he told her firmly. "You should loathe me."

"Well I don't," she argued calmly, shuffling a little closer to him. "Maybe I should, but I can't-

"Then how do you feel about me now, Granger?"

"That question again?" she sighed, setting her hands in her lap and averting her gaze. "I don't know, Draco."

"Do you think I am evil, Granger?" he asked bluntly.

"You're not evil," she assured him without hesitation. "You have just been...mislead. You're human, Draco, and you've made mistakes, but I can't hate you for that."

He lifted his head and released a shaky breath. "I should hate you."

"Should?" she echoed with a puzzled tone. "As in, you don't any more?"

"I don't know," he muttered so quietly, she wasn't sure he'd said it at all. "I am...confused."

His reluctant confession was flimsy and questionable, but she found herself feeling encouraged by his doubt. That hopeful spark that she'd been so determined to ignore

blossomed in her chest before she could help it. This was what she had wanted; some voiced confirmation that he was starting to question his prejudices.

It teased her Gryffindor courage and she slowly shifted closer to him again, boldly settling herself between his legs and resting her weight against his chest. She expected him to instantly reject her brazen gesture, but he didn't even flinch as she rested her head against his shoulder. He remained completely still and unresponsive, but she felt inexplicably safe there; warm and comfortable in a forbidden moment that lulled her into a sleepy state.

"This doesn't mean anything," she heard Draco murmur by her ear, possibly more to himself. "It doesn't."

"I know," she whispered.

Draco was painfully aware that this was far too intimate and undoubtedly wrong, but after two days of denying his craving to be this close to her, he was too absorbed now to push her way. He knew in the morning he would come to regret this lapse in judgement, but he couldn't resist the drugging effect she had on him.

It was barely eight o'clock, but sleep stole Hermione quickly, and Draco followed her a moment later with a disturbing realisation that things were changing.

He was changing.

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry...I know I warned you that it would be a little longer but still...gah...I really am very sorry...

Oh by the way, thank you so bloody much for the amazing response since my last chapter! I just...I have no idea how to thank you...Seriously...It's the highest amount of reviews I have ever received for a chapter (except the final chap of Hunted) and I just want to track you all down and snog you senseless! Love to Ethereal Essence for reviewing every chapter and big shout out to the lovely people who added me on facebook and have been so fucking wonderful (you know who you are! And you're all bloody brilliant!).

Hope the chapter was okay? Rather interested to know your thoughts on the beginning section...hmmm...Read and Review please! And sorry again for the delay...

Bex-chan

Alone

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione could never recall feeling so warm and content.

She released a lazy hum as the rhythmic falls of a masculine chest lulled her back to that wonderful purgatory between sleep and reality. A tasty smell of peppermint and sinful Slytherin tickled her nose, and she blinked away the remains of a blissful dream as she remembered where she was.

Judging by the heavy breaths toying with her hair, Draco was very much ignorant to the world, but his arms must have snaked round her during the night, and she couldn't help but push her body a little more into his. He felt so good wrapped around her like this, and she wanted to absorb as much as she could before the inevitable denial and arguments came. Frowning with that thought, she realised it was probably best she leave before he stirred, if only to save them both the embarrassment and hassle.

Unsure why, but unable to resist, she craned her neck to plant a lingering kiss against his jaw line, before carefully removing herself from his hold.

The absence of his touch left her feeling neglected and cold, and as an afterthought, she pulled down one of Draco's blankets to cover him. With a final sad look, she turned to leave, oblivious to the set of grey eyes slowly opening behind her.

Draco brought his fingertips to where her lips had been, and stared at her back as she left him alone. A random idea stole his brain, and he silently eased himself up, just managing to the catch the door before it closed behind her. He poked his head through the gap and strained his hearing ability to successfully catch her password.

Lutra, lutra?

He had no idea what it meant, nor did he care; he just felt satisfied that things could be a little fairer now. If she was so bloody eager to wander into his room whenever she liked, now he could do the same. He told himself it was purely for tactical purposes, but as he raised his fingers again to his Granger-grazed jaw, he couldn't help but wonder if there were darker motives to his prying actions.

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After a light lunch and a trip to the library, Hermione had returned to her room to find Hedwig pecking at her window.

Hermione read the letter again, and her smile widened. The envelope had been addressed solely to her, so she hadn't tracked down Ginny this time. After weeks of nothing but disappointment and fuel to her ever-growing pessimism; finally there was a light in the darkness. The note was scrawled in Ron's familiar and clumsy handwriting, but the words were bold and clear across the parchment.

We found it. It's destroyed.

Searching for the others.

I miss you.

R&H

There was no question about what 'it' was. They had found the locket. Her curiosity about the details would have to wait; she knew it was far too risky for Harry and Ron to provide her with too much information. But for the moment, she didn't care, they were one step closer to defeating Voldemort and ending this War.

I miss you.

Her broad grin creased into a sad frown as a spell of guilt hit her hard. Visions of her recent...activities with Draco waltzed across her conscious, and she realised, with a cringe, that she hadn't once considered how her behaviour would affect her friendships with the boys, specifically Ron. The details of her relationship with him were complicated to say the least, and she guessed she should blame them both for never having a civilised conversation about the subject.

While she didn't regret losing her virginity to her best friend, it had been made perfectly clear to her that that was all she and Ron ever would be. Friends. There had never been any passion between them; just crushes and curiosity that had now been, for her, sated. She loved him dearly, but she wanted that lust that she'd heard so much about; that burning throb inside your soul that made you crave someone's touch.

And that someone just wasn't Ron.

But Draco...

Draco had this...intensity with everything that he did, and it made something behind her navel tingle. The sensation was new and foreign to her, and she had no idea if she could call it lust or simply intrigue, but it was different and exciting. It encouraged her to interact and watch him, and in the safe solitude of her showers or her room, sometimes she couldn't help but imagine...

She shook her head to chase away the risqué thoughts and reminded herself that she had just received some promising news.

Priorities, Hermione...

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After two days of awkward glances and an obvious reluctance to address the night spent in forbidden arms, Hermione was beginning to realise she quite missed Draco's company. She was still struggling to really identify what she truly felt for her Slytherin housemate, but she had done her best to ignore her curiosity, and instead focus on her Horcrux research. But she couldn't deny her interest in him, nor could she really figure out why she desired to spend time with him when all they seemed to do was fight.

Perhaps it was because she could see him slowly dropping his defences, or possibly because the arguments reminded her that she had some fire still thundering in her bones. Hell, maybe she just enjoyed the spasmodic little flutters that crowded her gut whenever they were close...

It was Tuesday, meaning she would be leaving in two days to visit Tonks, and she needed to tell Draco. Smothering her anxiety and steeling her courage, she slipped out of her room, urged on by the winds slashing the night, and tapped lightly against his door.

"Why do you bother knocking?" Draco's voice called from inside. "You will come in whether I say you can, or not."

She found a little smile toying with her mouth as she used her wand to unlock his door, and she licked her dry lips before padding her bare feet over his threshold. He was sitting on his bed; shoulders hunched over and elbows resting against his crossed legs, while one of her books lay discarded near his feet.

"What do you want, Granger?" he asked, barely offering her a sideways glance.

"I wanted to talk to you about something-

"And you decided that three in the morning was the best time to bring it up?"

"I've been busy," she lied, carefully easing herself down to sit at the foot of his bed. "And we're both up, so I figured-

"Spit it out then," he said tiredly. "I actually planned on getting some sleep tonight."

"Okay," she sighed, hesitating as she tried to select her words. "On Thursday, I shall be staying in Hogsmeade for a couple of days-

"What?" he blurted. His head snapped up at her words, and a violent sense of dread seized his chest. The thought of her leaving him alone in this sanity-starving hole made him feel sick to his stomach, and an itchy shiver clawed its way up his spine. "What the hell do you mean you'll be leaving for a couple days?"

"Well, I'm visiting someone," she explained, nervously tucking an unruly curl behind her ear. "I will leave you enough food and-

"Are you going with that Corner prick?" he hissed quietly, fixing her with a fierce glare. "Romantic fuck-fest for the Heads at The Three Broomsticks?"

Hermione flinched. "No, that's not-

"I suppose I should be grateful that you're not denting the headboard in your own room," he continued viciously. "And if you have to slag it around-

"Draco, stop it!" she barked with offence and the shadows of tears scratching at her eyes. "I'm meeting a female friend for Godric's sake! Why do you always have to do that?"

His mouth clapped shut as he willed his stormy thoughts to simmer, and he wondered why he'd found his rant necessary. He considered the possibility that she was bluffing to save face, but he doubted Granger was capable of lying; and in a world rife with deception, he found her honesty rather refreshing.

"I'm sorry."

The words were rushed and tumbled past his lips before he could stop them, but for a brief moment, he thought the charming softening of her features might be worth his error. The way she looked at him then, like he was worth something more than the pitiful mess he felt, made that incessant craving to touch her tickle his fingertips.

"I'm sorry that I won't be here for a couple of days," she said before he could retract his comment, and he found himself weaving his fingers to keep his hands busy. "I will arrange some way for you to contact me if there's anything you need-

"I am perfectly capable of surviving two days by myself," he scoffed quickly, but the idea of her not being around to chase away the boredom made his soul ache. "It's a bloody shame you don't fuck off more often."

"Maybe-

"You have been a lot more...cheerful recently," he commented suddenly, giving her suspicious stare. "It's annoying."

Hermione frowned and wondered if her reaction to Ron's letter had been a bit more obvious than she'd thought. "What makes you think I'm happier?"

"It's written all over your face," he said with a roll of his smoky eyes. "And if I'm guessing right, this friend that you are meeting is one of your Order lot. Would I be right in assuming that your side is doing well, and that is to blame for your good mood?"

"You know I can't discuss that with you-

"Why not?" he countered. "I'm hardly going to walk out the front door and spill all your secrets to the man who wants me dead."

Hermione exhaled wearily and swivelled her body to face him. "I just don't think we should talk about it-

"I'm sure everyone else is talking about it," he muttered thoughtfully. "Why should we be any different?"

"Because we are different, Draco," she told him, somewhat sadly. "We are-

"On different sides," he finished for her, bowing his head to hide his eyes.

Hermione tilted her head, confused about the trace of melancholy in his tone. He looked troubled tonight, as though a horde of questions were streaming across his brain and he had no idea which one to answer first. She could see the muscles of his face were strained in an attempt to keep whatever was brewing in his head hidden from her, perhaps even from himself. That rare bearing of vulnerability was there again; in the subtle twitch of his lips or the anxious flicks of fingers, and she wondered when she had learned to read him so well.

"Different sides," she repeated in a solemn tone. "You still consider yourself one of them, Draco?"

That was the question...

He swallowed away the clot of angst in his throat and bit down hard on his tongue. It was the question he'd been asking himself since he had been forced to run from Voldemort; for how could he truly be part of a side whose leader wanted him rotting in a shallow grave? The question had grown louder and dominant since Granger had started to invade his senses. Everything was monumentally fucked up, and she seemed to be the only steady and, dare he think it, good aspect of his pathetic pseudo-life as a prisoner. He may detest the way he reacted to her and yearned for her company, but there was no denying her presence soothed his fractured soul.

Salazar, forgive me for that.

But he couldn't help it. She was the first and only person to make him challenge the beliefs that had been engraved into his skull. How could he realistically follow the psychopathic ideals of that creature when he'd put a price on his head? How could he really believe that Muggle-borns were inferior when Granger was the brightest witch to stumble into Hogwarts for decades? How could he... How could he pretend that those prejudices still made sense, no matter how bad he wanted them to?

"Don't you?" he asked her absently, removing his bare arm from under the blanket to display his Mark. "Doesn't this make me one of them?"

Hermione frowned at the ugly and twisted blemish on his snowy skin and was surprised to find that it didn't bother her anymore; not on him anyway. Perhaps it was the slightly softer edge to his voice tonight, or the defeated slump of his shoulders, but she felt like pushing the boundaries with her struggling companion. She shuffled a little closer and carefully reached out to stroke her fingers across his still-healing flesh, and felt encouraged when he didn't immediately snatch his arm away from her.

"That Mark doesn't define you," she said gently, catching his confused eyes purposefully. "The same way my blood does not define me. You define who you are, Draco; your actions and your thoughts-

"And if I don't know who I am?" he questioned, his voice quivering slightly. "What if I am... lost?"

A scary bout of affection soared in her chest. "Then just do what feels right," she urged eagerly. "And the rest will follow."

Draco's brow creased and his distant stare fell to her calming fingers, still softly teasing the sensitive scar on his forearm. Just when Hermione thought he was beginning to absorb her words, he snorted and pulled away from her too-tempting caresses.

"You Gryffindors are so quick to seek the good in people; to assume people can change," he scorned with questionable mirth. "Some people are beyond change, Granger-

"Not you," she protested quickly. "Not you, Draco."

Doubt flickered in his ashy glare, but she could see he was determined to resist her tonight. "You should go," he told her, nodding his head towards the door.

She contemplated telling him that she wanted to stay; to surrender some of her pride and admit that she felt safe with him, and that she'd never slept better in her life than when she had been locked in his arms. But the prospect of him laughing in her face and rejecting her made the cold scratch across her skin, and she decided not to push her luck. Leaving his bed, she headed out of his room, but paused in the doorway.

"They're just labels, you know," she mumbled, keeping her back to him so he wouldn't see the first tear roll down her cheek. "Slytherin, Gryffindor. Pureblood and Mudblood. They don't dictate how we should live our lives."

Behind her, Draco fought hard to ignore the quickening thuds against his ribcage. As she disappeared, he glanced down at his Mark again, and could still feel the lingering tingles from her touch. He felt so alone at that moment; almost aware that the flimsy remains of his stubborn prejudices were starting to shatter and crumble under the weight of her words. He knew that her absence, even if it was only for a couple of days, would do damaging things to his muddled brain.

As if to confirm that he had finally yielded to the somewhat blissful beginnings of madness, he waited an hour before he crept soundlessly out of his room, and found himself outside of

her door. He toyed with the thought of murmuring her password and slipping inside, but he had no idea what he intended to do.

You pathetic twat...

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"Michael and I agreed on the eleventh of December for the Christmas ball," Hermione explained. "I know it's a little earlier than usual, but you mentioned that you might have some problems with the transportation for some students this year."

"Yes, that's true," McGonagall nodded. "I've decided it's wise to send small groups of students home for the Christmas holidays over a week or so, just in case. I'm not sure using the Hogwarts Express is a good idea either, but there are alternatives. The eleventh works well."

Hermione sighed and rubbed her eyes. "Do we have to continue with this charade, Professor?" she asked wearily. "It seems silly to have a ball when we are at War-

"You know I want to keep spirits up," the headmistress said evenly. "Hogwarts is acting as a haven for now, and I would like the students to feel safe here-

"But they-

"The eleventh is fine," the older witch hushed her. "Classes will finish on the tenth, and that provides myself and the other professors with two weeks to ensure everyone gets home safely. Are you staying here, Miss Granger?"

"Yes," she replied a little sadly. "I've told my parents that I'm staying at the Burrow. They still don't really know much about what's going on, and I'd like to keep it that way."

McGonagall creased her brow. "Have you given any more thought to that memory charm you discussed with me?"

"It's a last resort," Hermione told her professor quickly. "I don't want to use it unless I absolutely have to."

"Well, let's just hope that things don't come to that," she sighed. "On a more positive note, I've heard from Nymphadora, and she is expecting you when you are ready."

Hermione's stressed features instantly brightened with that information. "I can't wait to see her," she confessed. "Do you need anything else from me? Or can I-

"You are more than welcome to go now," McGonagall offered with a warm expression.
"Would you like me to get Professor Slughorn to escort you?"

"I'll be fine," she assured quickly, rising from her seat. "I need to head back to my dorm first anyway."

"Very well," the headmistress nodded. "I shall see you in Transfiguration tomorrow then. And I expect you to be at the Christmas ball, Hermione."

Great.

"Okay," she nodded reluctantly. "I'll see you tomorrow, Professor."

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Hermione anxiously drummed her fingernails against the wall next to Draco's door. She had been lingering in the same spot for close to five minutes now, wondering why she was so concerned about her parting words to her blond guest. Since their reasonably intense conversation, she had kept her distance, deciding that she had once again probably surrendered too much of her hope to him. But he had been so human...practically bleeding a level of vulnerability that had left her with trusting heart-flutters and a whole new batch of emotions that she didn't understand.

What if I am...lost?

She could have cried for that comment. His customary arrogance had momentarily melted away to show her that perhaps all of her efforts hadn't been in vain. Maybe she had nourished that seed of doubt in his mind enough that it was finally starting to blossom...Or maybe she was getting ahead of herself. His flash of decency had diminished so quickly, she was beginning to wonder if it had happened at all.

"Is there a bloody reason you're loitering outside my room?" his voice disrupted her thoughts, muffled through the tick wooden door.

Taking a deep breath, she pushed it open and found him, once again, casually sitting on his bed with one of her books in his lap. "Sorry," she mumbled. "Am I interrupting you, or-

"Yes, because I have so much on my plate," he said snidely, rolling his eyes. "What do you want, Granger?"

"I'm leaving for Hogsmeade now," she told him. "I have prepared enough food for you to last the two days-

"Sod off then," Draco spat coldly. "What were you expecting, Granger? A fucking farewell party?"

"I wasn't expecting you to be so angry," she murmured, taking some steps towards him. "And I certainly don't know why you're angry."

Neither did he.

"I'm not angry," he defended quickly. "I just don't understand why you found it necessary to barge in here again and bore me with your shit again. You told me you were leaving the other day."

"Yes, but I-

"Are you done?" he snapped. "I might have sod all to do, but I'd rather do it without you here."

Hermione sighed and turned to rummage in her charmed bag, in which she had stored all of the belongings she would need for her stay with Tonks. After a couple of shakes, she removed a small snow-globe containing a miniature replica of Hogwarts Castle inside, surrounded by fake snow. Draco arched an eyebrow as she rested the little object in her lap and stroked the glass thoughtfully before she caught his eyes.

"I've charmed this," she said slowly. "If you shake it five times, it will set off an alarm on my clock. I've extended the wards too, so if you try to leave, that'll also set the alarm off."

He shouldn't have really been impressed with Granger's magical abilities, but once again he found himself with an unwelcome sense of admiration for her. He scowled away any semblance of respect that could have betrayed him, and released a haughty scoff.

"I don't need-

"It's just a precaution," she stopped him. "In case you fall and break your leg, or something-

"Wishful thinking there, Granger?" he said with an easy smirk. "You haven't lined the dorm with traps, have you?"

Hermione's lips twitched into an almost-smile, and she edged forward to place the snow-globe next to Draco on the bed. The flash of humour that had suited his features so well faded away as he eyed her dainty item with distaste and pushed it away from him, and Hermione wanted very much at that moment to touch him. The temptation had hit her so quickly and suddenly that she flinched, clenching her hands into tight fists in an effort to ignore the tightening of her stomach.

"You know, Draco," she mumbled uneasily, frowning when her voice hitched. "I could make other arrangements. If you don't want me to go, you only have to say."

Don't go...

"If you have no more pointless toys in your little bag of tricks," Draco growled. "Then I see no reason for you to still be here, Granger."

She was certain he could see the disappointment behind her lashes, but it quickly turned into irritation. "Fine," she said brusquely. "If you insist on being so bloody cold all the time-

"I wasn't expecting you to be so angry," he repeated her earlier words condescendingly. "Was there something else you wanted, Granger?"

"No," she huffed, swiftly rising from the bed. "I just don't understand why you have to be such a bastard all the time-

"Hey!" he shouted, standing up and grabbing her wrist. "What the hell were you expecting, Granger? Some gratitude for this poxy ornament when you're leaving me alone in this sodding prison-

"I am learning to expect nothing from you!" she fired back, bringing her face close to his. "Just when I think you might have a shred of decency in you, you go right back to being a selfish prick!"

"What the hell are you talking-

"The other day," Hermione reminded him in a quieter voice. "When we were talking about sides-

"You read too much into things," he growled defensively. "Did you ever think that maybe this place is just screwing with my head a little-

"Not as much you'd like to think," she retorted, swallowing when she realised how close they were. "Why do you have to put on an act when I am the only person who sees you?"

He parted his lips but hesitated to say anything. There was something familiar in her golden eyes that reminded him of the day she had kissed him in her allergy-stricken haze. It was there between her anxious blinks; a spark of courage amongst a storm of nerves, and he felt her lean into him. He clenched his eyes shut and debated allowing it to happen; tempted to just to drop all his defences, and let her do whatever she wanted. This was his only opportunity to get a final dose of her; that forbidden fix, before she left him alone with his demons. They had grazed lips before, so what difference would one more taste make?

But when her warm breath ghosted across his chin, it dragged Draco back to reality, and he hastily shoved her away before she could touch him. He sneered viciously at her as she stumbled, but the venom in his features was forced and practised; simply a mask to cover how disorientated he felt. Granger, on the other hand, had no time to hide her humiliation and surprise; her movements jerky and her eyes misted with hurt. Draco was a heartbeat away from screaming at her to leave, but she whirled around and fled before he could even draw in a breath.

The slam of the door ricocheted around his lonely room like the clap of the Wizengamot's hammer. Thus was his sentence; two days with only his shadow for company and wondering

what he would do without her presence to chase away the damning solitude.

He should have let her kiss him...

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The cold air made her tear-sodden eyes sting.

Hermione's walk to Hogsmeade was a rushed one; plagued with the realisation that she was beginning to feel things for Draco that were far from normal.

The first time she had kissed him, she had been woozy and dazed; acting on a commanding impulse that had been too much for logic to repress. But her attempt to catch another taste just moments ago had been different. She had wanted to lean in and test her luck. It had been a conscious decision, that had resulted in her feeling rejected and completely mortified. The thoughts in her brain were muddled and mangled into a catastrophic mess, and she had no idea where to even begin dealing with them.

As The Three Broomsticks came into view, she sleeved away the evidence of her cries and tried to gather her composure. At least the excitement of seeing Tonks would drown some of her questions about Draco, and she managed a half-hearted smile as she entered the familiar inn. A few of the usual punters were scattered around, but she barely noticed them as she caught Madam Rosmerta's wise eyes. The older witch offered Hermione a knowing nod and discreetly passed her a key across the bar, and she wasted no time in rushing to see her friend.

"There she is!" Tonks beamed as Hermione barged into the room. "I thought you might have lost your way."

"It's so good to see you," she gushed, rushing in for a hug, but faltering when she spotted the slight swell of Tonks' stomach. "Oh, Tonks! You're starting to show!"

"Meet the bump," she said with playful grin. "And I'm warning you now that I am going through the craving stage, so if you see me huddled in the corner clutching a marmite and jam sandwich, just ignore me."

Hermione smiled, but couldn't quite manage the laugh that would have normally come so naturally with Tonks' humour. An image of her encounter with Draco, when his lips had been barely a breath away, danced across her lids and left her mouth dry and her heart heavy.

"Are you okay, Hermione?" Tonks asked. "You look a bit troubled."

"I'm fine," she lied quickly. "I just miss Harry and Ron."

"Of course you do," she nodded sympathetically, giving the younger witch a warm smile.
"But at least you have some friends here who you can talk to. How are things at Hogwarts?"

Hermione couldn't help but flinch.

Complicated...

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Draco scowled into the darkness.

It was late, and the glow of the moon didn't reach the windowless living room where the silence was ringing in his ears; a loud reminder that she wasn't here. Her scent was starting to fade, the dorm felt eerily hollow, and all he had done for the last several hours was stare at the fucking snow-globe.

All he had to do was rattle the ugly little thing, and she would return, and he could steal a taste of her, as he should have done before she'd left.

He lunged at the magical ornament and hurled it at the wall with a loud roar ripping his windpipe. He watched it shatter before he turned on his heel and marched towards Granger's room with elevated breaths. Mumbling her password, he instantly calmed as he greedily inhaled the air in the room.

Definitively Granger.

He studied his surroundings critically, expecting to find a huge collection of personal belongings, but except for a few photographs, the predicable red bedding, and an impressive collection of books, it was similar to his own room.

Draco eyed the photographs sourly, lingering on particular one of Granger with those feckless pricks she considered good company. He slapped all the frames down so he wouldn't have to look them and settled himself on her bed, absently running his fingertips over her covers. His lids felt heavy and he leaned back; lulled by how strong her scent was amongst her pillows and blankets. If he slept here, surrounded by soothing whispers of her presence, who would know?

"Sod it."

I am SO sorry that it has taken me almost two weeks to upload a chapter...I know I said that it might take longer, but I honestly didn't anticipate it would take this long. To make up for my tardiness, I will do my best to have another chapter up before the end of this week.

On a more cheerful note...Happy Harry Potter Week! The film's out on Friday and I think I can assume that we are all bloody ecstatic! My Slytherin shirt is ready for its trip to the cinema!

I know this chapter's a bit of a filler, but I am so excited to get started on the next one, so hopefully it will make up for it a little! Thanks so much for pushing me past the 500 review mark! I'm very grateful! Happy Birthday to Sorceress Black for a few days ago! And thanks again to everyone who reviewed; you've all been so lovely and I have no idea how to thank you. Thanks also to the people who have added me on facebook for being so great, and I adore our little chats and the fact that it has somehow turned into a support group!

Read and Review please! Let m know what you think, and I hope the characters are still believable...

Bex-chan

Crave

Chapter Notes

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

"No," Tonks shook her head. "The letter the boys sent Remus didn't explain much, but does it really matter? As long as it's gone."

"I guess not," Hermione agreed absently. "I just wish I could do a little more to help, and maybe if I knew how they'd destroyed the locket-

"You're doing fine," she assured her friend. "Things are going well; the Ministry is holding fine and another Horcrux has been destroyed. Don't get me wrong, we could be doing better-

"A lot better," she sighed, combing her curls out of her face with her fingers. "I should have gone with them-

"Your talents are best suited helping McGonagall at Hogwarts," Tonks said. "The boys are clearly doing okay, and the Order wanted one of you to stay where we could reach you-

"I know," she frowned tiredly, rubbing her eyes. "I just don't know how much use I am here. All I seem to be doing is organising Christmas balls and other Head stuff that is completely unnecessary."

"You can't blame McGonagall for trying keep spirits up," the older witch offered her a light shrug. "A Christmas ball could be good for you. You told me how much fun you had at the Yule Ball. Have any famous Bulgarians asked you to go this time?"

Hermione felt a smile crawl up her cheeks. "No, no Bulgarians," she mumbled. "Michael asked me if I would like to go with him."

"Who's Michael?"

"Michael Corner," she explained with a thoughtful click of her tongue. "But I think he only mentioned it because we're the Heads. I hope that's the only reason."

"Why?" Tonks asked, arching an eyebrow. "Is he a bit of an idiot?"

"No, he's nice enough," Hermione said. "I just-

"You like someone else."

Draco...

Hermione snapped her head up to study Tonks with wild eyes as panic seized her chest. "W-What?" she stuttered. "What do you mean?"

"Ron," the other witch grinned knowingly. "We all saw how friendly you were at the wedding, and you told me you liked him."

"Oh, Ron," Hermione breathed, taking a second for the relief to wash over her. "Y-yes, of course."

"Are you okay, Hermione?" Tonks asked with a concerned look.

"I'm fine," she muttered with uncertainty. "I'm not very good with unfamiliar beds, and I didn't get much sleep."

It wasn't technically a lie; she had certainly been awake for the majority of the night, but the scratchy mattress had had little to do with her inability to savour a dream. She'd stared expectantly at her clock for long and lonely hours, waiting and almost hoping that the alarm would sound. It had been...unnerving to lie in bed and know he wasn't in the next room, and her thoughts had centred around him from sunset to sunrise.

Tonks had just been on the other side of the door, but she had felt very much alone, and she couldn't help but wonder how Draco was dealing with a secluded night in the Gryffindor Tower. After the last incident, when she had stayed with Ginny and he'd tried to escape, she had expected...something, but clearly he was doing just fine if her clock was silent, and that bothered her a little.

When she had finished her classes earlier today, she had considered stopping by to check on Draco, but a convenient flashback of her attempt to kiss him had made her think twice. After some lunch and a slow walk around Hogsmeade - where the first hints of Christmas were starting to glow - she and Tonks had discussed the War in depth, along with many other topics, but her mind always snatched her back to Draco.

"Ron and I aren't together, you know," she told Tonks, somewhat defensively. "We're just friends."

The Auror frowned. "You don't like him, Hermione? I thought-

"I thought I did too," she admitted. "But I just think we're better as friends. I...don't like him the way I should."

Tonks chuckled and gave the younger witch an affectionate pat on the back. "No one's forcing you to fancy Ron, Hermione. If you don't, then you don't-

"Did you and Remus get a lot of...criticism when you first got together?" she questioned carefully. "Because of your age difference?"

"A lot of people were quick to judge," Tonks said thoughtfully. "Remus was more bothered by it than me, but yes, we had a bit of hassle from nosy sods who had nothing better to do with their time."

"Did you ever question your feelings?"

Tonks sighed and tapped her knee pensively. "I knew people wouldn't think it was normal," she confessed after a moment. "And it probably would have been easier to be with someone my own age, but you can't pick and choose things like that. It just happens."

Hermione tilted her head and gave her friend a gentle smile. "Was it worth it?" she asked. "The disapproving looks and-

"Bloody hell, yes!" she exclaimed. "Look, when there's a War going on and a baby on the way, the gossipy pricks of London are the least of your worries. Plus, if I had ignored my feelings for Remus, I would have regretted it for the rest of my life."

The brunette chewed her lower lip and hummed in consideration. "I guess time's too precious when the world could end tomorrow."

"That's a little pessimistic," Tonks gave her a friendly wink. "But yes, life's too short. Have you got your eye on someone, Hermione? Scared the boys won't approve?"

Her lip twitched. "Something like that."

"Anyone I know?"

Your cousin.

"No," she shook her head. "He's...just one of the boys in my year, but Harry and Ron aren't very fond of him." Not a lie.

"They'll get over it," Tonks assured her with a dismissive wave of her hand. "So, what's he like?"

Hermione paused to gather her wits and words. Tonks had that trustworthy manner about her that often coaxed secrets to tumble out of her mouth, and she needed to be careful with how much she divulged.

"He's an arsehole," she started bluntly, noting the amused flash in Tonks' eyes. "He's incorrigible, he's complicated, and he doesn't listen to a word I say-

"That's typical of most men-

"He's rude," Hermione continued with her rant. "He's arrogant, he's cruel and very cold-

"Also quite common-

"And sometimes he makes me so angry I could just throttle him or hex him into the next bloody continent!"

Tonks cleared her breath to smother a laugh, and studied her young companion with a wise smirk. "But?"

Hermione swallowed and felt tears scratch the backs of her eyes. "But he's beautiful," she whispered sadly. "Completely messed up and utterly awful, but there's something there which

is just beautiful to me. I can't really explain it."

It felt so weird and wonderful to say it aloud to another person, but of course she was censoring all the darker details that came with her Slytherin housemate. Her pseudo-big sister was eyeing her sympathetically, tucking some strands of violet hair behind her ear and looking very much pleased with Hermione's confession.

If only you knew...

"Do you know how he feels about you?"

Hermione frowned and bowed her head. "He tells me he hates me-

"Have you two ever kissed?" Tonks pushed boldly.

She felt a hot blush stain her cheeks. "A few times," she murmured quietly. "But they were... impulsive and they didn't last long-

"Who kissed who?"

"Well," Hermione hesitated. "I...initiated the first one, but he's kissed me twice since."

Tonks' playful smile stretched up her face. "Sounds promising to me."

"No," she said, wrinkling her nose with disappointment. "It's more complicated than that. He shoved me away the last time I tried, and I don't even know if I like him really. There's just... something there that..."

She trailed off, and Tonks gave her a reassuring nod. "Go on," she urged. "You know you can tell me anything."

"Something...that hurts," she finished, her voice hitching. "He has this...this shield up, and I don't think I can get through to him. I'm trying, but every time I think I'm getting somewhere he just ruins it, and I don't know if I have the energy to do it anymore-

"Hermione-

"I keep seeing these glimpses of a decent person," she carried on, a tear skimming down her cheek. "And I think that's what I'm...attracted to, but I-

"Hermione," Tonks interrupted again. "It's okay. He just sounds a little confused. He'll come round."

"But what if-

"Just do what feels right, sweetheart," she advised slowly, and Hermione recalled saying some very similar words to Draco. "Would you like some tea before bed?"

"Could I have a hot chocolate instead, please?"

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Draco was sat in a crumpled heap on the cold floorboards, absently fiddling with the remains of Granger's snow-globe. He caught a shard awkwardly, and he hissed the air through his teeth as his finger wept a ruby teardrop. He eyed his blood critically, and a cold shiver ran up his spine as he recalled the day in the bathroom when there had been so much more blood, and not just his.

Granger's was exactly the same.

That had been a damning realisation, and he blamed that for every predicament that had followed, and the epiphanies that had struck him in her absence. The crippling fact of the matter was, Granger had every trait that he admired; intelligence, wit, strength, and then something that he couldn't put his finger on. She was simply...good.

If I was a Pureblood with exactly the same personality, would you be so quick to discard what happened this morning?

His brain had been flooded with her words since she'd left; every sentence that had ever made him doubt his prejudices had reverberated in his skull, but he was holding firmly onto the flimsy whispers of his family's ways. What had once felt so obvious and right now felt fickle and faint. He'd like to blame it all on her, but he had come to acknowledge there must have been cracks in his beliefs, but it didn't make it any easier.

You're human, Draco, and you've made mistakes, but I can't hate you for that.

He clenched his eyes shut. Mistakes...Astronomy Tower. Surely, if he'd been so certain that Voldemort and his principles were correct, that task would have been an easy thing to do. Maybe he'd started to doubt it all then...

They're just labels, you know. Slytherin, Gryffindor. Pureblood and Mudblood. They don't dictate how we should live our lives.

It was easy for her to say that. There were expectations that came with his infamous surname, and she couldn't begin to imagine the pressure he'd been under. He was certain that Potter had told her all about his breakdown in the toilets last term, but that had been a sliver of his turmoil. There had been times when he'd cast every silencing charm he knew and just screamed until his lungs had torn. Blaise and Pansy had seen some of his weaker moments, but nobody had been there to witness his real outbursts of chaos. Even before he'd been given his task, Draco had sometimes found himself staring at his reflection and wondering if a lifestyle full of hatred was all too much for him.

Why do you have to put on an act when I am the only person who sees you?

Because if he didn't, then what else was there? He'd been stripped of his wealth, his magic, his status. If he abandoned what he had been designed to become, there was nothing left.

Some people are beyond change, Granger-

Not you...

"Fucking hell," he groaned to himself, dropping his face into his palms.

You asked me to stay. I...I wanted to stay.

He'd never kissed someone like that before; like a rebellious burst that had made him feel loose and unchained. He'd been aware of who he was kissing and that he shouldn't have been touching her at all, but, at the moment, he couldn't have given a shit. On closer inspection, he didn't really give a shit now. There was no one here to scold him for thinking for himself, and doing what felt...

Just do what feels right.

Too dangerous, but ultimately too tempting.

The pathetic truth was he missed her, and not just as a distraction; he missed her as a person. Her voice, her little quirks, her fire...just everything. She would be back tomorrow, although he had no idea what time. It could be fairly early in the morning for all he knew, so his decision to sleep in her bed again was a rather risky one, and another damaging blow to his pride.

But it felt right.

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Tonks had left at eight, and Hermione had managed to get to the school before the weekend-lazy students had started to rouse and roam. She was so nervous she had worried her lower lip until it had bled, which had meant a slight detour at the prefects bathroom to heal the cut. Perhaps she was stalling, but she spent a good few minutes scrutinizing her reflection and trying to concoct a strategy to deal with Draco after her embarrassing behaviour two days ago.

Deciding that she had put it off for long enough, she headed to her dorm, hesitating to take a deep breath before she muttered the appropriate password. She slipped inside, intending to be

as quiet as possible, but a rush of wind slammed the door shut behind her.

Bugger...

She froze as she heard shuffling from the other side of the dorm, but it sounded misplaced, almost like it was coming from her room. No sooner had the thought crossed her mind that her door was flung open to release a very intense-looking Slytherin. Draco had clearly just woken up; his hair roguishly mussed, and he was clad in just a vest and loose pyjama bottoms, but it was the purposeful and slightly wild glint in his eyes that made her heart pause.

He lingered in the doorframe for a moment, staring hard at her like he wasn't sure she was there at all. Hermione shook away her trance and the anger hit her, just as he began to march towards her with bold strides.

"You were in MY room?"

"Yes," he spat, quickening his steps and slicing the distance between them.

"How the hell did you-

Draco cut her off; grabbing her face and snatching her lips with a desperate kiss. He sighed shakily into her mouth, uncaring that she felt stiff and unresponsive against him and just acting on instinct. He pulled away but kept her close, relishing her little pants tickling his chin. He clenched his jaw and kept his eyes closed, readying himself for her rejection and outrage, but she tilted her head to latch back onto him.

Her gesture was timid but it was enough for him, and he shoved her roughly against the door, swallowing her gasp. His movements were frantic and almost feral as he sucked her in and took greedy nips at her winter-wet lips. She kept up with him, licking and pecking back with dissipating nerves; clutching onto his arms with trembling fingers. His hands drifted up her cheekbones and into her coffee-curls, coaxing a moan from her that made his hips twitch.

He pressed himself against her as much as he could, dragging his fingertips down her neck, shoulders and ribs to settle possessively at her sides. He groaned as she combed her nails through his hair, catching a sensitive spot at his spine that made him shiver in a wonderful way. Their hot breaths clashed between kisses and Draco decided he needed more; craved it actually.

He tore his mouth away and moved to her throat, pleasantly surprised when she lolled her head back and sighed in apparent bliss. Her grip on his biceps tightened as he found a receptive spot near her ear that made her blood rush, and her pulse felt tantalising under his tongue.

"Tell me to stop," he mumbled against her skin, barely audible.

Hermione swallowed hard but didn't utter a word to break their contact; too lost in the pace and passion that was completely foreign to her. She was vaguely aware that he was pushing away her robes, but the thought of stopping was a distant whisper at the back of her skull.

She heard them thud to the floor just as he lifted his head to steal her lips again, his warm and eager palms sliding under her jumper. Her hands dropped to rest against his chest, and she scratched curiously at his collarbone and neck.

"Tell me to stop," he hissed out, more urgently this time, nipping at her jaw.

His hands grazed upwards until his thumbs stroked the underside of her cotton-covered breasts. Her fingernails were raking down his stomach, and he felt himself harden as she went lower. That was when reality struck him.

"TELL ME TO STOP!" he screamed, ripping himself away from her so frantically he stumbled to the floor a few feet away.

Hermione felt all her limbs go weak, and she slid gracelessly down the door, studying Draco intently and anxiously. He looked broken and battered, like all his energy was being used to refrain from touching her. He slowly raised his head and they locked eyes; both sets shocked and wide.

"Why didn't you tell me to stop?" he growled accusingly. "Are you fucking stupid, Granger? Do you think this is normal?"

She was shaking. "I don't-

"Do you have any idea what this place is doing to me?" he asked coldly. "What you are doing to me?"

"Draco, please-

"LOOK AT ME!" he yelled. "I do NOT do shit like this! That desperate for a quick fuck that I would touch the Mudblood virgin-

"Don't you dare call me that!" she warned angrily.

"Which one?" he fired back. "You're telling me someone has actually crawled between your thighs?" Hermione cringed but remained silent, and Draco felt the jealousy stab his stomach painfully. "Let me guess," he sneered darkly. "Weasley?"

"That's none of your business-

"IT IS NOW!"

"Why?" she retorted bravely, squaring her shoulders. "You've made it quite clear that this... mistake was just an attempt to land a 'quick fuck!'"

He faltered at her brazen language but kept his scowl firm. "What the hell were you expecting, Granger? All your pro-Mudblood shit to sink in?"

"I know some of it has," she said steadily. "You know it too-

"Why the fuck should I have to change to appease you-

"It's not about changing yourself!" she argued loudly, too enraged to cry. "It's about finding yourself!"

"Don't waste your Gryffindor crap on me-

"Have you ever been happy, Draco?" she asked him hopefully, carefully shifting a little closer to him. "Have you ever really felt content with your life, or done anything that felt right to you?"

He hesitated, shuffling through his fractured memories and trying to find one with her requirements. The only time he could ever recall feeling a sense of peace was the night she had slept in his lap, and perhaps just now when he had been gorging on her taste, but before that...only darkness. Just a hatred for her kind that had engulfed any chance of contentment.

"Look me in the eye," she said softly, coming to sit at his side. "And tell me that you still completely believe that Muggle-borns are inferior; that I am disgusting."

He parted his lips to indulge in a vile and scornful rant, but he couldn't do it. Salazar knew he wanted to, but she looked too perfect then for him to even pretend she was filthy; lips slightly swollen and hair deliciously tousled.

No, he couldn't.

"Leave me alone," he murmured instead, hoping he sounded somewhere near threatening although he doubted it. She leaned in to rest her palm against his shoulder, and the tingle was too reminiscent for him. "Don't touch me."

She withdrew her hand reluctantly. "D-do you...like kissing me, Draco?" she stuttered uneasily.

Yes...

"Ask me if I like betraying my family," he shot back harshly. "Ask me if I would be doing this if I wasn't in this hell-

"I like kissing you," she confessed in a rushed whisper. "But I...I am getting so tired of trying to convince you that I am not someone you should hate-

"What do you want from me, Granger?" he asked.

"Nothing more than you can give," she told him gently. "But I want you to stop pretending and do what feels right for you for once-

"How the fuck would you know what feels right for me?" he challenged. "You think a few stupid kisses are going to erase what I think about you and your kind?"

She released a sad breath. "You and I-

"You and I are nothing!" he protested heatedly. "I told you! I clearly need a shag bad enough that I would-

"Lower yourself to touch a Mudblood," she finished for him. "You know, you flinch when you say it now."

He faltered. "No, I do not-

"Yes you do."

Something about the conviction in her tone stirred that heat in his gut again, and before he could stop himself, he had practically pounced on her and was kissing her again. The unsatisfied aftershocks of the last round were raw and consuming, but he managed to stop himself before he got carried away this time. He released her with a loud groan, resting his forehead against hers and drawing in loud and ragged breaths as he fought his cravings. He'd gone too far.

Hermione studied his agitated expression and felt her chest ache. She willed herself to be patient and understanding, but she wondered how much more she could give him. Gulping back her nerves, she decided she would give him one final opportunity to redeem this situation, even if it meant sacrificing another piece of her waning dignity for the sake of a Death Eater. Merlin, help her.

"Draco," she murmured breathlessly. "Look at me." His eyes snapped open and regarded her wearily as she placed her soothing palm against his cheek. "It's okay," she told him. "I know this is-

"You don't have a fucking clue," he ground out, yanking away from her again, and scrambling to his feet. "You can't even begin to comprehend what this place is doing to my head!"

"Draco-

"I am telling you now, Granger, that nothing like this will ever happen again," he promised, and his words were so measured and crisp that she found herself believing them. "We are done here-

"Yes we are," she replied, rising to stand and straightening her back defiantly. She'd reached her limit. "I refuse to do this anymore! I do not deserve to be treated like this by you! Do what the hell you want, because I don't give a shit!"

"Finally!" he exclaimed. "She gets it! Well, I'm glad you eventually decided see some sense. Accept this for what it is, Granger; me wanting a convenient fuck, and you being the only option-

"Get out of my face!" she shouted, removing her wand from her back pocket. She could feel her eyes watering, and she refused to let him see her crumble. "Now!"

He held his ground for a few moments; his incensed glare shifting between her face and her wand before he spun on his heel and disappeared into his room. The witch was quaking violently and her chest heaving as she tried to gather some semblance of control, but it was impossible. She managed to choke out a quick silencing charm before she collapsed to the

floor and coughed up a string of heart-hurting sobs. She passed the stage where her lungs burned but couldn't stop despite the physical pain searing through her chest.

It shouldn't have killed her; she had, after all, experienced his cruel attitude on so many occasions, but that kiss...

It had been deceptive, leading her into a false sense of promise that had convinced her to bare her soul to him, and he had just spat on it. She felt cheated and used, and the worst thing was, she had no idea at what point she would have told him to stop. If she would have told him to stop.

Screw that Gryffindor tenacity; she gave up.

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I know the word count is lower than normal, but I try to do about 12 pages, and this is twelve pages! I think the amount of dialogue affected it, but I hope that this chapter is still okay? And can I get a little love for updating in four days, and on the day of The Deathly Hallows release! I'm so excited! Ahhhhh! Happy Harry Potter Release Date, people! But yes, I do apologise profusely that this is shorter than my usual chapters, but it kinda needed to end there... Things shall be...picking up the pace from this point.

Thanks so much for your wonderful reviews! They really are so wonderful to read and I can only promise that I will update as quickly as possible and continue praising your lovely comments!

Happy Birthday to SlytherinTemptation for yesterday! And I hope you all enjoy the film! I realise this week will be a busy one for us Harry Potter fans, but please let me know how you felt about the chapter as I am very curious. Apologies again for the shortness. Right, it's 5a.m. here and I need to be up at nine...Lend me your thoughts!

Bex-chan

Glass

Chapter Notes

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

The final days of November were misty and bitter, and December crept in before she'd even noticed.

The nights were the kind that made you long for company; cold and eerily silent as nature slowly died by the frost. The winds had faded, and for that she was grateful, but Oh God the silence was haunting.

She was doing everything possible to keep busy, spending less time in her quarters, and flitting between the library and organising the ball with Michael and the Prefects. The dorm had become so suffocating after her fight with Draco, and she didn't dare spend more than a few moments in his presence. Despite the fact that their stormy altercation had happened just over two weeks ago, she still felt uneasy. Anything more than a necessary moment, and her body would start to react; heat crawling into her cheeks and pixies fluttering in her stomach.

Draco, on the other hand, seemed to seek her out whenever he could, randomly emerging from his room when she was in the kitchen or sitting area. In the last fortnight, they had crossed paths no less than ten times, and it was all due to his efforts, much to her confusion. She always made a quick exit and tried to avoid his eyes, fearing they would drag her in, but she had yielded and caught them once or twice. Her breath would hitch and her mouth would go dry, but she always managed to keep her expression indifferent as she ducked into her room, with his stare always boring into her back.

In the days since their kiss-come-argument, Draco had seemed to deteriorate; his features becoming worn and defeated. She ached to interact with him, if only to chase away some of the pain etched onto his face, but she was determined to keep a healthy distance from him. She still cooked the meals, of course, but that was the extent of her Malfoy-related activities, even if she was yearning to do more.

Despite her best efforts not to, she still cared.

But distractions were plenty with Michael requiring her help for the Ball and the end of term arrangements, and Ginny had successfully managed to convince her to go dress-shopping. The students had been given today, Sunday, to visit Hogsmeade and buy their formal outfits; and Hermione had hoped that the village's festive atmosphere would warm her mood.

She had always loved Christmas, but the cheer seemed forced and awkward this year, and she was very much aware that she wouldn't be spending it with Harry and Ron or her family. The risks were simply too high. Even the snow, which she adored with the appetite of a toddler, seemed to be in hiding, and not a flake had fallen this winter.

There was still time though...

"What do you think?" Ginny asked as she pulled back the dressing-room curtain. Hermione raised her head and felt a genuine smile tug at her lips. Her beautiful friend had selected a charming black dress with an intricate bead pattern across the bust and seams, and it suited her perfectly. "Well?" she prompted eagerly, flicking her fiery hair over her shoulder. "Is it okay?"

"You look stunning," Hermione told her affectionately. "Really, Gin. Didn't you like it in the mirror?"

"The mirrors are charmed to bullshit that every dress looks good," the younger witch scoffed. "Are you sure you're not just being polite?"

"No," she shook her head. "That's the one, Gin. You look wonderful."

She grinned and smoothed down the fabric. "Thank you," she said. "Is it good enough that I should take some photographs for when Harry gets back?"

If he gets back...

"Definitely," she nodded instead, deciding that dampening the mood was unnecessary. "He would stutter like a fool if he saw you in that dress, although I'm sure Neville will do the same."

"No," Ginny chuckled. "Neville's puppy-dog eyes have been steering towards Hannah Abbott recently."

"Really? Then why didn't he ask her to go?"

"You know how shy he gets," she spoke of him fondly. "Plus, I got in there before he really had a chance to ask anyone. I wanted a date who I trusted; something you should have done, Hermione."

"Michael is innocent enough-

"He has a soft spot for you," Ginny interrupted with a disapproving tone. "I know he and Ron weren't close, but still; he should know better-

"Ron and I were never official," she reminded the redhead. "And Michael is just a friend, Ginny-

"Well if he tries anything, he'll be shitting slugs for a week."

Hermione couldn't help but laugh, and it felt good. "Your brother is fond of slug-hexes too."

"Even after it backfired?" Ginny smirked, cocking an amused eyebrow. "Okay, well that's my dress sorted. Which one do you like?"

"I have dresses-

"But you should get a new one," she insisted, gesturing to the variety of gowns in Gladrags Wizardwear. "That navy one would suit you-

"I don't see the point in buying a dress for a ball I don't even want to go to," Hermione argued, although the dress held her attention for a moment. "And it's not like I want to impress my date-

"Don't do it for him, do it for yourself," Ginny told her as she moved to pluck the gown from the rail. "This colour is lovely, and it doesn't have any of the frilly stuff you hate."

Hermione hesitated and reached out to finger the chiffon gown; simple compared to the other dresses decorating the shop, but she had always followed the less-is-more principle. "It's very beautiful," she mumbled thoughtfully. "But I-

"Just try it on."

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The Head Girl headed back to her chambers with some Christmas gifts and the new dress in hand. Ginny's incorrigible and convincing behaviour was to blame, but Hermione would admit that she felt a little more relaxed after some shopping and a Butterbeer in the freshly-decorated pub, but it dissipated as she came to stand in front of her door.

Taking a deep breath, as she always did, she shoved it open and cursed herself yet again for forgetting her charmed bag as she struggled with her purchases. Her plan to make her entrance quiet and quick was hopeless when she stumbled, and some of her bags went flying across the floorboards.

"Bugger," she murmured, kneeling down to collect them.

She grabbed the final item just as she heard Draco's door open, and she kept her eyes low as he strode into the sitting area. The air in the room instantly shifted and grew heavier, and she swallowed back some nerves as she rose to her feet and rolled her shoulders.

"What's that for?" he questioned critically, gesturing to her dress in the transparent cover.

He was partially blocking her way, and the answer slipped out of her mouth before she could catch it. "Christmas Ball," she mumbled quickly, manoeuvring awkwardly around the sofas, but he moved into her path anyway; his eyes lingering on her dress. "Get out of my way please-

"You've been avoiding me," he accused in a scratchy voice. "Why?"

Hermione averted her gaze. "You know why, Draco," she snapped. "Move out my way-

"Exactly how long you do you intend to keep up this silent treatment?" he continued irately. "It's starting to piss me off-

"I won't ask you again," she said between tense lips, clumsily rummaging in her pocket for her wand. "Get out of my way, or I'll make you."

He regarded her with conflicting eyes, biting the inside of his mouth with irritation, before he stepped to the side with a resigned breath. His balled fists were shaking at his sides as she brushed past him, and she tried desperately to ignore the breeze of his comforting scent. His breath stroked across the shell of her ear, but she managed to stifle the shiver that threatened to betray her weakness.

"We have argued before, Granger," he said before she could reach the door, his voice almost dejected. "Why are you so...affected this time?"

She halted her steps and felt the ire rise in her chest. "You asked me to leave you alone," she responded coldly. "And that's what I'm doing-

"But I-

"You made this bed, Draco," she told him stiffly, determined not to get dragged into an argument. "So lie in it."

Fumbling with her wand, she cast a quick Muffliato to whisper her recently-changed password; Crookshanks. She doubted Draco would know the name of her beloved pet, and knew now to be careful when going into her room. She thought she heard him whisper something as she went inside, but she refused to dwell on it.

"Wait," Draco murmured, but she slammed the door anyway.

He recalled that fickle phrase his mother had used when he'd first started to attend Hogwarts and he'd denied he would miss the Manor; you don't realise what you've got until it's gone. After a fortnight with only a handful of sentences exchanged, he was beginning to regret the way he had handled their tempestuous row, and she was apparently adamant to not even look at him. It was beginning to slowly erode his resolve to pretend it wasn't bothering him, but the pride-damning truth was he pined for something from her.

A passionate fight, an educated discussion...a kiss.

Anything.

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Wednesday had the pace of a limp-limbed sloth.

Hermione's classes had droned by, and she had spent the remainder of her afternoon helping to finalise the decorations for the Great Hall. She had managed to tear away from the overly-enthusiastic Prefects and steal a few hours in the Library, but her research on Horcruxes had been frustratingly unproductive. It was around ten in the evening when she decided to yield to her heavy lids and return to her dorm, hoping that Draco wasn't loitering in the sitting area.

She managed to sneak soundlessly inside and grab a glass of water, but a knock at the main door startled her. The glass shattered at her feet and she cursed under her breath, casting a wary look at Draco's room.

"Are you okay in there, Hermione?" Michael's voice called from outside, and she rolled her eyes. "Did I hear-

"I'm fine," she bit back. "What do you want, Michael?"

"Just a quick word-

"I'm just about to go to bed," she told him, sidestepping the shards carefully. "We can discuss it tomorrow-

"It won't take a moment," he insisted. "Come on, Hermione, it's only ten."

The witch exhaled and massaged her forehead, turning to give Draco's door a sceptical glance. Surely he knew better than to reveal himself when she had a guest, but he was unpredictable at the best of times. Deciding it was best to get rid of Michael as quickly as possible, she transfigured her clothes into pyjamas and kicked off her shoes, leaving her bag and wand in the kitchenette before she made to answer the door.

"Can I come in?" the Head Boy asked once she's opened it a crack.

"Not right now," she shook her head, too tired to even invent an excuse. "What do you need?"

"Well, I was just wondering what the arrangements are for Friday?"

"You know what's happening," she frowned. "I sent you all the details."

"I meant with us," he clarified, rubbing the back of his neck. "Am I picking you up from here? Or do you-

"Oh that," she mumbled, trying to remain patient. It wasn't his fault that she'd been rather exasperated recently. "No, that's fine, Michael. We all agreed to meet outside the Great Hall, so we'll just do that."

"Okay," he nodded, barely concealing his disappointment. "Are you sure you don't want to meet up beforehand?"

"No, we're going to be rushed as it is, so it's just easier to meet there," she explained, pretending to stifle a yawn. "Was there something else? I'm quite knackered."

"Um, no," he shrugged in defeat. "That was all. I'll see you tomorrow then."

"Good night," Hermione offered, promptly closing the door and listening to Michael's footsteps echo down the corridor. She stilled her breaths when she felt that familiar tingle across her shoulders and back, and she knew her Slytherin housemate was behind her. "What are you playing at?" she questioned, whipping around and making the mistake of catching his eyes. "Are you trying to get yourself caught?"

Draco's snowy features were creased into a pained scowl that made her falter. He looked... betrayed. "You said that there was nothing going on between you and Corner," he growled darkly, and her chest constricted.

Hermione made to move forward, but he predictably obstructed the route to her room. "There's not," she murmured hesitantly. "Move, Draco-

"Clearly there's enough going on that you would go to the ball with him," he continued in a hoarse voice, slowly stalking towards her. "I didn't peg you for a liar, Granger-

"I'm not lying," she argued, cringing when she remembered that she'd left her wand on the kitchen counter. "Let me get to my room-

"He likes you, Granger," he told her. "I can tell-

"You're being ridiculous," she scolded, unnerved by his stoic tone. "Move out of the-

"Make me," he challenged. "I'm not done talking about that prick."

Deciding the situation may require some magical assistance before she got too absorbed, her eyes flickered over to her discarded wand, and she lunged for it. She yelped as she slipped on the water she had spilled before; falling hard against the floorboards and smacking her hand into the crushed glass.

Hermione whined as the pain shot from her palm to her wrist, and up the rest of her arm. She glanced down and cringed when she saw the Galleon-sized shard stabbing her hand and the warm blood spilling between her fingers. She pulled herself up to lean against the cupboards, and before she could really understand it, Draco was kneeling next to her; his face calculating and composed, but with an edge that could have been misconstrued as concern.

"Pass me your hand," he instructed steadily. "I need to get the glass out-

"No, it's fine," she hissed through the pain. "Just get my wand-

"I can't touch your wand," he reminded the witch. "Let me take it out and you can heal it when you've calmed down-

"Help me get up-

"Stay still," he told her sternly. "Come on, Granger. Pass me your hand and I'll make it quick-

"Ow, ow, ow," she breathed as he gently cupped her wrist and took a closer look at the damage. His unexpected tenderness and poise calmed her, and her confused gaze studied his pensive and softer expression before she exhaled in submission. "Okay," she sighed. "I'm ready."

Hermione choked on a gasp as he fingered the glass and tried to pluck it from her flesh. "It hurts," she blurted before she could stop herself, swallowing a whimper. "Draco-

"It's alright," he hushed her, giving the wedge a final tug that yanked it loose. "There; it's done."

Draco watched the relief swim across her honey-soft features and felt something in his chest twinge. Her blood was streaked across his fingers and tucked beneath his nails, and while he was aware that it should have repulsed him, it didn't. His thumb absently rubbed invisible circles over her pulse-point as she took some deep breaths to help the sting in her palm subside. The inevitable tense silence slotted between them, and he watched her expectantly, waiting for her to say something.

"Accio wand," she whispered, snapping her attention away from him.

Draco reluctantly released her wrist as she began to repair the messy cut, but he remained crouched at her side. Granger hadn't allowed him within an inch of her, and he took advantage of the opportunity to relish their proximity before she reverted back to her plan to avoid him. He dampened his lips with a serpentine flick of his tongue and forced himself to be patient, watching her with measuring eyes and realising he would have to be tactical if he wanted to end this well.

"I could have done that without you," she told him firmly, apparently satisfied with her healing charms.

"Perhaps," he conceded with a lowered brow. "I have-

"This doesn't change anything," she rushed out, leaning away and firing him a warning look. "I am still angry at you-

"Is that why you're going to the Ball with bloody Corner?" he growled, the jealousy rich in his voice, much to his disdain. "To prove a point?"

"I have nothing to prove to you!" she fired back, pulling herself up to stand and heading straight for her room. "You made your opinion of me clear-

"Don't run away from me, Granger!" he shouted after her. "Why the hell is this time so sodding different?"

"You know why!" she yelled; cheeks cherry-flushed and eyes starting to water. "I am tired of you tossing me aside and screwing with my head! I made how I feel about you obvious and you just-

"How you feel about me?" he repeated, his heart hammering under his ribs. "What are you-

"It doesn't matter anymore," she interjected hastily, scolding herself for letting that slip out. "You wanted nothing from me, so that's what you can have-

"Granger, wait!" he barked, but the only response he got was the shrill slam of the door. "For fuck's sake," he hissed into the empty space, making his way towards the bathroom to wash away the blood staining his fingertips.

He didn't bother to scrutinise it for indications of Mud this time; he knew it was just like his.

He hunched over the sink and flicked on the tap, eyeing the silky-red liquid swirl around the basin until it faded to a soft pink. Grinding his teeth and clenching the porcelain, he braced himself as a painful throb overtook his chest. This separation she was enforcing was weighing him down, and after two weeks, he was starting to forget how she felt; how she tasted.

He couldn't realistically blame her for acting like she was, but the prospect of her giving up on whatever it was between them made him feel physically sick. It had been fine toying with her emotions when there was a dormant promise that she would persevere regardless, but he knew her stubborn behaviour well enough to recognise that this time was different.

He had pushed her too far, and was paying the price.

It pained him to acknowledge it, but he wanted her, and the intensity and rawness of it overpowered the voice in his head telling him it was wrong. He could feel the need to act on his longing for her brewing inside his gut, and he was very much aware that something would happen soon.

He was beginnin to get restless.

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Hermione shrugged at her reflection and dabbed a final layer of balm across her lips.

The midnight-blue gown seemed wasted when she didn't feel an inkling of anticipation for the Ball, but she had experimented with some light make-up to pass the time. Ginny had given her some spray to calm her curls, similar to the product she had used for the Yule Ball, but she had left her locks loose this time. She had no doubt that on any other night, she would feel rather elegant and excited, but she couldn't shift the melancholic cloud that had misted her brain since Wednesday.

Draco's considerate and placid behaviour when she had injured her hand had completely bewildered her. She could have so easily abandoned her vow to stay from him at that moment, but she had to remain logical. A flashback of his words 'convenient fuck' had sobered her, but she had pondered about delicate handling of her ever since. He'd treated her like fragile glass, and she had been fascinated by uncharacteristically considerate nature. Perhaps the distance was having an effect on him...

She shook her head to banish her wistful thoughts, and decided that she had delayed heading down to the Great Hall long enough. She dropped her wand into her charmed bag and left her room, freezing in the doorway when she spotted the solitary figure sat on one of the sofas.

Draco's head was bowed and his shoulders slumped in defeat as he absently drummed his fingernails against his knee. She suddenly felt conscious of her appearance, despite her earlier indifference, and she ran her hands over the soft fabric as her stomach did a nervous flip. He must have heard the quiet rustle of her dress, as his head snapped up, and his winter-sky eyes widened and began to drink her in; warmth rushing to her cheeks as he studied her with uninhibited interest.

Draco felt his pulse quicken as he absorbed her, and his plan to play this situation skilfully and tamely was quickly discarded. She was simply too appealing for him to remain prudent, and he couldn't let her leave here knowing that she would be in the presence of that Ravenclaw fucktard; innocent intentions or not.

"What are you doing in here?" she asked, severing his trance. "I-

"Don't go with him," he blurted, and he genuinely didn't care if he sounded pathetic. "Don't go with him, Granger."

Hermione pursed her lips. "You have no say in this-

"Yes I do," he argued, rising from his seat. "Stay here-

"Why should I?"

"BECAUSE I CAN'T STAND IT!" he screamed; every muscle in his body seizing up. "I can't...I can't do it! Don't ask me to do this!"

"I'm not asking you to do anything!" she countered, hoping the emotion wasn't too strong in her voice. "Michael is just a friend! And even if he wasn't, it has nothing to do with you-

"Then make it something to do with me!" he shouted, marching towards her. "Make it my business-

"Don't come near me," she warned, but it was weak. "Please, Draco-

"Stay," he requested again, moving close enough that his breath roused goosebumps across her collarbone. "Stay," he repeated, softer this time. She closed her eyes and he tried to lean in and kiss her, convinced that he had won this fight, but she desperately pushed him away before he could catch her mouth. "Granger-

"No!" Hermione protested, shaking her head. "I gave you so many chances, Draco! And you always do the same thing! I can deal with the Mudblood comments, but I will not let you mess with my heart! You hurt me!"

The wave of guilt that hit him was crippling. "I won't-

"Yes you will!" she yelled, pointing a trembling finger at him. "I am not for you to use and then chuck away!"

He tried to near her again but she sidestepped him before he could reach her. "Granger-

"Tell me I wouldn't be a convenient fuck!" she spat the words like they burned her tongue. "SAY IT!"

He flinched but looked her dead in the eye. "You are anything but convenient, Granger," he told her honestly. "But I know you want me to...to touch you-

"Stop it," she mumbled breathlessly, rubbing away a tell-tale tear. "That's enough-

"I know you want to touch me too," Draco continued boldly, stepping into her space again and grasping her shoulders. "You told me-

"I know what I said," she hushed him, making no valid effort to break out of his hold this time. "But you said-

"Fuck what I said," he growled huskily, tilting his head. "If you tell me not to kiss you, I won't."

The limits of his patience were judged by milliseconds as her eyes darted over his face. She looked petrified, but something that resembled acceptance graced her features as the third second ticked by, and he decided that he'd waited twenty days too long to waste another moment.

Draco kissed her roughly; unable to hold back and ready to drown in her if she'd let him. Hermione responded almost immediately, parting her lips so he could lick and suck at her with blissful ease. He could feel her nervous heartbeats against his chest as she clutched his face; her fingernails drawing teasing patterns by his ears and down his neck. Grabbing her hips tight, he rammed her back into the nearest wall and felt her moan vibrate at the back of his mouth. It trickled down his spine and stirred that dangerous twitch between his hips, and he kissed her harder.

Sweet, wet sounds mingled between them as they became more frantic, and Draco dragged his teeth across her bottom lip, and down her chin to land on her throat. Her pulse thrummed against his tongue as her dreamy little sighs ghosted across his crown, and he nibbled greedily at her flesh.

Whether he liked it or not, this tension and need had been bubbling within him for weeks, and he couldn't help but slide his palm across her stomach, and then lower. He knew he was

rushing it, but after countless mornings of shower-inspired fantasies, he couldn't help but slip his anxious hand between her thighs.

"Stop," Hermione panted, digging her nails into his shoulders. "I need to go-

"No," he groaned against her skin. "Granger-

"It's too fast," she insisted, and he reluctantly pulled himself away from her. "I-I have to go to the ball-

"No!" he said more forcefully, trying to get her to meet his hazy eyes. "I know you want this-

"I need to think," she murmured, moving away from him and heading for the door. "You... you could just be doing all this to-

"I'm not!" he argued, feeling the anger rise in his voice. "Don't you dare walk out on this, Granger!"

"I...I just can't," she stuttered, scrambling to leave the room.

On the other side of the door, Hermione took a long minute to gather her composure and fix her ruffled appearance with some help from her wand. Hot tears swelled behind her eyes as her chest continued to heave, and her body failed to cease shaking.

Oh God, oh God, oh God...

She started for the Great Hall on quaking legs, using the walls to help her move down the corridors. She was late, and she could hear the music echoing amongst the castle's ancient acoustics as she neared the ball. The beat seemed to encourage the sensitive throb beneath her stomach, she tried to ignore the reminiscent tingle between her legs. She could hear the voices of students now, and she quickly schooled her features into a calm façade to conceal her shock and angst.

"Hermione!" Michael's voice called, and tried not to flinch as he came into her sight. "There you are, I was worried something had happened to you. You look amazing."

He approached her eagerly and tried to peck her cheek, but she managed to avoid the unwelcome gesture. "Thank you," she nodded politely. "Where are Ginny and the others?"

"They're already inside," he explained. "Are you ready to go in?"

"Um...sure," she mumbled, allowing him to lead her to the doors.

They paused just outside the elaborate room, and Hermione scanned all the decorations and fixtures that she had spent weeks organising. She had kept it similar to the frosty Yule Ball theme but had added a few little extras, including faux snow that fell from the ceiling, and waltzing ice-sculptures that mingled with the students. A quick glance around the familiar faces confirmed that everyone was enjoying themselves, but the cheerful atmosphere, that she had been so desperate for since the beginning of term, did nothing to soothe her temperament.

All she could think about were the tracks of Draco's lips and fingers, still buzzing in her pores and sending static across her skin. Yes, she had been nervous about where the situation had been leading, but she had fled because she'd been convinced his actions were selfish and lust-driven, but now she had doubts. His behaviour tonight and on Wednesday had been different and seemingly genuine, but she could so easily be deluding herself, or he could be a brilliant actor.

But what if...

What if it had been something more; something real? What if she had been too hasty to escape? Godric, she needed to know...

"I'm sorry, Michael," she muttered quickly, taking a step away from him. "I can't do this."

"What?" he asked, giving her a long and puzzled look. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry," she repeated.

Without waiting for a reply, she pivoted on her heel, and broke into an adrenaline-fuelled run that guided her back to her dorm. Back to him.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for getting me past 700 reviews! You guys are bloody amazing, and I want you all to have a glass of wine (or the drink of your choice) on me! I hope that chapter was okay? Please lend me your thoughts! Saw the film on the weekend and it was amazing! I won't put any specifics up because some people may not have seen it, but did anyone else cry like a toddler?

Anyway next chapter...well...You'll just have to wait and see! Apologies for the semi-cliffy! Thanks again to the lovely people on Facebook for making me smile when I've been ill and the interesting topics! It's twenty to six here so I shall bid you goodnight and hope you like the chapter.

Please Read and Review!

Bex-chan

Snowy

Chapter Notes

I know I normally do this at the end, but this is necessary, I guess. Content Warning: Sexual Themes. For some of you, this may mean skipping paragraphs, and for the rest of you, you're the kind of people I drink wine with ;) I don't often recommend songs or anything like that, but if I could suggest Counting Crows - I am Ready or Natalie Merchant - My Skin for a nice little backtrack, but it's entirely up to you. I hope you like the chapter.

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

Draco's mouth was still damp from their kiss.

He collapsed into the couch, closing his eyes tight and cradling his face with sweaty palms, as the chill coiled around him. He had no idea if he was shaking from the cold, or from the painful pangs that made his chest feel close to rupturing, and he felt completely lost. Despite his perpetual insistences that Granger and this place had driven his mind to ruin, he realised now that her presence actually soothed the turbulent thoughts rattling around his skull. Her twenty days of silence had been torture; his solitude leading to more doubts about blood and what he wanted from Granger.

The echoes of his father's voice and his preconceptions of Muggle-borns were distorted and fragile now; barely whispers in the corners of his mind. It angered and scared him that she had had such an effect on his resolve, but there was also a drugging sense of relief that he didn't quite understand. Kissing and touching her was like cresting the most unusual sense of peace; and while he felt completely lost, it was a...good lost. He imagined it was similar to the bliss one was supposed to experience when drowning, and he was certainly drowning.

And she had just left him here; frustration crackling under his skin and fighting sanity-slicing images of her with Corner. In the back of his battered brain, he knew that Granger was good on her promise that she and that Raven-bore prick were nothing more than friends, but the jealousy ate away at him anyway. He felt capable of a murderous rampage every time his imagination cooked up a picture of them, but what could he do? Nothing, but simmer.

His fingernails stabbed into his temple as another wave of resentment struck him, and he gulped down the bile that had started to scorch his windpipe. A deep and guttural growl made his whole body vibrate, and he willed himself to stay seated, knowing he would most likely slam his fist into the wall until his knuckles were shrapnel if he moved from the couch.

He had no idea how long it had been since she'd left him, barely minutes probably, but it felt like his loneliest hour.

He had always been so...trained and disciplined with his behaviour, but a mere moment alone in a room with her had him being completely driven by his urges, and that petrified him. Control was essential, but his brain might as well be spattered against the wall for all the good it was doing right now. There was a massive gap in his head, which his prejudices had once occupied, and now it was just becoming stocked with her instead.

Her words.

Her face.

Her scent, her smiles, her sighs.

Granger...

He snapped his head up when the door opened, and it completely knocked the air out of him when he realised that she'd come back. Her breathing was erratic and her face rosy-flushed, and her curls had returned to their wild state, framing her face perfectly. Between the heaves of her chest and her dilated eyes, she looked bewildered but bloody edible. The soft sway of her inky-blue dress waved at him, and he was on his feet in a heart's thud; acting solely on instinct.

They locked eyes across the room, and the confusion and tension practically rippled between them, and Draco willed himself to remain stoic. He could very well be getting ahead of himself; Granger might have simply forgotten something, and it would do him no favours to get his hopes up. But from the anxious expression carved into her pretty features, he could tell she was here for a specific reason, and a knot of excitement and apprehension clotted his gut.

His feet began to move of their own accord.

He needed to get to her before she over-analysed the situation and made another break for it, leaving him behind once again to stew in her shadow. He was beyond trying to suppress his want for her tonight, and perhaps if they could just...accept the unavoidable spark, she would be out of his system, and it would be the end of his irrational weakness for her.

"I...I have no idea what I'm doing here," Hermione mumbled as he stopped right in front of her.

Draco was struggling not to grab her and cement the inevitable, so he settled for tentatively raising his hand to cup her cheek and trace her lip-line with his thumb. He felt her heavy swallow, and he stepped closer into her space as she sealed her eyes from him. He could imagine the internal debate going on behind her fluttering lids, and he held his breath as she parted her lips.

"I just..." she whispered with obvious nerves. "I just wanted one night to-

"One night," he agreed for sanity's sake, before swiftly slicing the final inches between them.

Her sigh of surrender tickled his tonsils as he latched onto her mouth; finding she tasted of blueberries and promises tonight, and it was intoxicating. The lustful twitch in his stomach quickly came back to life as he gorged on her with all the frustration she had left him with. He clutched her sides possessively and held her firmly in place, adamant that she would not escape this again; not that she gave him any indication that she intended to.

While Hermione's kisses and gestures were slightly timid, there was no hesitation, and she matched his passion with a perfect pace that left her feeling light-headed. She planted her palms on his face and laced her fingernails into his snow-soft hair so she could pull him a little closer. Godric, she was petrified, but it was exhilarating to have him doing such wonderful and brain-damning things to her mouth.

She had no idea where the bold impulse came from, but she dragged her hands down his chest and tugged at the seam of his black jumper. Her fingertips grazed across his skin as she shifted the material up his torso, and Draco broke their kiss to help her; roughly yanking it over his head and tossing it to the side.

Hermione took the stolen seconds to let her eyes wander over his naked skin. He was a hypnotising shade of moonlight; not too muscular or lean, just beautifully seeker-built with lines and curves that begged to be touched.

She barely managed to release an admiring gasp before they were kissing again; fast and frantic like time-fated lovers. She ran her curious hands over his chest, feeling him groan against her tongue and tighten the grip on her waist. Her thighs clenched when something sensual tickled behind her navel, and her heartbeats were roaring in her ears.

Draco quickly spun them around, refusing to lose the connection of lips and teeth as he began to guide them to the other side of the dorm with haste-clumsy movements. Hermione hummed into his mouth as he slammed her back into her bedroom door and chewed on her bottom lip. A dazed sigh escaped her as he moved his attention to her throat, sucking softly at her pulse and encouraging a dreamy shiver to waltz down her spine.

"Password, Granger," he rasped breathlessly against her skin.

She blinked and tried to gather her concentration. "Crookshanks," she rushed out, and Draco steadied her as the door gave way.

Her room was dark, save the knowing glow of tenacious moon-rays, and she let it engulf her. It felt secure in here; a safe place to store dangerous secrets and forbidden fantasies, and she angled Draco's face so she could kiss him again, hoping that he would swallow the remainder of her stubborn qualms.

Draco could feel the anxiety in her stance, but as he glided his hands across her shoulder-blades, he felt enough of her tension slip away for him to tug at the straps on her dress. The navy gown pooled at her feet with a hearty thud, and he frowned when he felt her stiffen again.

He pulled back to give her a meaningful look, but he couldn't help but let his hazy stare roam down her shape. His stomach constricted, and he felt himself go harder as he absorbed her;

yes, he had imagined her in those pathetic mornings hunched against the wall next to the bathroom, but he had underestimated her appeal. She was more feminine and alluring than the images his brain had conjured; clad in a simple set of blue underwear that was typically practical, but didn't detract from curves and creases that made his eyes dance. By the dim light, her olive skin and tawny features looked like toffee, and for a brief moment, he was completely awe-struck.

Definitely not ugly...or filthy...

Her unease became obvious as her arms moved to cover her body, and he quickly captured her lips again before she had a chance to be stolen by doubt. He'd be damned if he let that happen when he'd come this far.

He slipped his hand between them to unfasten his trousers and manoeuvred them further into the room. With her bed in sight, something he had craved since the couple of nights he had slept in here, he felt his heart thunder against his ribs as she went back to grasping his face with slightly trembling hands. He pushed her, as gently as his need would allow, into the mattress and crawled over her; still feasting on her mouth.

He felt the nerves seize her muscles again as he reached behind to unclasp her bra, and he deepened the kiss to distract her; pleading to non-existent entities that she would abandon logic, like he had.

He grazed his teeth across the bumps of her collarbone and relished the moan that ghosted across his forehead. She was slowly giving in; he could feel it. He knew she could feel his desire pressed against her inner thigh, and he moved his hand between them and wriggled out of his boxers so he could feel flesh against flesh.

His fingers tucked into the hem of her underwear, and he slowly slid them down her thighs, knees and shins with medal-worthy patience. He could feel her vibrating with suspense and uncertainty, and he glanced up to find her bathed in creamy moonlight and watching him with wide and wary eyes. He tilted his head to reach for her mouth again and tried to settle himself between her legs, but her shaky voice made him freeze.

"Draco, wait," Hermione murmured. He flinched as his face lingered above hers, silently vowing to Salazar's soul that if she told him she couldn't do this, he would surrender his mind come morning. She licked her lips and gave him a pleading look, before she forced the delicate words to leave her. "Please go slow."

His brow creased at the implications of her request. "I thought you weren't a vir-

"I'm not," she interrupted; a fiery blush staining her cheeks. "But I...only once."

Pressure...

He realised how much she was giving him then, and he fought hard not to be affected by it. The lusty throbs in his chest ached for a moment with something else; something painfully pleasant that made him decide not to be selfish tonight.

"Put your hands on my shoulders," he directed quietly, waiting until she complied before he continued. "If it hurts, grip as tight as you need to, and bite down on my lip."

His words seemed to soothe her qualms, and she gave him a slow nod of assent before craning her neck to steal a calming kiss. He instantly intensified it, learning her slowly and knowing that it was best to keep her busy while his fingers trailed over her stomach and ducked between her thighs to see if she was ready.

Despite the conflicting notions so obviously scrambling Granger's head, her body was sublime and keen for him; perfectly damp and silky beneath his fingertips. Shoving aside his impatience, he stroked the pad of his thumb over her most sensitive spot, which earned him a timid moan, and he slipped two fingers inside to help prepare her for him. After a few long minutes of rotating his digits, and some more feminine sighs tickling the roof of his mouth, he decided he had waited long enough, and done all he could to relax her.

Draco positioned himself appropriately and Hermione instantly trapped his bottom lip between her teeth. He rubbed her sides in soothing circles as he finally entered her, and her fingernails stabbed into his shoulders as she choked on a whimper. He couldn't help the velvety hiss as she dragged him in; barely noticing her desperate grasp on his shoulders and all sensation rushed south. She was tight with inexperience and panic, and she felt fucking fantastic, but he wanted her to enjoy this.

"Relax," he murmured against her mouth. "It's alright."

He knew she needed to accommodate to him, so he fought his urges and remained still, resting his forehead against hers and hoping that her pain would subside quickly. Carefully easing out and then filling her again, he repeated his painfully slow movements until her fingers had stopped digging into his skin and she freed his lip. He dipped his head to the crook of her neck, remembering that she had been rather fond of his mouth teasing her there, as he quickened his rhythm.

Hermione lost her concentration as the pain ebbed, and she heard her pants grow heavy as his ministrations stirred something inside of her. Each of his strokes seemed to feed the flicker of this foreign sensation just under her stomach, and she instinctively writhed her hips to try and get more. Draco lifted his head to hover his lips over hers; barely touching as his volatile breaths fell into her mouth and tingled her tongue. Their glazed stares locked as a throaty groan rumbled in his chest, and Hermione felt the exquisite knot that he had created swell and tingle.

Draco snaked his arms around her back and sat up, pulling her up with him as he rested back against his haunches. She was flush against his sweat-sodden chest, and he held her head firmly as they kissed again, more fervidly than they ever had, as he adjusted them to the new angle. Knowing that this position would brush against her receptive bud, he rocked his hips in purposeful patterns, before ripping his mouth away to freckle wet pecks over her chest and breasts.

Her little, dulcet sounds were becoming more fervent, and he could feel her muscles starting to tense up around him as she began to quiver in his arms. The heavy hammering of her heart

against his lips told him she was close, and he willed himself to restrain the bliss bubbling in his own system.

He'd be damned if he didn't feel her unravel around him.

Hermione finally coughed out a stuttering cry as pulsating heat spread from her core and made her insides clench. Her control was lost as she shuddered gracelessly, and allowed the bizarre but beautiful sensations to consume her. Draco clutched her tightly to him as she came undone, grabbing her face and combing back her brazen mane to witness the wonder in her eyes.

With a few more twists of his hips and the ripples of her rapture around him, Draco felt the bubble in his loins burst and release into her. He smothered his growling groan against her throat and clung to her as she absently soothed him; stroking his hair and sighing against his neck. He shivered as her nails caught the tip of his spine; his breaths calming as the buzz began to fade, and his limbs became lead-heavy.

She was weak in his hold, resting her head against his as she hummed lazy kisses across his shoulders. He slowly eased them back into the pillows, absently grabbing the forgotten covers and shielding them from the chill. Disentangling limbs and flesh, Draco settled next to her on the bed, observing the witch intently as her lashes fluttered and she nibbled her lip. He could feel the awkward silence sneaking up on them as their post-bliss breaths simmered away, leaving them with the inevitable questions and an unwelcoming reality.

"Draco, I-

"Rest, Granger," he told her.

"I just wanted to say thank you," Hermione whispered tiredly; her lids falling shut. "For being...gentle."

He frowned at the affection in her tone, knowing that in a few hours, it would all be different. By the garish rays of morning, he would hate himself for giving in, and she would feel used and betrayed. The night provided them with peace and secrecy, and for that reason alone, he raised his hand to brush away the unruly coffee-curls around her face. She was on the crest of sleep, and she sighed at his touch; mumbling something incoherent as he glided his finger across her eyebrow.

He snatched his hand away when he realised what he was doing, and scolded himself for prolonging the inappropriate intimacy. Leaving would have been logical, but his bones felt burdened and Granger's bed was so warm. He lied down and faced her; not touching, but possibly closer than was necessary, but sleep stole him before he could question it.

He resented tomorrow for being unavoidable.

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* * *

Hermione woke with sore limbs and a tenderness between her legs that veered between pleasure and pain. With passion-bruised lips and the taste of a Slytherin on her tongue, she cracked open her eyes to scrutinise the still-warm space next to her. She'd expected him to leave, so when her sleepy stare moved and found his silhouette crowding the window frame, she was more than a little surprised.

She carefully sat up so she could see his expression; his pale features set in a pensive frown as he glared out the window. He was fully-dressed, rubbing his chin, and looking too troubled to realise that she was even awake.

"I thought you'd leave," she broke the calm in a scratchy voice.

Draco didn't look at her. "It seemed pointless when you can just wander into my room whenever you like," he told her steadily.

Hermione took a deep breath before she gathered a sheet around her and left the bed, taking slow strides towards him with no idea what she intended to do. When she was close enough, she realised that the view outside was frosted with white, and the dreamy snow was pouring down fast. She couldn't help but gasp as a small smile crawled up her cheeks, oblivious that Draco was studying her now and contemplating dragging her back to bed to extend their forbidden activities. The room was heavy with their mingled scents and it was like an aphrodisiac, but something about her innocent grin niggled at him.

"What are you so bloody happy about?" he questioned sharply, resting his chin against his knuckles in an attempt to appear blasé.

"It's snowing."

He arched an eyebrow. "And?"

"I have been waiting for it to snow," she said softly.

She was close enough now that he could reach out and touch her if he wanted to, but he refrained, even if it was ridiculously tempting. Post-coital mornings suited Granger very well; with her bushy hair and blushing cheeks, and when his eyes caught marks on her neck from his mouth, he felt his groin tighten. He tore his intrigued gaze away from her and clenched his jaw, determined to say his piece and then get out of the room.

"Look, Granger-

"Do you...do you regret what happened last night?" she interrupted uneasily, toying with the sheet between her fingers.

He cringed because he had no idea how to answer that question. "Do you?" he countered instead.

Hermione licked her lips. "No, I don't, and I...I don't think you do either."

"It's irrelevant," he mumbled, averting his eyes. "It shouldn't have happened, and it shouldn't happen again-

"Shouldn't?"

"Won't," he corrected quickly. "It can't-

"Why?" she pushed boldly, irritated by his dismissal. "Because I'm a Muggle-born?"

"Granger-

"You know, you don't look at me with disgust anymore," she told him calmly. "Quite the opposite, actually-

"What were you hoping to gain from this, Granger?" he asked bluntly. "You know who I am-

"Yes, I do," she agreed. "And I know that you don't really believe all that rubbish, or last night wouldn't have happened-

"Last night was a clear indication that this place has fucked with my head too much-

"Stop it!" she snapped angrily. "Stop trying to blame this on everything else! It's bloody pathetic! You knew what you were doing!"

"And so did you!"

"I'm not denying that!" she shouted. "Do I mean nothing to you?"

He gnashed his teeth and fixed her with a cold look. Merlin knew why, but that comment irked him like hell. "You don't get it, do you?" he sneered. "I am one of them now-

"One of who?"

"A fucking blood traitor!" he shouted, abruptly rising from his seat. "I have screwed over my family, so don't you DARE question how I feel about you!"

Hermione gasped at his outburst, and they both froze in place, barely inches apart. Shock and outrage flickered in Draco's eyes as he realised what he'd said, and he would have given anything to suck the words back in. She reached out a hand to touch his cheek, but he batted it away out of principle, refusing to feel more foolish than he already did.

"Fuck this," he grumbled, heading towards the door. "I'm not doing this now-

"Draco, wait," Hermione called, stalling him before he could reach the door. "I...I'm sorry but I can't live with you after last night if you're going to be like this."

He felt his chest twitch painfully. "What do you mean?"

"If...if you want this to really stop now," she continued in a sad and stuttering tone. "Then I will see if McGonagall can find s-somewhere else for you to stay. I...I can't do this with you anymore. Not after what's happened between us."

Somewhere else? Without her?

The thought alone made him feel physically sick. Things were irrevocably different now; he had seen her bare and uninhibited, and whether they liked it or not, they owned a part of each other. Even when the fingerprints on his shoulders and the dents in his lip had disappeared, the memories would still be there; crisp and clear, and ready for him replay whenever he liked. And the fact of the matter was he wanted more memories, but Merlin knew his pride had already taken a battering this morning.

"And I suppose you want my answer now?"

He heard her sniff behind him. "You have the weekend," she murmured gently. "I want an answer by Monday."

Hermione watched him square his shoulders and push open the door, leaving her behind with the evidence of their intimacy; crumpled sheets and the smell of lust misting the air. She sat at the window and brushed aside her tears, counting snowflakes in a futile effort to detract from how vulnerable she felt at that moment.

She knew that he felt something for her; he had blurted it out himself, and his tenderness from last night had made her feel so safe, but she knew how stubborn he could be. She honestly had no idea if he would choose to stay, or decide that their liaison had gone too far, but she knew that if he left, it would devastate her. She almost regretted her ultimatum, but she refused to look at him everyday and feel discarded; used and then tossed aside because of his crushing pride.

If he chose to remain here, it would be enough for her.

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By Sunday evening, Draco was ready to have a hernia.

Granger had left on Saturday morning, no more than an hour after she had dealt him the option of leaving, and she had yet to return. He had no idea where she'd stayed, but at one point, he had actually found himself concerned that something might have happened to her. Logic had caught up with him, and he'd realised that McGonagall would have paid him a visit

by now if that had been the case, but nevertheless, his consideration for her well-being had sobered him immensely.

It would have been sensible to accept Granger's offer of an alternate prison and go cold-turkey, but in reality, it had never been an option. She had somehow gone from being the most irritating aspect of this hell, to the reason he was still sane. Without her, he knew that he would crumble like sea-shattered cliffs. He wanted to touch her again; craved her actually, although he had no idea why.

It just...made sense.

He came to the conclusion that it was simply a bi-product of his isolation, and if he needed her to steady his mind until he escaped Hogwarts, then so be it. Once he was free, things would return to normal, and nobody would ever know about his disgraceful behaviour.

Everything that happens in this room remains between us.

He heard the main door open and close, and he listened intently to the tell-tale footsteps of his witch as she went to her room. He could discern the sounds of her shuffling around for a few moments, before she was on the move again, heading to the bathroom this time, and flicking on the shower. The familiar beats of falling clothes roused reminiscent flashbacks of Friday night, and images of navy gowns and olive skin flashed across the backs of his lids.

He thought twice, and then once more before he was on his feet; dangerous intentions making him stiff between the hips.

He'd spent too long imagining her showers.

He crept silently towards the bathroom, hoping that she had forgotten to lock the door, and luck was apparently on his side today. He slipped inside and took a healthy gulp of the cherry-scented steam, carefully beginning to discard his clothes as he eyed Granger's oblivious shadow dancing across the shower-curtain.

His pulse was throbbing loudly in his ears by the time he removed his boxers to the first of Granger's bathroom moans, and he eagerly padded across the floor, and stepped into the cubicle.

He stared at her naked back, following the droplets of water that trickled from her long tresses and landed at the charming dimple just above her buttocks, before sliding down her shapely legs. He reached out to touch her, but the moment his fingers grazed her skin, she whipped around with terrified eyes and feeble attempts to hide her precious parts.

He managed to muffle her scream with a hasty kiss, enjoying the odd sensation of shower-drops gliding between their lips. Hermione squirmed for a few seconds, but she yielded when his thumbs skimmed down the column of her neck and drew feather-soft patterns just under her ears. He slowly pushed her against the tiled wall and frowned when he felt her break the kiss and brace her hands against his chest.

"What are you doing?" she asked between heavy breaths.

It's just until you get out of here...

With the security of his deluded mindset that this would all evaporate once he was out of her room, he set his jaw and gave her a decisive look.

"I'm staying."

Chapter End Notes

Massive apologies for the late update. I'm really sorry, I just find it difficult to write sexual scenes, so I hope it's okay? Please lend me your thoughts about it...Kinda nervous! I didn't want it be smutty (i.e. Hermione's a secret slut and Draco's a sex god)..I just wanted it to be realistic...so I hope that comes across...

I believe massive thanks are in order. First of all, thank you to everyone who reviewed. It's the highest amount of reviews I've ever received for a chapter and I'm very touched! Seriously...you guys are wonderful! Also, huge thanks to x-werecat for making my first ever piece of fanart (link's on profile page...go look!) and making my week! My other fic, Hunted, also reached 1000 reviews this week, which is a first, so I really do feel like the luckiest girl for having such lovely people reading my fics! Love, love love! Wine, wine, wine!

Once again, I hope this chapter was okay ~nervous gulp~ and let me know what you think. Next chapter is going to take a little longer (two weeks-ish), I'm afraid, as I have two assignments due in the next couple of weeks. I'm really sorry about that, but I promise I'll do my best to get it up asap. It's almost six here...and I have work at eleven, so I'll cut my rant there...Read and Review!

Thanks again!

Bex-chan

Stars

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione groaned into the pillow as her alarm chased away the whispers of her playful dream. Draco had been deliriously wonderful last night, just as he had been their first time; patient and unselfish, but still oozing that stubborn nonchalance that was definitively Malfoy and rather alluring. The nerves had affected her again, but she had certainly felt more comfortable this time, and something about the water trickling between their bodies had soothed her qualms and tickled her in a delicate but delicious way.

Wrap your legs around my waist.

Her sore muscles clenched as she recalled his lips and mumbles against her throat, lulling her into a place that felt sinful and yet somehow safe. She had let him press her against the tiles and rouse that throbbing warmth in her stomach, amongst the rose-scented steam and the echoes of pulsing water. She had quaked and moaned with abandon, like Friday, and then he had carried her to her room, waiting until she had gathered her senses before joining their hips again to satisfy himself.

Granger...

With her body sated, she had simply watched him with fascination as he sought his own release. His features had softened and he'd looked completely unburdened for those brief moments, and she had absently freckled kisses across his jaw and neck. She had studied him intently and silently decided that he had never looked more beautiful and free, and she had kissed him hard when he had let go. Her sheets were still damp from shower-drops and sweat, and while she knew the space next to her was empty, she peeked under her lashes anyway; just to check.

She was alone, but that was...okay.

He had come to her last night, and that was enough for now. His pride was taking a severe beating, and she was wise enough to know that it would take time for him to adapt to their... odd situation, as did she. Truth be told, she wasn't exactly sure what she hoped to gain from all this, but she knew she liked him, and Luna's words had her tempted to act on impulses.

Sometimes, Wars can bring good things. They can teach people to hold on to what feels right, even if there are risks involved.

She had a feeling fate would work against her but, just this once, she decided to let things happen and follow the flow. Merlin knew, she would find it hard not to over-analyse the strange relationship with her Slytherin houseguest, but she was learning him, and rushing to make decisions or find conclusions would prove futile.

A quick glance at her clock warned her that she had remained in bed too long and was slightly late, and she quickly began her morning routine before she went to meet McGonagall. Classes had ended so that the Headmistress could start sending home students for the Christmas Holidays as safely as possible, and Hermione and the other Prefects had agreed to assist her. Unfortunately, Michael would be there too, which meant she would finally have to face the Head Boy after running away from him at the Ball with no explanation.

She had already fed the excuse of a sudden stomach bug to Ginny and her other friends when she had stayed in the Gryffindor common room on Saturday night, and she hoped the white lie was substantial enough for Michael to believe. Striding down the familiar corridors, she checked her reflection in a frosty window-pane to ensure that any marks left by Draco had been successfully covered by her rushed Glamour Charms, before slipping down the hall for McGonagall's office.

A guilty flush crawled into her cheeks as she heard the familiar voices drift down the corridor; McGonagall, Michael, Neville, Ginny, amongst the other Prefects. If she had felt guilty after kissing Draco, the paranoia was driving her mind to madness now. Surely they would notice her slightly swollen lips? Or glimpse an ill-disguised bruise from a rough kiss? Or realise that there was a hint of masculine scent to her now?

Sucking in a deep breath, she pushed open the door and flinched when about twelve pairs of eyes shot over to her.

"Sorry I'm late," she mumbled, accidentally catching Michael's stare. "I overslept."

"It's alright, Hermione," McGonagall assured, gesturing for her to take a seat. "You know most of this anyway. I was just explaining that the first group of students will be heading home today around three O'clock. Madame Maxime has agreed to lend us her Abraxans, and they should be arriving about two so I you might need to assist Hagrid."

"How many students are there going to be?" Neville asked, scribbling down notes on a piece of parchment. "If I'm escorting them home, I want to make sure I'm not missing anyone."

"Twenty-two, including you, Mr Longbottom," she replied. "After they have all been dropped off, the horses will take you to your home, and find their way back to Beauxbatons, but all of you should help to ensure that the listed students are accounted for."

"Who's taking the next group on Wednesday?" Ginny asked.

"I am," Lee raised his hand. "I'm using the Charmed Bus, right?"

"I believe so," McGonagall nodded. "All the details are on the rota I've sent around."

"How many are staying behind, Professor?" Hermione questioned, purposefully keeping her eyes away from Michael.

"Just a handful," the Headmistress explained. "I think there are six students all together."

Hermione concealed a frown as her friends continued with their questions, realising that it would very well be her loneliest Christmas this year. She only had herself to blame; she had offered to remain at the school, much to Ginny's irritation, but staying at the Burrow without Harry and Ron wouldn't have been the same. Plus, with Draco stashed away in her dorm, she felt responsible for ensuring that he remained hidden, and also for helping McGonagall keep things steady at Hogwarts. And the sad truth was, Hermione was content to let Christmas slip by like any other day this year.

There was too much going on beyond the castle's walls, and it clouded the festive feeling like a thick and poisonous smog. The absence of familiar friends and family would leave an empty space in her chest, and with only a cold Slytherin lover for company, whom she was still struggling to understand, it was guaranteed to be sullen day.

"Right," McGonagall's voice stole her blue thoughts. "If you could all make sure the right students are ready by two, then that's it for today, if there are no more questions?" Only the sound of the pupils gathering their belongings answered her. "Okay then, I will see you all later, and if you see anyone outside, tell them to mind the snow. Hermione, could you stay behind for a moment please?"

"Okay," she nodded nervously, offering her friends soft smiles as they left her with the Headmistress. "Is everything alright?"

"Everything's fine," McGonagall assured her, muttering a Silencing Charm on the door. "I just wanted to see how things were going with Mr Malfoy?"

She tried so hard not to blush. "Fine," she managed steadily. "I think...he's settled down a bit now."

"So he's calmed down?" McGonagall pressed. "He's stopped being hostile?"

"No...he's not hostile," Hermione murmured distantly. "He's just...better now. I think we have become accustomed to each other."

"That's good," she agreed. "I wanted to thank you again for staying here over Christmas. Miss Lovegood is still uncertain if she is staying or not, so I know you won't really have any friends here, and this isn't your home-

"It's okay," the young witch shrugged. "It's just another day, right? And Hogwarts feels like home sometimes, but it's just not the same without Harry and Ron."

"Well, I know that your current living arrangements aren't ideal," McGonagall continued with a thoughtful tone. "So I wanted to let you know that you are more than welcome to join the other staff and myself for the day-

"Thanks for the offer, Professor," Hermione interrupted quietly. "But I think I'll just stay in my dorm and keep things normal."

"You don't mind spending it alone with Mr Malfoy?" the Headmistress asked, arching an eyebrow.

"I just want it to be like any normal day," she replied, keeping her features as even as possible. "Plus, it wouldn't really be...right to leave Draco completely alone on Christmas Day. He must feel lonely enough as it is."

Minerva hummed in thought. "You are...softening towards him?"

"I-I just..." Hermione stuttered, releasing she had possibly revealed too much. "I just understand him better, and I doubt leaving him alone would do any good for his... disposition."

"I guess not," McGonagall agreed with a sceptical tone. "Well, if you change your mind, you are free to join us."

"Thank you," she said, rising from her seat. "I'll see you later on, Professor."

With a parting smile from the Headmistress, Hermione shuffled out of the office with a secret reminder to watch how she referred to Draco in McGonagall's presence. Turning into the corridor, she sighed, but it caught in her throat when she felt a masculine hand hook onto her elbow.

"Michael," she breathed harshly when she recognised the set of brown eyes regarding her anxiously. "You made me jump."

"Sorry," he mumbled awkwardly. "I was hoping we could talk about what happened? At the ball?"

"Right," she nodded absently. "Yes, of course, I-

"Perhaps we could discuss it in your dorm?"

"I fancied having a wander," she told him quickly. "Could we walk around and talk about it? I don't really want to be cooped up in my room today."

"Okay," he agreed, leading them into a slow stroll down the empty corridors. "So-

"I am really sorry," she blurted, pushing a few strands of hair behind her ears. "About leaving you there like I did. I didn't feel very well-

"It's alright, Hermione," he frowned. "You don't need to lie. I know you were thinking about him and that-

"Him?" she repeated. "I-

"Ron," he clarified with a knowing look. "I'm sorry, I didn't realise you two were serious, but Ginny explained everything to me."

"I see," Hermione said uncomfortably, pushing aside some guilt that had invaded her stomach. "Right...well, I-

"I don't want things to be awkward between us," he interrupted, steering her around a corner towards the library. "I consider you a friend, and I wouldn't want things to-

"I'd like us to be friends," she told him honestly. "And I'm sorry I didn't make my relationship with...Ron more clear. It's just a bit complicated with him being away, and the War going on."

"That's okay," Michael nodded. "Would you like me to walk you back to your room?"

"I think I'm going to spend some time in the library," she supplied. "I have some things I need to do, but thanks anyway. I'll meet you later on to start rounding up the first leavers."

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Draco watched the light snow fall on the other side of the window pane.

He had never been a particular fan of it, but after weeks of the same views from this room, he had to admit that the crisp, white landscape looked somewhat picturesque. After too many weeks stuck inside this shit-pit, he was beginning to forget what the outside felt like, and he could honestly say that he missed it.

He'd heard Granger leave a good hour ago, but she was still here. Her scent hung in the air and he could still taste her against his tongue, and he tried to pinpoint when exactly her essence had turned from an irritant into a comfort.

Despite his personal promises that shagging Granger would be a one-time incident, he had already resigned himself to the fact that he would do it again, and again, until that troublesome craving for her in his gut had ebbed away.

If it ebbed away.

At least he had managed to wake up before her. Every self-respecting male knew that lingering in a post-coital bed meant something deeper than a physical tumble between the sheets, and he'd sooner Crucio himself before he let that happen.

It was only meant to be one night...

That little theory had certainly shrivelled up and died if their shower antics were anything to go by. He blamed her threat of a new prison for this.

He could have questioned his reasons for pursuing Granger, and possibly given himself a hernia in the process, but there seemed little point in over-thinking a problem that had no

solution. Knowing it was something he would definitely regret, he had decided to take Granger's earlier advice, and just do what felt right for the time being.

There was nobody here to judge him or scold his deranged and dangerous behaviour, and when she was the only element of his isolation that made his instincts tingle and his blood rush, refusing the desire to touch her wasn't an option.

If this was insanity, then all that talk about the happiness of madness was beginning to make sense.

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After spending a few hours amongst more books on Horcruxes, Hermione had said her goodbyes to Neville and the other students before they'd left Hogwarts behind to join their families. They had been a little delayed when a fifth year had taken a nap and failed to show up on time, and by the time the herd of Abraxans had taken flight, the dark, winter sky had started to drown the white hills.

She had found herself strolling around the snow-covered grounds for a couple of hours, relishing the pleasing crunchy noises beneath her feet as she went. She bent down to rake her fingers through the sugary powder, uncaring that it was so cold it made her hands burn.

She cast a Warming Charm and seated herself on a tree stump to gaze up at the clear skies. She adored nights like this; when the clouds had retreated, and the stars were sprinkled across the navy universe like frosty freckles.

She began to play dot-to-dot in her head, finding the constellation Lyra easily with its bright star, Vega. Her studious stare instinctively shifted to Draco, and she followed the serpentine sway of the long trail of stars. They winked at her and she simply stared at it for a few moments, appreciating the beauty and complexity, before deciding that it was getting too late and dark to be alone.

Back in the walls of Hogwarts, she made her way back to her room; distracted by concerns about how to act in her Slytherin companion's presence after two nights under his spell. She was moving past the kitchens without paying much attention, when a firm tug on her robes startled her out of her daze.

"Bloody hell!" she gasped, clutching her chest as she whipped around and gave the confused House-elf an apologetic look. "Sorry, Dobby. You gave me a bit of a fright."

"Dobby is sorry, Miss," he apologised earnestly. "Dobby has been looking for you! I have a gift for you!"

"A gift?" Hermione repeated with a frown. "You didn't need to get me anything, Dobby."

"It's a Christmas tree," the small creature explained, reaching into the flimsy pocket of his top to remove a small sapling. "I managed to save a good one for you, Miss! It's pretty! Miss must use the Finite spell, and it will grow into the tree I chose for you!"

She offered him a weak smile. "That was very sweet of you, Dobby," she said. "But I don't think I'm having a tree this year. Perhaps one of the Professors would like-

"Miss must have a tree!" he protested enthusiastically, pushing the small seed into her hand. "Miss needs a tree for Christmas!"

Hermione accepted the thoughtful present and decided that arguing was both futile and ungrateful. "Thank you, Dobby," she nodded, giving him a friendly pat on the back. "That was very thoughtful of you."

"Miss is very welcome!" he beamed at her. "Dobby must go now, must help Winky clean!"

With a snap of his fingers, he disappeared, and Hermione eyed the sapling in her palm for a moment, before she continued to head towards her room. She contemplated leaving it as it was, but that seemed almost cruel when Dobby had taken the time to select it for her. As she pushed open her door, her eyes automatically landed on Draco's room, and she felt little pixies prance in her stomach, as they always seemed to do now. Shrugging away her nerves, she placed the sapling in the darkest corner of the sitting area, and stepped back before removing her wand.

With a quiet mumble of the appropriate spell, she watched a trunk slowly rise up and sprout long branches with healthy, evergreen pine needles. By the time the Douglas Fir had finished its regeneration, it was just over six feet tall and, as Dobby had promised, a fine specimen with perfect proportions and a refreshing smell.

Hermione angled her wand and had an incantation to decorate the tree on the tip of her tongue, but she hesitated. She lowered her arm and headed into her bedroom, kneeling at the charmed trunk by her bed and rummaging for the bag of red and gold Christmas decorations that her mother had given her before she'd returned to Hogwarts. Her lips creased into a sad frown as she considered how much she missed her parents, but she carried the small bag, also spelled with an Undetectable Extension Charm, back to the sitting area anyway, and began to absently hang baubles and tinsel from the sturdy branches.

That was how Draco found her; fawny-eyes distant and forlorn as she toyed with a snowflake-shaped ornament between her fingertips. He cocked a curious eyebrow and took some steps towards her, stopping a few feet short of her back and scowling when she gave no indication that she was aware of him.

"Why don't you just use a spell to put those on?" he questioned bluntly. "You're just wasting time and energy."

He heard her release a sad breath before she latched the snowflake onto the tree. "I like to do it this way," she told him. "It reminds me of home."

"And red and gold trimmings?" he commented snidely. "How very predictable of you, Granger."

"It has nothing to do with the Gryffindor colours," she replied in a blank tone. "My family always have red and gold on the tree. I always thought that green, red and gold go together really well."

He debated disagreeing with her for the sake of it, but the defeated slump of her shoulders made him pause. Rolling his eyes at himself for being too mindful of her feelings, he collapsed onto the sofa and regarded her carefully; already sensing that persistent itch to touch her pull at his stomach.

"Exactly how many days are there before Christmas?" he asked.

"It's the fourteenth today," she mumbled. "Eleven days."

Draco cleared his throat. "And you're staying here?"

"Yes," she nodded as she continued her work. "It was the safest option."

"I would have pegged you for a Christmas enthusiast, Granger," he admitted in a stoic tone. "But you seem...indifferent."

"There's hardly anything to celebrate this year," she sighed, finally turning to face him. "Was there anything you wanted for Christmas?"

He narrowed his eyes and gave her a cold stare. "Freedom from this hell-hole?"

"You know that's not possible-

"Then no," he grumbled, resting his elbows against his thighs. "And if you aren't bothered about Christmas, why have a tree at all?"

"It was a gift," Hermione shrugged. "If you change your mind, I'm taking a trip to Hogsmeade on Saturday-

"I don't need anything," he affirmed in a gruff voice. "If I have to spend the day in this place, then I'd rather ignore it all together."

She bobbed her head in agreement. "That sounds fine."

A melancholic silence drifted between them as she half-heartedly planted the last of her decorations on the branches, and she reached into her bag to remove the final piece; the essential star to crown the tree. She examined the striking design and stroked her finger over the edge as she counted the pretty sequins and followed their intricate patterns.

"My father always used to put the star on the tree," Hermione murmured, unsure if Draco was even listening to her. "It was always something the man of the home did. A tradition, you know?"

She glanced up to find her new lover watching her with hooded eyes, and his lips set into a stern line. After a few moments, he exhaled and shook his head, as though he was angry at himself, before fixing her with a yielding look of understanding.

"We had the same tradition," he confessed reluctantly.

Hermione swallowed back the nerves in her throat and extended her arm to offer him the star. "I guess that would be you here," she said. "Care to do the honours?"

Draco pushed away her hand. "This isn't a home, Granger."

"It's the closest thing we've got to one," she offered sadly. "Besides, I can't reach-

"I'm not putting it on the tree," he finalised. "Just leave it, Granger."

She frowned in defeat and placed it on the coffee table, shuffling her feet as she gathered the courage to mumble her next words. "Draco, I've been thinking-

"Shocker-

"Should we...", she trailed off with uncertainty. "Should we talk about our...situation?"

"No," he replied quickly. "Talking about it won't make a difference-

"But I-

"Just leave things be, Granger," he hushed with a tense jaw. "Weren't you the one who said it was best to just let things flow?"

Her eyes widened a fraction at that remark. "I guess I did say that-

"Then I suggest you take a leaf out of your own book," he muttered; his eyes dropping to his lap. "I made my decision clear last night, and I don't want to discuss it any further."

Hermione chewed her bottom lip as she realised she wanted him to stay with her tonight, if only because today had been a bitter reminder of how lonely the next fortnight would inevitably be. She took a deep breath and tried to locate another dose of that Gryffindor bravery, which always seemed to wither whenever Draco was concerned.

"I think I'm going to head to bed," she told him with a wavering voice. "Are you...are you coming?"

He arched an eyebrow with slight surprise before he shook his head. "No," he answered, and Hermione had to fight hard to conceal her hurt.

"Okay," she mumbled lamely, making her way towards her bedroom, feeling rather humiliated. "Goodnight then."

"Granger," Draco called just before she reached the door. He clenched his eyes shut and massaged the bridge of his nose; conceding to the fact that his tattered dignity was

questionable from this point on. "Leave your door unlocked. I might change my mind."

Hermione's mouth twitched into a private smile before she slipped into her room, leaving Draco behind to glare at her unfinished tree. He stayed still for long minutes; his mind burdened with conflicting notions as his eyes shifted to the star on the table. A growl rumbled in his throat before he grabbed it and marched over to the tree, reaching up to effortlessly place it on top and complete the task Granger had started.

He stepped back to give it a critical look, and privately decided that green, red and gold did indeed compliment each other fairly well. With a final grunt of surrender, he turned on his heel, with no intention of heading to his own room.

Chapter End Notes

I'm really sorry about the shortness, but I'm going to end it there with the promise that I will have the next chapter (The Christmas Chapter) up before/on Christmas Day, and that one will be a lot longer. I'd just like to thank you for your patience and your continued awesomeness with your support and reviews, and I honestly can't thank you enough. Thanks to the wonderful lovelies on Facebook for making me smile!

I know this was a bit of filler chapter, and things are about to get more interesting as of the next chapter! Thanks again so much for all the wonderful reviews. 979...wow! If I reach 1,000, that would be the best Christmas present ever, and you shall hear my screams of joy in every corner of the globe. Let me know what you think, and expect the next chapter I promise before/on Christmas.

Also, I don't know if you noticed, but I've been using five-letter words for my chapter titles (started as an accident, but I'm determined to keep it going!) so if anyone has any interesting or unique ones they can think of, let me know!

Sorry again about the length and the wait...I feel bad...Let me know what you think!

Read and Review! (Because it's almost Christmas! ^_^)

Bex-chan

Gifts

Chapter Notes

Slight sexual connotations in this chapter. Also, towards the end, if I could recommend 'Ice Dance' by Danny Elfman (Edward Scissorhands) for a backtrack...Hope you enjoy.

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

Hermione felt the mattress shift beneath her, and she stifled the groan that tickled her tonsils as Draco closed the door behind him.

The cold always seemed to replace him in her bed when he left her alone, feigning sleep and feeling disappointed, but this was how it had been for the last few days, and she knew better than to mention it to him. He had made it clear that he wasn't willing to broach the subject of their bizarre relationship, and they had fallen into an pseudo-routine since Monday.

The mornings would always begin like this one; Draco abandoning her between their tell-tale sheets and silently sneaking back into his own room. She would then prepare him some food for the day, before heading to the library or to McGonagall's office to continue the time-consuming mission to get everyone home safe. Evenings provided them with burning expectations and awkward glances, that she personally hated. She knew it was simply a side-effect as they adjusted to their situation, but they were both fiery characters, and she missed their witty arguments and heated debates.

She had a feeling they would be at each other's throats sooner or later; probably once her insecurities and nerves had faded a little, and Draco had accepted that he was attracted to a Muggle-born.

When the evening turned into night, she would slip away into her bedroom and leave her door unlocked so that he could join her. There had been a couple of nights when his pride had apparently smothered his interest in her, and he had returned to his own room. That was okay, for she felt her muscles needed some time to recover, but she found herself wanting him just to sleep with her and chase away the lonely nights.

But he never did.

He would come into her room; kiss her like a fate-fearing man, strip them bare and satisfy them both, always insistent to make sure she was sated, even though it had seemed to take hours sometimes. She knew from Lavender's and Padma's chats about sex that it was difficult for women to consistently find that blissful release, but Draco determinedly worked on her receptive points until she trembled and moaned, and left them both exhausted.

But he never held her in the aftermath.

He never offered any whisper of affection once they were finished.

He never stayed for more than a few hours.

She would hear him leave and her heart would ache for a moment, before she reasoned with herself that it was he was still battling his prejudices.

And then the routine would start again.

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It was the last Saturday before Christmas, and she had agreed to meet Ginny for a trip to Hogsmeade to get any last-minute gifts. Ginny would be going back to the Burrow on Sunday, and while Hermione acknowledged that her friendship with the Weasley sister had been a little strained this term, she would still miss her.

"I have a surprise for you," Ginny grinned as they headed into the village. "And I reckon it might actually put a smile on your face."

Hermione arched an eyebrow. "I'm intrigued."

The pretty redhead reached into her bag and removed two presents; one fist-sized in clumsy, red wrapping, and the other a slightly larger box with gold wrapping. Hermione's confused eyes flickered between the two gifts before giving Ginny an expectant look.

"Are these for me?"

"Certainly are," the younger witch nodded. "They're from Harry and Ron."

Hermione felt her mouth fall open. "What? How-

"They sent them to Mum back in October," Ginny explained, pushing the presents into her friend's hands. "She wanted to surprise you because she knows how much you're missing them."

"I can't believe they thought about it so early," she mumbled to herself, stroking her fingertips over the precious packages. "Thank you."

"It's no worry," Ginny said. "The red one's-

"From Ron," Hermione finished with a knowing twitch of her lips. "He never could wrap to save his life. He used to make Harry and I wrap the presents he'd bought for you and your

family."

"Lazy bugger," she rolled her eyes. "I'm dying to know what he got you though; send me an Owl after you open it. Mum said that my present from him was obvious."

"You got presents from them too?"

"They're waiting for me at home," she said. "I can safely guess that Ron got me another scarf, but I'm hoping Harry was a bit more inventive."

A thoughtful expression crossed Hermione's features. "Is there no way we can send them anything?"

"No," Ginny frowned, helping Hermione tuck the gifts into her bag. "Mum asked Remus, but we don't even know where they are, and Hedwig never waits around to give her anything."

"It would have been nice to give them something-

"Don't," Ginny warned in a low tone. "These were supposed to cheer you up, not make you all mopey-

"Sorry," Hermione winced. "Thank you for the surprise, Gin."

"Nice to see you smile," she commented as they wandered into the village. "Right, you're going to have to help me pick something for Fred and George."

The pair of witches had spent an hour browsing for their final bits and bobs when Hermione left Ginny to barter over a Charmed wristwatch for her Dad. The brunette aimlessly strolled along the snow-sprinkled path and admired the striking window-displays; wonderfully decorated with Christmas trimmings and magical trinkets that roused an inkling of festive excitement in her heart.

She hesitated at one particular window, humming in thought as a wonderful idea invaded her head and encouraged to slip inside the shop. She headed directly over to the item that had caught her eye and thought of Draco; her mind already made up that she would need to have a word with McGonagall once she returned to Hogwarts, and that the item was perfect.

"Can I help you?" the clerk interrupted her musings.

"Yes," Hermione nodded. "Can I have this, please?"

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The Headmistress eyed her companion sceptically. "Miss Granger-

"I know this is a lot to ask," Hermione hushed the older witch. "But it's Christmas, and I think he needs it."

"I'm not sure I can-

"Just for an hour," she pushed tenaciously. "Please, Professor. There's nobody here anyway, and I promise that he won't try anything. I think he knows now that we are trying to help him."

"You can't be certain of that, Hermione," McGonagall replied in that wise tone of hers. "What if he-

"He has no wand," she argued. "He has no where to go, and he is...better now-

"Hermione-

"Look," she blurted, the desperation loud in her voice. "I will make sure that nothing goes wrong; I promise. You know I am capable."

McGonagall tilted her head and regarded her student with warming eyes. "Why are you doing him this favour?"

Hermione schooled her features to appear indifferent. "I just think he needs a break," she offered evenly. "And as I said; it's Christmas. You know, time of forgiveness."

The Headmistress seemed to toss that statement around in her head a couple of times before she released a long and yielding breath. "Very well."

"Really?" Hermione blinked with surprise. "It's okay?"

"I will probably regret this," McGonagall sighed, massaging her temple. "But yes, I will make arrangements so it's possible-

"Oh, thank you so much, Professor-

"But you will take sole responsibility should anything happen," she warned strictly. "You must ensure that Mr Malfoy doesn't try anything foolhardy-

"Of course-

"And this is a one-off," she continued, rising from her seat. "Make sure he knows that-

"I will," Hermione nodded eagerly, jumping up and nearing her mentor to embrace her in a grateful hug. "Thank you, Professor."

Minerva shifted awkwardly, but placed a comforting hand on her student's back and surrendered to a small smile. "Merry Christmas, Hermione."

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Draco swore under his breath; tossing his third attempt in the sink and watching in swirl down the drain.

He'd had a craving for a coffee, but trying to imitate Granger's perfect cups of caffeinated goodness had proved unsuccessful and very frustrating. He had witnessed the witch make them countless times and had reasoned that it seemed simple enough, but evidently there was something missing, as he couldn't even get the colour correct. He was about to try again when she finally walked through the door two hours later than she normally did; her cheeks rosy with a winter blush, and her hair tousled by the wind.

She dropped her apparently heavy bags near the couch, and his stare lingered on her face, as it often seemed to do when she was oblivious to his presence. It was one of his many new and irritating habits that had decided to kick in since their lusty nights in her room had begun, but there was little point in resisting when he had already succumbed to his inappropriate desire to touch her. She must have heard the kettle starting its fourth boil because her eyes shifted over to him, and he scowled at her when she gave one of her bags a non-too-sly nudge behind the sofa.

"There's something wrong with this fucking kettle," he told her, pointing at the offending object.

"What do you mean?"

"I have tried, and it just doesn't taste like coffee," he explained, and the connotation that it actually didn't taste like the coffee she made hovered between them. "I flicked the switch and did all the stuff that you do-

"Did you add milk?" she asked, moving towards him.

"Of course."

"And two sugars?"

"Yes."

"Well, did you actually put the coffee in?" she questioned, smothering a grin when he simply tweaked an eyebrow at her. "It's in the blue tin in the top cupboard-

"This is ridiculous," he growled. "I shouldn't have to be degraded to doing such simple tasks the Muggle way."

He was in the mood to rile her up today; since they had begun killing nights together in forbidden bliss, she had become somewhat reserved and uncertain around him, and he hated it. If he had to select one reason he respected Granger, it would be her volatile temper, not unlike his own. When minutes passed like hours in this prison, her passionate opinions and skill to beat him down with witty words made the days...bearable, and something about the flicker of flames in her eyes when she was mid-rant made his groin jerk.

Combine that with his genuine agitation at being stuck in this dorm all day, and that she had apparently bought him something after he had specifically told her not to, and the scolding words simply tumbled out of his mouth.

"It's not degrading," she countered quickly, giving him a stern look that perked his interest. "This is how people do things without magic-

"Well it's a pain in my fucking neck!" he spat. "And just what the hell were you hiding behind the couch?"

"Nothing-

"I told you I didn't want anything! I swear, Granger, you just insist on making this more difficult-

"I'm making this difficult?" she repeated angrily. "Godric, you are such a selfish prick-

"I said I didn't want anything from you-

"Well tough luck!" Hermione shouted, squaring her shoulders and shooting him a defiant glare. "It's Christmas! Things are crap enough without you being a miserable-

"I don't-

"I am not finished!" she scolded. "Bloody hell, Draco! Why have you got to question everything-

"Because I am not exactly in a position where I can give you anything back!" he yelled, raking his tense fingers through his icy hair. "I don't want to have a list of debts to you-

"I don't want anything back," she said slowly. "I never expected-

"Then why bother?"

"Because it's Christmas," she sighed, her eyes forlorn. "Just trust me on this-

"I have no reason to trust you," Draco interjected, noting the disappointment flash in her hazels. "You have no reason to give me anything-

"It's just...it's something nice to do-

"Fucking nice," he grumbled coldly, curling his lip as though the word scorched his tongue. "You Gryffindors are so pathetic-

"I am not pathetic," she ground out between her teeth. "Don't you dare-

"Well, don't talk such bollocks-

"You know, it's okay to trust people and be nice!" she argued with rising impatience. "It's okay to care about other people-

"Granger-

"It's okay to NOT turn into your father!" Hermione ranted, regretting her words a little when a dangerous expression stole his features.

"I warned you," he hissed lowly. "Never to mention my father-

"Draco-

"You think spreading your legs for me gives you the fucking right to bring up my family?" he sneered, bringing his face close to hers. "I'm telling you right now-

"I just want you to realise that trusting people does not make you pathetic!" she protested, moving close enough that his hot breath tingled her forehead. "It doesn't make you weak or... or inferior-

"What do you want from me, Granger?" he asked with an exasperated look. "You want me to trust you?"

"It would be a start-

"For fuck's sake," he muttered under his breath. "This argument is completely irrelevant. You don't trust me."

Hermione released a weary breath and raised her fingertips to brush against his jaw. "I'd like to," she told him quietly, relieved when the muscles in his face relaxed under her touch, but she was completely baffled when his lips twitched into a demi-smirk.

"I've been wondering when you would get all bitchy again," he remarked, pulling his chin away from her soothing ministrations, as his features quickly turned sour again. "Look, Granger, I was under the impression that we had... agreed to just ignore Christmas-

"Well, I changed my mind," she said defiantly. "I want Christmas to feel like...like Christmas, and I refuse to let you bugger this up! We will-

"I don't see the point to all this!" he fired back, feeling his insides clench as he watched her temper flare. "It's just a day-

"That's enough!" she shouted, slicing her hand through the air for finality. "We are done here-

Draco leaned in and captured her mouth with a swift and heated kiss; grabbing her face roughly and manoeuvring them towards the couch with stumbling urgency. When the backs of her thighs smacked against the armrest, they separated their lips, and he watched the

embers dance in her half-lidded eyes for a moment as her surprised, little breaths licked at his skin. Privately scolding himself for getting too carried away, he put distance between them and fixed her with an indifferent mask.

"Fine, Granger," he mumbled. "Do what you want-

"I just want a normal Christmas," she whispered sadly, resting her hands against his chest and rubbing absent patters across his collarbone. "And I...I would like you to take part in it."

Draco frowned and closed his eyes. "Why?"

"Because I think you need it as much as I do."

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In the week leading up to Christmas, the days and nights all seemed to seep into each other, and the dawns and dusks became interchangeable figments of the winter skies. Hogwarts drowned in the silent solitude of it all, playing host to the dozen inhabitants that had remained in the ancient castle. The snow had fallen harder, and Hermione had wandered the glittering grounds by herself in the empty hours, trying to find Luna, who had apparently stayed at the school, but was nowhere to be found.

Hermione was roused awake by Draco's usual attempts to leave the room before the sunrays warmed her face, and it was only an hour later, when she glimpsed her scribbled and crooked calendar, that she realised it was Christmas day.

She allowed herself a personal smile before she left her bed and shrugged on her dressing gown, heading straight to the sitting area. She gave Draco's door a contemplative glance but decided against disturbing him just yet; she had no specific plans for him until much later. Things had been reasonably easy between them in the recent days; their argumentative natures had come back into play and some of the awkwardness had melted away as a result, although Draco was still adamantly refusing to acknowledge anything close to a festive spirit.

They bickered and rowed, as they had before, but he had refrained from using the word 'Mudblood,' and the passion of their squabbles usually led to an interesting hip-lock in her bed of dangerous secrets. She had tried to rationalise her growing feelings for Draco, but reason seemed to abandon her whenever he was concerned.

She moved to the Christmas tree and eyed the small selection of gifts; the ones from Harry and Ron, three from Ginny, McGonagall and Neville, and a bulky envelope - no doubt filled with money - from her parents. From the Headmistress she received an advanced book on

Transfiguration (which she couldn't wait to dive into), a selection of wonderful and exotic fragrances from Ginny, and a box of delicious chocolates from Neville.

Harry had sent her a photograph of the three of them; a stunning picture that had been taken last Christmas, with them surrounded by snow and looking completely immune to the cold spin of the world. Set in a charmed frame, with ivy and holly that sparkled and moved, she adored it, and reminded herself to place it right next to her bed.

She moved on to Ron's, peeling away the hastily-wrapped paper and eyeing the jewellery box with trepidation snaking up her spine. The locket was beautiful; heart-shaped silver and flecked with yellow gem-stones that winked by the light. It was striking and feminine and... just not her. She studied it with guilt rising in her throat, when the familiar voice made her start.

"It's from Weasley, isn't it?" Draco questioned bitterly. "I had assumed that you two were just friends-

"We are just friends," she cut in quickly, rising to her feet.

His jealous eyes shifted to the offending object. "That necklace says otherwise-

"People give gifts at Christmas-

"So do lovers-

"Draco-

"Look, Granger," he growled, taking a step towards her. "I don't share-

"This is ridiculous," she scoffed, shouldering him out of the way and moving towards the other side of the room. "I'm not listening to this-

"Where are you going?"

"For a shower!" she snapped over her shoulder, slamming the door behind her with a shrill smack.

Draco snarled into the empty room and clenched his fists until his palms burned and bled. What did she expect from him? He was hardly accustomed to their complex and unorthodox circumstances, and he was struggling to absorb it all; he had been so certain that his interest in her would simmer after a couple of rounds on the mattress, but almost every night, he returned to her bed.

Her lack of experience was so oddly charming, and now she had finally reverted back to feisty ways, he just couldn't help himself. She was his first sexual partner with whom he just seemed to...click. Something about their biology or...Merlin knew what, just worked, and it wasn't just the sex. Her kisses, her touch...her very presence made him react and shiver inside, and he had no clue what that meant.

He heard the waterdrops pulse against the tiles and her flesh, and something possessive ignited in his gut. Weasley had barely been an issue in their isolated dorm; merely an outside entity that was easily forgotten in here, but now a part of the Ginger Tumour - that ugly sodding locket - was in the room, and subsequently in Granger's thoughts, and he despised that.

Call it that male instinct to claim what was his, or something more profound, but his feet carried him to the bathroom door. He discarded items of his clothing, tossing his bed-vest and pyjama bottoms to the side as he mused that another tryst with his witch under the shower was long overdue.

Just as he had before, he remained as quiet as possible, slipping in behind her and studying her with reluctant admiration. Opportunities to observe her unexpected beauty were rare and short-lived, as her insecurities always made her shield her body from his eyes. He inspected every inch of her; from her toffee-tinted curls, to the wave of her hips, and the tips of her toes, but he had yet to discover a single flaw. If it weren't for her blood, then...

"What are you doing, Draco?" she shattered his thoughts, turning her head to peek at him from under the water-gems tucked between her lashes.

"I also needed shower," he lied casually, pressing his chest against her back and rubbing the shadows of his fingers up her waist.

She made a half-hearted attempt to brush away his hands. "I am still angry at you-

"You are always angry at me-

"Have I ever given you the impression that I would just...you know...

"Fuck?" he provided with a slight shrug. "Shag-

"Have sex with," she corrected with a blush. "Do I honestly strike you as the kind of person who would have sex with just anyone? Or sleep with someone when I was in a relationship with someone else?"

He clicked his jaw. "No," he admitted tensely, attempting to dampen her chagrin with tactical strokes of his hands. "But you and the Weasel have a history-

"I have never quizzed you about your previous conquests-

"Pansy and Astoria," he supplied blankly. "But your...relationship with Weasley is different-

"That's enough," she sighed, slowly twisting to face him. "I am...I am sleeping with you, and that is it. I would never even consider having another lover, and I would hope that you would offer me the same level of respect, even if you weren't stuck in here."

He said nothing, but lifted his hand to move aside some of the sodden strands that clung to her forehead, and leaned down to place an almost chaste kiss on her lips. It was soft and firm; the kind he had never dared to give her before, and even though the first tastes of passion

began to mingle between their mouths after a few moments, Hermione knew it was different, and she felt her insides warm.

Draco could still feel that possessive whisper at the back of his skull; that need to mark her in a way that Weasley hadn't. He slowly dragged his kisses down the column of her throat, and received a dulcet sigh as he dipped to her chest. When he dropped to his knees and concentrated his hard pecks against her stomach, he felt her tense, and his instincts that she had never had this done to her before were confirmed.

"Draco," she mumbled in a shaky voice. "I've never-

"It's alright," he soothed in the steadiest voice he could manage. "You will like this, Granger-

"But I-

"Trust me, Hermione," he said purposefully, locking their eyes for a lingering moment. "I will not hurt you."

She predictably chewed her lip for some uncertain seconds, before she gave him a nervous nod of assent, and leaned her back against the tiled wall in a futile effort to relax. He carefully trailed his fingertips up her legs with relaxing attentions, before he gently gave her knees a slight nudge apart. His breath teased her sensitive spot, and Hermione choked on a whimper as new and wonderful sensations shimmered behind her navel.

"Consider this my gift," Draco mumbled, before he pressed his tongue against her and relished her moan.

It'll be better than that tacky fucking locket.

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"I guess it's time," Hermione murmured.

"What for?"

"To give you your present."

Draco scowled, but had to fight the amused grin that threatened to betray him when she almost fell off the couch.

After their two-hour shower, they had moved to the sofa, tangled in a batch of conjured sheets, and the day had been spent with lazy conversations, debates and a turkey-sandwich

dinner in between amorous intermissions. Night had stolen the skies before he'd even realised it, and a quick glance at the clock in the kitchenette told him it was almost quarter-to-eleven.

It had been far from the conventional Christmases with his family, but it had been...bloody decent actually, considering the circumstances. How could any self-respecting male complain after a day dedicated to sex on the sofa?

He studied her as she clutched one of the sheets close to her chest, awkwardly moving towards the lone gift under the tree, which was wrapped in green paper and tied with a gold bow. He reluctantly pulled himself into a sitting position as she placed the package in his lap and sat next to him with an expectant look on her face.

"I'd like to point out, again, that this is unnecessary," he grumbled, pulling away the ribbon.

"Just open it," she frowned, anxiously tapping her fingers against her ankle and checking the clock. "We don't have much time."

He tore away the wrapping and slowly removed the item inside, his brow creasing as he felt the soft fabric beneath his curious touch. It was a black coat, not unlike one he'd had a couple of years ago; simple and yet evidently expensive with its quality and design. He cocked a sceptical eyebrow and lifted his eyes with the intention of asking why she had chosen this, but she cut him off before he could even inhale.

"It's really only half of your present," she mumbled apprehensively. "I...I managed to convince McGonagall to let you out of this room."

His eyes widened. "I don't understand," he said quietly. "I can...I can go?"

"It's just for tonight," she told him quickly. "McGonagall has agreed to let you leave here so long as I am with you, but we can't leave the grounds and we only have between eleven and midnight, so it's like the whole Cinderella thing."

"The what?"

"Never mind," she shook her head. "Look, Draco, I need you to understand that this is a one-off hour for Christmas, and if you try to run away, I will have to stop you."

The silver-haired Slytherin could do little but nod absently as he considered the witch before him with complete bafflement. He remembered all his previous Christmases and Birthdays, and they were all stocked with materialistic objects and empty promises that had been so predictable and anti-climatic. Nobody had ever taken the time or effort to consider something this...thoughtful; not even his parents.

He could honestly say that the thought of attempting a runner never crossed his mind; he knew he had no place to go, and it wouldn't only take a flick of her wand to impede any escape attempt.

"I am...uncertain what to say," he confessed warily, fingering his new coat and quite surprised that she had managed to guess his tastes accurately.

"I expected as much," she nodded with a slight smile. "We should get ready," she suggested, gesturing to his coat. "Wrap up warm. It's freezing outside."

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Hermione had led them down the quieter sections of the castle with a dim Lumos, but the halls were dead and abandoned, as McGonagall had assured her they would be. When they finally reached the door to the outside, Draco soaked up the view of the snow-silky landscape that glowed by the hue of the almost-full moon. Light and delicate snowflakes kissed his cheeks from scattered clouds that were dissected by moonbeams and a steady breeze.

The crispy crunch beneath his feet roused reminiscent notions that he would have never normally appreciated, as he absently followed Granger further away from the ancient school, realising she was leading them towards the lake as they meandered between leafless trees. The cold air whipped around them and harassed the exposed skin of their faces as they trudged through the snow-snared grass, oblivious to the pair of friendly eyes watching them. They walked side-by-side in silence as Draco sucked in the cold and virgin air greedily, and enjoyed it tickling the back of his throat.

"It's colder than I thought it would be," Hermione commented next to him. "I'll cast a Warming Shield-

"Don't," he hushed her in a blank tone. "I had forgotten what the wind feels like."

She frowned at his comment and bobbed her head in understanding, keeping her Lumos low enough to guide their way and hopefully just be mistaken for a glimmer of snow, should anyone glance out of one of the castle's windows. They reached a small frozen inlet of water, and they paused underneath the fragile skeleton of a weeping willow to eye the reflections of stars freckled across the lake's icy surface.

"It's funny," Hermione muttered into the navy night. "I planned getting you here meticulously, but I never thought about what we could do once we were outside."

"Must you plan everything?" he questioned.

"Not everything. There are a couple of things that I've intended to do, but never gotten round to."

"Like what?"

She tilted her head and contemplated his question, her eyes landing on the frozen lake. "I always wanted to go ice skating."

"You've never been ice skating?" he repeated, giving her a look of slight surprise. "You seem like the type would enjoy that kind of thing."

"I think I would," she nodded. "Can you ice skate?"

"Of course."

Hermione swallowed back the lump in her throat and lifted her chin. "Would you teach me?"

"You're joking, right?" he scoffed, but the taunt melted in his mouth when he noted her pleading look. His pebble-grey eyes studied her intently, and his lip twitched before he rolled his eyes in surrender. "Fine," he said, heading towards the edge of the lake. "I suppose it could be amusing to watch you fall. What about all the creatures in the lake though?"

"They get put into a hibernation state when it freezes like this," she explained, following him, and reciting a quick transfiguration spell to turn their shoes into skates. "Draco, are you..."

She trailed off as he took to the ice with an effortless grace and skill that made her chest flutter for a reason she couldn't comprehend. Feeling completely inadequate, she hesitantly placed one skate onto the ice and cringed at the odd and unbalanced feeling that stole her nerve.

"Draco," she called, bringing her foot back to the land. "I've changed my mind-

"Come on, Granger," he goaded, easily coasting across the frozen surface. "What happened to all that Gryffindor courage bollocks?"

"I don't like it," she told him. "I don't like not being in control and-

"This was your idea," he reminded her.

"Well, then can you help me?" she requested, gesturing that she wanted him to come back to her side. "Just...give me a hand or something-

"If you would just get on the ice-

"Please, Draco," she tried, catching his eyes to let him know she was serious.

"For Merlin's sake," he sighed, making his way over to her and stretching out his hand.

"Come on then, Granger."

"Don't be a prick and push me or anything," the witch warned, taking his offered hand and bracing herself as she settled her skate on the lake again. She wobbled, and Draco instinctively provided his other hand for her balance as she hastily placed her other skate on the ice, feeling her nails through his multiple layers as she clung to him desperately. "I don't like this."

"I can see that," he smirked mockingly as she wavered on her unstable legs. "Get a grip, Granger. It's a piece of piss once you get going-

"Cocky prat-

"Just move your skates in diagonal lines," he instructed, slowly gliding backwards and pulling her with him. "You'll get the hang of it-

"I swear, Draco," she whispered, in a tone that was apparently meant to be threatening. "If you let go of my hands-

"I won't let go," he assured her absently, catching her as she stumbled. "Bloody hell, you really do have no coordination. Now I think of it, you were crap on a broom too."

"Merlin forbid I have a handicap," she replied, allowing him to essentially drag her across the ice. "Everyone has a weakness."

Draco faltered at that comment but managed to keep them both steady as he mulled over her words. In the back of his brain, he had half-expected that her influence over him would wither once he had escaped her isolated dorm, but watching her now; specks of snow trapped between the strands of her hair, a blossom-blush warming her features, and trusting him like it was the easiest thing in the world, she was just as alluring out here as she was in their room.

He'd expected to revert back to his old ways

To be swarmed by his previous opinions

To hate her again, as he should.

But...

She had somehow become his weakness.

"I think I've got it now," Hermione said, her voice rich with concentration. "Let go of one of my hands-

"Forgive me," Draco blurted suddenly, halting them where they were and grasping her upper arms. His breathing became laboured as he watched the shock swirl in her Autumn-shaded eyes, and he resisted that ever-present urge to kiss her slightly parted lips as he waited for her response. "Forgive me," he repeated, quieter this time.

For everything I have ever done, and everything I will inevitably do to hurt you in the future.

Blame it on that sentimental rush that Christmas apparently inflicted on the unsuspecting, or the acceptance that his attraction to her existed beyond the walls of her dorm, or even that he wanted to repay her for reminding him how the wind felt, but he needed this one moment of clarity before they returned to the castle. She was the only aspect in his dark existence that was close to pure and good, and he wanted to savour her before he, or the realities of War, destroyed this dose of peace.

"I think I forgave you weeks ago," she told him with a sad smile, leaning up to snatch his lips and seal her promise. She felt tears slip past her lashes as she broke their kiss and rested her

forehead against his, clenching her eyes shut to conceal the true level of her affection. "Merry Christmas, Draco."

Just a Perfect Day.

You made me forget myself.

I thought I was someone else.

Someone good.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies...Sorry, sorry, sorry, sorry! My power and water buggered up on Christmas Day so I have been flitting between friends' houses in an effort to try and get this up...I feel so bad...Sad face...I extended it to try and make up for it...

I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas! Sincerely! Thanks to Karate Chic for giving me my 1000th review (omfg...) and I just don't know how to thank you for the wonderful responses I've had...Just lovely...And thanks to everyone who suggested chapter titles...A fair few of you mentioned 'gifts,' and I thought it suited this chapter perfectly, so thanks so much!

The song lyrics at the end are from 'Perfect Day' by Lou Reed. I just thought they matched Draco's mindset for the end of this fic. I always loved Lex Waltz's suggestion of 'Awake My Soul' by Mumford and Sons.

Anywho...lend me your thoughts on the chapter if you can, and if anyone has any questions etc. feel free to add me on FB (I'm rubbish with keeping on top of my emails).

Read and Review (Because it's Christmas! ^_^)

Thanks for reading, and my sincere apologies again.

Greys

Chapter Notes

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

Hermione was stirred awake by the heavy breaths tingling the sensitive skin between her shoulder-blades, and she blinked away the shadows of what had felt like a pleasant dream.

She stared into space as her slumber-slow thoughts gathered together, and her gaze widened when she realised what the breaths against her skin meant. She carefully twisted her body around, and her eyes fell to the sleeping Slytherin next to her, following the line of his lazy hand, tossed across her waist.

He had stayed. He had stayed with her in bed until morning.

She smiled in spite of herself, and carefully grazed the tips of her fingers over his knuckles, catching sight of her bedside clock and noting that they had almost slept in until eleven this Boxing Day morning. She couldn't even remember the last time she had managed a lie-in with her previous bouts of insomnia taking their toll, and the fact that he was here gave her a forgotten feeling of peace.

She settled back down in the toasty sheets and admired his relaxed features; so beautiful when he was lost to the dreams and oblivious to reality. It might have been selfish and a bit irrational, but she almost allowed the darkness of the War to slip to the back of her mind as she cherished this surreal moment.

He shifted, gripping her hip a little tighter, and Hermione tried to steady her breathing. She didn't want him to wake up; not just yet. Merlin knew if he would ever treat her to his presence in the morning again, and she wanted to remember how it felt to feel like this...like they were real...

And content...

She knew it was only a temporary thing; the Christmas season had a nasty habit of deluding people and giving birth to dangerous levels of optimism, but for the moment she felt warm and the closest to...happy in months. And all because her should-be enemy was at her side. Her smile stretched as she recalled their night outside.

Forgive me...

The specifics weren't necessary, nor were the reasons he had asked her for forgiveness, but Godric it had been a shock. An amazing shock. That had been her Christmas present; a small sacrifice of his pride and ego for the sake of her clemency.

He really had changed in the last three months.

It was becoming more obvious now, the shrinking lies and prejudices that had been scratched into skull, and he was starting to think for himself and make his own judgements. All she could do was give him the facts and hope that he would eventually see sense, and acknowledge that blood purity was an irrelevant circumstance, like hair colour or the shades of skin. It was a painfully slow process and it was barely the beginning, but Dumbledore had clearly thought Draco's soul was worth saving, and now she understood why.

And she liked him...Godric help her, she really did.

"Do you often watch people sleep, Granger?" his gruff voice made her gasp, and his eyes slowly peeled open to fix her with an agitated look.

"I hate when you do that," she mumbled with an embarrassed blush, frowning as he dragged his arm off her.

"Diddums," he smirked, propping his head up with his hand and leaning over her. "Fuck, it's cold in here."

"Are those levels profanity necessary at this time in the morning?" she grimaced.

"Are your big words?" he fired back smugly. "And yes, I know what they mean, but really, Granger. You could at least wait until midday before you smack me with your internal thesaurus."

"Well," she grinned, encouraged by his unexpected casual manner. "I thought you of all people would be able to keep up."

"That's a backhanded compliment," he said with subtle amusement. "Dare I ask why you're up so early? Some weird Muggle tradition?"

"It's almost eleven."

"Don't be ridiculous," Draco scoffed, but when he spotted the clock, his brow creased with surprise.

His eyes shifted to the photograph next to it; the picture Potter had given her yesterday of her and those feckless morons she kept around. The three of them were smiling and laughing about something he would never know, and both of her friends had a protective arm slung across her shoulders, as if to warn him that she was theirs and not his. The peculiar sense of calm that had settled between them this morning quickly dissipated, and when the photograph mocked him with another private chuckle between Granger and that ginger fuckwit, Draco felt his defensive instincts kick back in.

"I should get up," he grumbled, moving to the edge of the bed and sliding his boxers up his legs. "It's late-

"Don't do that, Draco," she stilled his actions with a firm tone. "Don't shut off like that. We were just talking-

"Then what would you have me do?" he asked between gritted teeth. "Pretend that this is normal?"

"I would have you define 'normal' first," she replied. "Come back to bed-

"You were always a fan of facts, Granger," he said slowly, keeping his back to her. "So here's the facts; we are enemies-

"Draco-

"To make it clear," he carried on, eyeing the Dark Mark on his forearm with bile rising in his throat. "I'm a Death Eater-

"No you're not-

"A shit one, I'll admit," he muttered in a low voice. "Shit enough that I managed to piss off Voldemort within a year, but a Death Eater nonetheless, Granger. And you are a member of the Order-

"You were never really one of them," she argued adamantly. "And you know it-

"You fight for the Light," he continued with an almost dejected tone. "And I am part of the Dark, and that's how it is."

Hermione sighed and tried to place a hand against his back, but he shrugged her away. "It's not that simple, Draco," she tried.

"It is that simple," he growled. "You can search for the anomalies all you like, Granger, but these are the facts. Most things are black and white."

"Then why are there so many shades of grey?" she whispered, moving carefully behind him and wrapping her arms around his abdomen. She rested her cheek against the taut muscles of his back and peppered dreamy kisses down his spine. "I like the colour grey."

He sealed his eyes and tried not to bend to her lulling lips and tempting words. "You're too stubborn, Granger."

"So are you-

"It's all very well to pretend our...antics are normal in here, Granger," he scowled. "But we won't be in here forever-

"We can cross that bridge when we come to it," she offered in a quiet voice.

"It would be wise to end this now," he told her stoically, and Hermione felt her chest constrict. "I will end up hurting you."

"If you don't care about my feelings, then why should that matter?"

He flinched, and resigned himself to giving her another shred of his tattered dignity. "I never said I didn't care for your feelings."

Hermione felt the optimism warm her blood, but optimism is a dangerous thing.

"Then how do you feel for me?" she asked nervously, stroking absent shapes across his stomach. He had started their repeated use of this question, and as she considered all the previous answers they had each given, she realised how different they had become.

"I don't know," he murmured quietly. "It's...impossible to define."

"Do you still hate me?" she pushed.

He released a defeated breath and raised a hand to rub his forehead. "No," he answered after a long pause. "It would certainly be more convenient, but you know I don't, Hermione." He hesitated to take a sobering breath. "And how do you feel for me?"

She gave the back of his neck another kiss. "I like you, Draco," she admitted softly, and the confession was so innocent and honest that it made his insides clench. "I thought...I thought that was obvious-

"I will hurt you," he repeated, louder this time. "It's all very well to play fairytales in this room, but it won't last-

"Then surely it would make more sense to make the most of it," she reasoned steadily, relieved when she felt his muscles relax under her cheek. "Draco, I am getting tired of trying to convince you to stop questioning this."

He tensed his jaw. "Then why do you?"

Hermione licked her lips and hoped her voice didn't waver. "Because I feared this War had made me lose hope," she breathed. "But you reminded me how to smile."

Merlin, her honesty was crushing his resolve, but then, had he really ever wanted this to end? It was simply instinctive to question and battle it for the sake of his waning pride. He slowly placed his hand on top of hers and bowed his head in surrender as he brushed his fingers across hers.

"Never say I didn't try to warn you," he spoke stonily. "This will all end in tears."

"Perhaps," she agreed sadly. "But for now, we have no bridges-

"To cross," he finished for her, turning slightly to glimpse her over his shoulder. "Must you always work in riddles?"

"They're more like analogies," she corrected, craning her neck to peck his cheek. "Are we finished arguing?"

"We will never be finished arguing, Granger."

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Hermione followed the sunken foot-tracks in the snow and dragged her hand across a branch to steady her steps.

She felt guilty for the notion, considering Draco's inability to leave, but she had needed to escape her dorm and swallow some fresh air. He had slipped away for a shower and then predictably disappeared into his room; perhaps to scorn himself again for their complicated relationship, or maybe just to catch up on lost sleep. She had no idea, and knew better than to ask when she had seen that slightly tormented look in his eyes before he had left her.

She cast a quick Warming Charm to hush the chill and seated herself on a hefty rock under a brittle and winter-beaten Oak to study the familiar surroundings. The snow had paused for Boxing Day's afternoon, and she missed that infinite childish tingle that it always gave her, but the grey clouds in the sky promised more, and she hoped it was soon.

"Miss Granger," a wise voice broke her reverie. "I thought that was you."

"Hello, Professor," Hermione greeted the Headmistress. "You needed a walk too?"

"I don't have many duties at the moment," she said with disappointment. "You looked rather distant. Is something troubling you?"

"Nothing that shouldn't be troubling me," the youngest witch shrugged.

"Would you like to be left alone with your thoughts?" McGonagall asked, bristling when a harsh wind tore through the air. "Or would you care for some company, albeit the company of an old woman?"

Hermione breathed a laugh and patted the space next to her on the boulder. "Have a seat."

"Just a moment," McGonagall muttered, removing her wand and casting a charm to soften the rock before she settled next to her student. "My back is not as forgiving as it used to be. What is on your mind, Hermione?"

"I was wondering what Harry and Ron are doing now," she confessed slowly. "And hoping that they managed to enjoy Christmas on some level."

"I'm sure Mr Weasley managed to create some form of entertainment," the Headmistress offered with a knowing grin. "You should not worry so much about them. If they were in trouble or really needed to get a hold of one of us, there are ways they could do so; Patronuses, Owl, et cetera."

"I know," she agreed absently. "I just wish I could have gone with them."

"I hope you don't resent me for asking you to remain here with me," McGonagall sighed.

"The only reason Remus agreed to let them go was because they assured him they would only be gone a week. Had any of us known that they'd intended to leave for these many months, it would not have been permitted."

"I knew they wouldn't come back after a week," Hermione mumbled. "Harry was too determined to find the Horcruxes."

"Well, I must admit that they are doing better than I predicted," she said in a thoughtful tone.

"Have more faith in them, Hermione. Perhaps I need you more than they do at the moment."

The brunette cocked her head to the side and regarded her mentor hesitantly. "Professor, will you forgive me for asking a blunt question?"

"Depends what that question is."

"Well," Hermione began awkwardly. "You obviously like children, or you wouldn't be a teacher, and you're very good at giving advice, so I was just wondering why you never had any children of your own?"

"But I have had many children," she replied, and Hermione's eyebrows arched in surprise.

"Thousands actually. Some good and some bad, but they all hold a place in my memory."

"Your students."

"Of course," McGonagall nodded, giving the young witch a meaningful look. "And every now and then, an exceptional one comes along who makes me feel as proud as any mother."

Hermione smiled as she felt a warm rush of gratitude and respect for her mentor. "Thank you," she sighed. "For everything."

"You're very welcome," the Headmistress said, rising from her seat with some age-induced difficulty. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I agreed to meet Filius and Horace for some lunch, but if I may ask you a question before I go?"

"Of course."

"This arrangement with Mr Malfoy," she started with a measured voice, and Hermione tried not to flush. "I can see that things have...altered between you, and I am wondering whether I should be concerned?"

Hermione wondered for a moment her lips were slightly swollen from kisses, or if she had accidentally failed to conceal a bruise on her throat that would be suspiciously shaped like Draco's mouth. She hoped that the tensing of her shoulders wasn't obvious, and that the guilty shadow in her eyes was successfully hidden beneath her lashes.

"No," she mumbled finally, feigning certainty. "Everything's fine."

As McGonagall offered her an accepting nod and turned to leave, Hermione laced her fingers together and released a comfortable sigh when the snow started to fall again.

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Draco nursed his self-made coffee between his palms and inhaled the steam.

It wasn't as good as Granger's, but it would do, and as odd as it sounded, he actually felt like he'd accomplished something on his own today. Despite the fact that he had done it the Muggle way, he felt neither degraded nor foolish, but simply relieved that he was capable of doing such a mundane task. And if he'd done it, then perhaps Muggles were not quite as different as he'd assumed...

His head snapped up when Granger entered the room; frosted with snow and looking decidedly cold, but still charming. It almost disturbed him how alluring she was to him now, even in her baggy, Muggle clothing and with her slightly dishevelled appearance, but there was a sad bow to her lips that made him curious.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked, perhaps a little sharply.

"Nothing," Hermione breathed wearily. "I'm just a little tired."

"Liar," he accused, his ashy eyes tracking her as she moved past him into the kitchenette. "You are transparent at times, Granger."

"It's nothing," she insisted. "I just get a little down after Christmas. January always feels so bleak."

"It's not January yet," he pointed out, leaving his seat and coming up behind her. "Christmas was only yesterday."

"I know," she nodded. "But I know that next year is going to be awful, and I...I wish that things were different."

"Different," he repeated, reaching up to coil one of her curls around his finger. "You mean you wish that you were with Potter and Weasley."

The muscles in her back stiffened beneath his touch. "I miss them," she confessed sadly. "Just as I'm sure you miss your family. But I..." she trailed off, and Draco could imagine the blush staining her cheeks. "I would never...choose to erase what has happened between us. Even it meant seeing Harry and Ron."

A scary and dangerous bout of something close to affection hit him in the gut, and he continued to toy with the lock of her hair. "And what would they do, if they knew about us?"

"I don't know," she murmured, closing her eyes and leaning into his touch. "I think they would shout and scream, but I would hope that they love me enough to understand eventually, but I would be lying if I said they don't despise you."

"And I despise them."

"You despised me once," she reminded him, turning her body and taking a moment to admire his storm-grey eyes. "And what would your friends do if they found out about us?"

"We both know my friends wouldn't be the problem," Draco said with a pointed look, moving his busy fingers to fiddle with the hem of her jumper. "My parents would disown me, and I wouldn't see a knut of my inheritance. You know all this, Granger. I'm sure you've heard all about what happened to Andromeda."

"I have," she said, raising a hand stroke her fingers up his jaw. "There are more important things than money and reputation."

His lips twitched with scepticism. "Maybe in your world, Granger."

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Several nights later, and Hermione realised she had lost track of time. Draco had been notably calmer and less agitated since his Christmas stroll across the grounds, and she couldn't help but take advantage of it. He had stayed in her bed until morning-light a couple of times, although she couldn't decide if it was simply accidental, or if he chose to linger in their warmth and pass the early hours in her company.

That was where tonight found her; between his legs and leaning back into his chest, with only a few blankets tossed carelessly around them and body heat to rush the blood. She had Charmed her window-sill into a window-seat, and temporarily broken the wards so the wind could chase away some of the mustiness in her room. Plus, Draco seemed to like the breeze rousing goosebumps across their bare skin, and she was too relaxed here to disrupt it; with his limbs tangled around her, and his chin against her shoulder as they both read the book in her lap.

"Have you finished the page?" she asked.

"Granger," he muttered, his voice husky against her throat. "You can be quite a sly witch when you want to be."

She stifled a laugh. "And what would make you say that?"

"You're telling me your book choice wasn't intentional?"

She indulged in a private grin. "Perhaps on a subconscious level-

"Bollocks," he accused, but his tone was rich with amusement. "Two enemies shagging in secret? It's hardly subtle, Granger."

"This happens to be a Muggle classic," she told him, twisting her neck to peck the edge of his mouth. "Can I turn the page?"

"Go ahead," he nodded, returning a kiss to that tingly spot behind her ear. "Although I feel the need to point out that this Romeo bloke is a bit of a tosser."

"How so?"

"Well, he was supposedly obsessed with that Rosaline girl," he started critically. "And then he marries this Juliet after only knowing her a couple of days. The guy is a complete wet."

"I agree, it is all a bit rushed," Hermione mumbled reluctantly. "But romance was a lot different back then-

"You mean it was unrealistic," he said. "I'm actually quite looking forward to the part when he kills himself."

Hermione lowered her brow in confusion. "How do you know he kills himself?"

"That bit at the beginning," he explained as though it was obvious. "'A pair of star-crossed lovers take their life.' It kind of gives the plot away, Granger."

"Spoilsport."

"Don't blame me," he rasped, pressing his lips against her throat again. "Blame the author."

"But-

A loud bang followed by a burst of light echoed across the night, making Hermione start before she could retort. Her hand covered her hammering heart as she felt Draco's hold around tighten, almost protectively. Another crash of colours came seconds later, and she pushed her window open wider to catch the simmering remains of a sparkling unicorn galloping across the clouds.

"Fireworks," she sighed with understanding. "Merlin, that made me jump."

"I noticed," he mocked, releasing his firm grip on her. "Open the window a bit more, let's see what Flitwick settled on this year."

She complied and adjusted her body so they could both watch the display of animated creatures dance in the air. She adored magical fireworks; so different to the Muggle shows

she had been accustomed to, and Flitwick never failed to impress with his creativity.

"It must be New Year's Eve," she whispered with realisation, hastily shooting a look over to her clock.

One minute to midnight...

"Kiss me," Hermione blurted clumsily.

Draco turned to face her, and his eyes narrowed suspiciously at her bold words. "What are you-

"Just kiss me," she said again, desperately grasping his face and pulling him close to seal their lips, and their fates, if superstition was to be believed.

He was initially hesitant, but he quickly surrendered and tugged her into his lap, greedily running his hands over her waist, which ignited wonderful shivers to shoot down her spine. Her fingertips combed imaginary paths through his hair, and she sighed into his mouth appreciatively when his teeth gently latched onto her lower lip. She would never admit it, but she could easily kiss him for long and lazy hours.

When he pulled away, she hummed with disappointment and the sense of loss, but her eyes darted back over to her clock to discover it was indeed midnight. She turned back to Draco and watched the brazen colours of the fireworks reflect in his grey eyes and waltz across his pale features, and she felt something deep in her chest burn and swell.

"What was that about?" he asked in an uncertain voice, regarding her expectantly.

"It's a Muggle tradition," Hermione clarified automatically, knowing it wasn't something the wizarding community was familiar with. "It means...

That I want to spend the year with you...

It means that you are important to me...

It means that I want to keep you...

"It means nothing," she lied as a second thought. "It's just...it's just something Muggles do on New Year's Eve."

She could see he was reluctant to accept her explanation, but he simply rolled his eyes disapprovingly and shrugged his shoulders. "Muggles really are bizarre," he remarked, gesturing for her to settle back between his thighs. "Come on, Granger. I'm actually quite curious to find out what happens to the 'star-crossed lovers.'"

Hermione barely managed to suppress her cringe. "You know what happens," she murmured. "They die."

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She glided her fingers across the army of books in the restricted section of the library, scrutinising the titles that had any indication that they might contain any reference to Horcruxes. She finally selected an ancient-looking text that was withering in her hand before she turned and headed back to her dorm. She'd woken up alone this morning, and had decided she had a good few hours to continue her research before Draco emerged from his room later on.

New Year's Day assured that Hogwarts' corridors were barren and silent, and the afternoon was slowly pushing into the evening, which meant the remaining residents were probably all in their respective rooms, so Hermione was a little surprised when she spotted a figure urgently rushing towards her.

"Miss Granger, there you are," McGonagall breathed with apparent relief. "I need to talk with you."

Dread bubbled in her stomach as she absorbed the older witch's flustered behaviour. "Is something wrong?"

"I'm afraid there is," the Headmistress admitted in a grave tone. "Let's go to my office, I can explain it to you there."

Hermione barely had a moment to protest before McGonagall turned on her heel and began stalking back the way she'd come. "What is it, professor?" she questioned nervously, met only by silence as she tried to keep up. "Professor-

"I need to show you," she called over her shoulder.

Hermione's heart was rattling around her ribs by the time they reached the Head's office, and she followed McGonagall inside with trembling legs and a thousand questions. "Take a seat-

"I'd rather stand," Hermione declined, eyeing her teacher impatiently. "What's going on? You're frightening me."

McGonagall offered her an apologetic glance before she reached for the newspaper on her desk and handed it to the younger witch. Hermione's eyes scanned the Daily Prophet's front page, willing her mind to stop racing so she could properly make sense of the black, white and greys mingling together to create ominous words and shifting photographs. She skimmed over the article; the content barely registering in her head before she felt her heart shrink and snap.

She raised her watering eyes to McGonagall and tried to find her broken voice. "All...all of them? Dead?"

"Yes," the Headmistress nodded sullenly. "I'm sorry, Hermione, but I think it may be time."

Chapter End Notes

HAPPY NEW YEAR EVERYONE! I realise I'm a few days behind, but my New Year celebrations ending up spanning a couple of days and I'm a little buggered on my time-tracking skills! But I hope you all had a good one! I have raised a metaphorical glass to toast each of you for being so lovely.

I hope you liked the chapter, and I shall apologise now for the cliffy...don't hate me... Sorry about the shortness too, but the next chapter is going to be a long one by the looks of it...

Thank you all so much for the wonderful reviews for the last chapter, and massive thanks to all the new readers who let me know their thoughts! I really can't begin to explain how grateful I am...and this fic has gained so much more feedback and interest than I expected so...yeah...love, love, love! I have exams in the next couple of weeks but I'll do my best to get the next chapter up in a week.

I just realised how much British slang I use too...Sorry! I do it without thinking...I'm sure they're all on urbandictionary, but if you would like me to explain from now on in the a/n, just let me know, or send me an email or facebook message etc. (both on profile page).

Read and Review, and lend me some thoughts! And thanks again for reading.

Tears

Chapter Notes

Once again, if I may, recommend a song, and I have a feeling it will be a favourite amongst us Harry Potter fanatics, as it featured in Deathly Hallows: Part 1. I think you already know...Nick Cave - O Children. I adore this song anyway, and when I found out it was in the film...gahhhh...mental orgasm. While I know the interpretation of the song is a bit obscure, I always thought it was about how Children are the innocent victims of wars, so I think it fits this chapter quite well, but if anyone has any other ideas, let me know!

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

Hermione read the damning paragraphs again, blinking away the tears that blurred the words and burned her eyes. She focussed on one of the photographs, recognising the Finch-Fletchleys, Justin's parents, from when she'd seen them at King's Cross a few years ago.

She lifted her chin and gave McGonagall a pleading look. "Is Justin-

"He's alive," the Headmistress explained quickly. "He was visiting his Grandparents when it happened."

"Poor Justin," she whispered sadly, swallowing back a sob. "He must b-be devastated."

Her misty eyes moved to the other three photographs; each featuring a married Muggle couple with beaming smiles to serve as a reminder of how they once were. The eight adults had been murdered in the week between Christmas and New Year's Day, all showing signs of torture before the Killing Curse had been used to silence their screams. She wasn't familiar with the names, but she knew their stories well.

"They're all parents of Muggle-borns, aren't they?" she questioned sadly, already knowing the answer.

"Yes," McGonagall nodded, and Hermione could never recall seeing the other witch so shaken. "The Creevey residence was also broken into, but they were fortunately out of the country."

Hermione's eyes fell to the final two pictures; two boys, no older than fifteen, who had attended the wizarding school, Bryn Glas, in Wales. A tear slipped down her cheek as she studied their youthful faces and felt the sorrow overpower her chest. Tortured and killed, just like their parents.

"They're so young," she mumbled. "Too young."

"I know," McGonagall sighed, placing a comforting hand on her student's back. "The Death Eaters are becoming more active-

"Then we should be more active," Hermione forced determination into her voice. "We should be making plans-

"There is only one plan I wish to discuss with you at the moment," she interrupted, somewhat uncomfortably. "The plan that you mentioned to me when you first came back to Hogwarts-

"You mean Obliviate-ing my parents and making them leave the country," she clarified with a deceptively even tone, brushing aside her tears with a trembling hand. "Yes, I remember."

McGonagall grimaced. "Hermione-

"They always wanted to go to Australia," she commented distantly. "I think they would be safe there."

"I know this isn't easy on you," the older witch frowned. "But I fear that things are getting worse-

"I'd hoped it wouldn't come to this," Hermione confessed dejectedly, surrendering to the batch of tears sliding past her lids. "I mean...I know that it is the most sensible and safest option for everyone, but...it...it's just hard-

"I know it is," the Headmistress said gently, giving Hermione's shoulder a sympathetic squeeze as she pulled her into a hug. "Perhaps it would be best if I did it-

"No," she argued firmly. "No, I should be the one to do it. They're my parents." She hesitated and nibbled her lip. "My Mum and Dad."

"Then I will do everything I can to help," McGonagall promised, releasing the younger witch and giving her apologetic look. "I'm sorry, Hermione, but it would be wise to do this as soon as possible."

Hermione gulped back the lump in her throat and forced some stability into her posture. "How soon?"

"Tomorrow," she said in a strained voice. "Early in the morning; before the sun rises. I thought about going tonight, but I think it's best you have a bit of time to prepare the Charm...and yourself. Are you certain are skilled enough with the Memory Charms?"

"Yes," she nodded absently. "I'll convince them to move to Australia, give them fake names and...and make them forget me. I can do that. I can."

"Hermione, you know you can't tell anyone where exactly you plan to send them, unless it is absolutely necessary."

"I know."

"Hermione," the Headmistress breathed wearily, meeting the younger witch's eyes. "If there was any other option to guarantee their safety and yours-

"But there isn't," she finished. "It's okay, professor. I knew what the risks were when I mentioned the idea to you. I know what I'm doing."

McGonagall bowed her head in acceptance. "Very well," she said. "If you come here just before six, it should still be dark enough to go unnoticed. I will Apparate us-

"That's fine," Hermione mumbled, unsure what else she could say. "I should go-

"Would you like to stay for a bit?" the aging witch offered, with concern dripping from her voice. "Perhaps some tea and biscuits would-

"Help?" she supplied doubtfully. "I don't think so, Professor."

"Well, then perhaps you'd like a bite to eat-

"No, it's fine," the young brunette declined as she hastily turned to leave, feeling suddenly claustrophobic in the Head's office. "I should get an early night and look over my books on Memory Charms-

"Hermione," McGonagall called before she could reach the door. "It will be alright."

She flinched at her professor's assuring words and wondered why people were always so quick to offer flimsy promises in times of war. She was too much of a logical person to remain optimistic in this case, and she knew the likelihood that the Memory Charms could be reversed was fifty-fifty, and that wasn't even considering whether they would win the war, or if she would be able to find them.

The fact was; if she died in this war, her parents would neither know nor care, because they wouldn't know who she was.

"I'll see you in the morning, Professor," she murmured. "Goodnight."

Hermione rushed out of the room before McGonagall could futilely attempt to console her again, and her shaky legs moved into a desperate sprint to get back to her dorm. She dashed down the empty and shadow-silent corridors; hot tears spilling from her eyes as she whipped around the corners and stuttered out her password. Shutting the door behind her, she gave the space a quick scan to ensure Draco was still in his bedroom, before she leaned back and willed herself to find some composure.

She rubbed her eyes with the heels of her hands and dug her fingernails into her scalp as she forced herself not to cry. She was so angry at herself; this had been all her idea, and she should have been more emotionally prepared, but the dread was laced around every one of her tense muscles, and the sorrow was wrapped painfully around her heart.

Everyone she loved was slowly disappearing; Harry and Ron, and now her parents. Who was next?

"Granger?" his voice startled her. "What the hell are you doing?"

She quickly straightened her back and attempted to discreetly rub away the damp tracks on her cheeks before her blood-shot gaze sought him. He was just outside his bedroom, studying her with curious eyes that made her feel far too vulnerable and completely revealed for him to read.

"Nothing," she mumbled, clearing her throat when it sounded too scratchy. "Nothing-

"Doesn't look like nothing," Draco commented dryly, frowning when he noticed the glittering remains of tears locked between her lashes. "Have you been crying?"

"No," she said quickly. Too quickly. She lowered her head and made for her room. "I have some things I need to do-

"Hold on," he argued, moving into her path. "You're hiding something-

"Move out of my way-

"No," he refused sternly. "Don't lie to me-

"Draco, I swear," she warned, but her voice cracked. "If you don't move-

"Just tell me what's wrong," he persisted, grabbing her wrist and trying to see her face. "Has someone hurt you?"

"No, Draco," she shook her head fiercely, trying pull away. "Just get off me-

"Not until you tell me what's wrong-

"LET GO OF ME!" Hermione screamed, snatching back her hand with a surge of anger. "WHY DON'T YOU LISTEN TO ME?"

"What the FUCK is your problem?" he spat furiously. "I only asked-

"Well, don't!" she retorted, slipping around him and scrambling for her room. "I just want to be left alone-

"FINE!" Draco yelled at her back, his barks fuelled by his sense of rejection. "IF YOU WANT TO BE ALONE, YOU CAN FUCKING BE ALONE!"

Hermione slammed the bedroom door behind her to cut his shouts short, and muttered a quick Silencing Charm to ensure she couldn't hear him, and he couldn't hear her. If she was going to succumb to another round of sobs, she didn't want him to know about it. She couldn't deal with Draco right now; she needed all of her attention on her parents, and she refused to let him muddle her tempestuous thoughts when her Mum and Dad required every morsel of her racing mind.

Priorities. Priorities. Priorities.

She drew in a shuddering breath to ease her shaking limbs before she grabbed her book on Memory Spells and hunched over her desk. She'd read the text countless times and the sentences were so familiar, but for the next six hours she concentrated on engraving them into her skull and practicing the angles of her wand. Hermione did everything she could to remain composed and focussed, but every now and then, a tell-tale tear would kiss a page and betray her torment.

When her lids began to flutter around midnight, she decided that it was wise to at least try and steal a few hours' sleep if she wanted to be alert and capable for the heart-numbing task in the morning. Her movements were sluggish as she undressed and crawled under her covers, mentally reciting the passages from the book and trying to ignore the fact that her parents would forget her before breakfast.

Her mind slipped to the argument with Draco, almost accidentally, and she wished that she'd handled it differently.

She could have done with his arms around her tonight.

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Draco drummed his agitated fingernails against the desk.

After Granger had left him in a frustrated state, he had stomped pointlessly around the dorm in an effort to blow off some steam, but he had found himself screaming at her locked door no less than five times without a response. He didn't know what annoyed him more; how she had behaved, or the fact that he had no idea why she'd screamed at him to leave her alone, before she'd isolated herself in her room.

He hated not having his wand.

Just a quick spell and he could have barged in there to demand what had affected her so much, and he would be lying to himself if he didn't realise there was a certain degree of protectiveness that needed to know the reason for her tears. The concept of someone hurting her, be it physically or emotionally, made his head throb and his blood curdle. He had no idea when this new and intense regard for her welfare had settled into his system, mingling with all the other notions that shouldn't have been there, but it was driving him insane.

He just wanted to know what, or who, had upset her; needed to know.

His storm-grey eyes studied his empty bed bitterly.

He'd spent less and less nights in his room, and when he did it was a voluntary decision on the days when he remembered that he shouldn't be interested in his Muggle-born lover. Those protests in his head and pride had been getting quieter recently, and the thought of sleeping alone in here made him feel cold and uneasy.

He rested his brow against his knuckles and released a heavy breath.

He had a feeling the nightmares would return to haunt him tonight.

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The morning sky was that dark shade of winter-indigo when McGonagall Apparated them to her street. Hermione could hear the distant hum of the Milkman's van, but that was the only sign that life was beginning to stir, and the pavements were completely empty except for a light frosting of snow and a couple of wandering cats. She eyed her house and frowned at the dim light coming from the living room; she knew her parents were early risers, but she had hoped she could do it while they were sleeping.

"Are you certain you don't want me to do this for you?" the Headmistress questioned next to her.

"I'm sure," she nodded tiredly.

McGonagall sighed and gave Hermione's shoulder a reassuring pat. "Very well," she said. "I will be waiting here for you when you're finished. If you need any help or you change your mind-

"I'll be fine," Hermione replied stiffly, taking a few steps forward. "I won't be long."

She inhaled a lungful of the crisp air, before she Apparated into her bedroom with a loud snap. Everything was as she'd left it; her bed made and her shelves bare, save the few trinkets she hadn't taken to Hogwarts. She licked her lips and studied the fragile posters that had been stuck to her walls since she was thirteen, and the stubborn stain on her carpet from when she had dropped her orange juice after discovering she was a witch. The room was rich with memories and the murmurs of her past, but the painful swell of emotion in her chest was interrupted by something nuzzling up against her calves.

"Crooks," she whispered affectionately, kneeling down to gather her beloved pet in her arms. "I missed you, boy." Her rusty-coloured cat rubbed his face against her cheek and purred appreciatively as she held him close.

"You're going to live with me again," she told him quietly, frowning when she heard the movements of her parents downstairs. "But I need to do something first, so you have to be a good boy and stay quiet for me, okay? Can you wait by the front door for me, Crooks?"

Releasing Crookshanks, Hermione watched him skip away from her before she gave her room another thoughtful scan and resigned herself to the task at hand. She cast a quick charm to silence her footsteps and slowly made her way down the stairs; absently running her fingers across the family portraits that were hung in the hallways.

The familiar sound of the television floated towards her, and she turned into her sitting room to find her parents sat on the couch, their backs to her as they sipped their morning teas and watched the news. The smell of burned toast filled her nostrils, reminding her of how endearingly clumsy her Dad could be, and how her Mum would eat it anyway because she loved him too much to complain.

Hermione hesitated in the doorway as the agony threatened to overwhelm her, but she shoved it aside, knowing her mind needed to be clear in order to do this. She wanted to do it now, before they realised she was there and she had to deal with the heartbreak of meeting their confused eyes. Catching a whimper in her windpipe, she raised her wand with a trembling hand and mentally prepared herself for the magic she was about to perform.

"I love you both so much," she breathed, but her voice was drowned out by the television. A lone tear crawled down her cheek as she sealed her eyes and concentrated on the spell with everything she had. "Obliviate."

She reluctantly peeled back her lids to watch her faces disappear from the photographs, and she would swear to Godric she could feel herself being erased from her parents' minds. Knowing she barely had minutes before their brains caught up with all the new and false information, she took a step towards them and kept her arms rigid at her sides. The temptation to reach out and just give them a parting hug was devastating, and it took every sliver of her control to refrain.

Instead, she lifted her fingers to her lips and blew them a kiss. "I promise I will find you when this is over," she exhaled behind them, before she bowed her head and turned to leave.

That was it.

No family. No Harry and Ron. War.

She stole a second to mourn her childhood and the family who didn't know she existed.

Crookshanks was waiting loyally by the door, his head tilted to the side with something that resembled worry. Scooping him back into her hold, she clung to him for dear life as she gave her home a final grieving glance, before she left it behind. Her lungs ached with suppressed sobs as she spotted McGonagall, and she straightened her back in an effort to look strong.

"That didn't take long," the professor commented, extending her arm to give the cat a quick pat. "How did it go?"

"Fine," Hermione answered vaguely. "It went as expected."

"How are you feeling?"

"I'm fine," she lied, lifting her chin to enhance her façade. "We should go back before someone sees us."

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Hermione made her excuses and rushed to her room, desperately desiring solitude and an escape from the sympathetic gaze that McGonagall had fixed her with since she had altered her parents' memories. She'd intended to lock herself away in her room and scream until she felt normal, but her legs crumbled beneath her the moment she entered her dorm.

Crookshanks tumbled out of her hold as she sank to the floor, and she just didn't have it in her to even try and get up. She embraced her legs against her chest and dropped her forehead against her knees as she surrendered to the inevitable, and allowed the broken cries to tear through her throat. Her faithful pet nudged at her with mews of concern for his distressed owner, but she didn't notice; she simply wept into her jeans and pleaded for the crippling pain in her chest to ebb.

That was how Draco found her; a fractured and shuddering mess that made him freeze. His shrinking prejudices battled with his new-found feelings for her, but when she released another cracked cry, his feet lead him to her side too quickly to comprehend or dispute. He crouched next to her and warily studied his witch, hunting for any hint for her misery, but the only thing that seemed out of place was the distressed cat pawing at her feet.

"Are you hurt?" he mumbled doubtfully, but she didn't give any indication that she was aware of his presence. "Granger, what's wrong?"

Nothing. Not a flinch.

He gathered every shred of patience he had and stroked aside some of her chaotic curls so he could see her face. Something about the tortured expression marring her features made his gut spasm, and it affected him in a way that was completely foreign to him.

"Granger," Draco tried again. "What is it?"

Still nothing.

Exhaling with frustration, his fingers subconsciously rubbed the nape of her neck in soothing circles. "Hermione," he sighed. "Tell me what you want me to do."

Finally, he saw something; just a subtle flicker in her broken-hearted gaze that let him know she'd heard him. He found himself holding his breath as she turned her head a little to acknowledge him and struggled to calm her erratic whimpers.

"My...my room," she managed in a small voice.

"Alright," Draco muttered, gently taking her arm and tossing it across his shoulders before he rested one hand against her back, and the other under her knees. He got to his feet and lifted her with him, holding her tight as he headed for her door. Every one of her shivers and moans vibrated against his chest as he carried her into the bedroom and placed her on the bed, seating himself on the edge as she curled up on her side with her back to him.

"I...I want to b-be alone," she stuttered as Crookshanks hopped up on the bed and settled at the foot.

Draco pursed his lips. "Granger, I don't think-

"Please, Draco," she groaned.

The raw desperation in her voice made him cringe, and he released a haggard breath of assent before he eased himself off her bed and made to leave. He lingered in the doorway for a moment, and glanced over his shoulder at the withering witch, realising with a sense of dread that he'd never been so...aware of another person. Salazar, strike him down, but he couldn't help it.

With a weary shake of his head, he shut her door behind him, and frowned as her sobs leaked from her room, and followed him around for the remainder of the day.

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It was broaching three in the morning when Draco decided he'd had enough. After a day of dragging and testing hours, he had considered every possible explanation for her grief until his head had hurt and his tolerance had simmered.

He knew he needed to be tactical and delicate with his approach if he wanted to discover the reason for Granger's behaviour, and in an odd moment of consideration, he made her a cup of tea. It took a few attempts before he was satisfied, and with the steaming mug in his hand, he pushed open her door, and an unsettling sensation scratched down his spine when he saw her on the bed.

Hermione had pulled her body up into a sitting position and cocooned herself in one of her thick blankets. Her lips were trembling and bruised, no doubt from her incessant chewing

habit when she was anxious, and her posture was slumped with defeat, but it was the look in her eyes that made Draco's questionable soul falter. Her cries had stopped but her cheeks were glossed with hours-old tears, and the look in her distant gaze was haunting; beautifully broken and reminiscent of a corpse's empty stare. Steeling himself, he neared her with purpose, placing her tea on the bedside table and sinking into the mattress opposite her, but she looked right through him.

"Come on, Granger," he started, his tone more clipped than he'd intended. "Snap out of it. You have more strength than this."

Hermione didn't blink.

"What's happened?" he tried a different approach. "Is it...Is it Potter and Weasley?"

Simply silence, and that same glassy gaze of nothing.

"Fucking hell, Hermione," he hissed, grabbing her face and forcing her to look at him. "Stop this. Tell me what the hell has happened."

Her lids fell shut and Draco clenched his jaw with growing agitation. Touching their foreheads together, his thumbs soothed away the damp evidence of her mourning hours, and he allowed the pride-killing truth to stumble out of his mouth.

"Come back to me, Granger," he bade in a barely-there voice. "I...", Salazar, forgive me. "I need you."

A drugging rush of relief swept through him when she snapped open her eyes and looked at him; not through him. Her tear-heavy lashes fluttered as she licked her lips, and he didn't dare speak for fear that she would return to her catatonic state.

"My Mum and Dad don't know who I am," she murmured finally, and his brow creased with confusion. "Muggles were...were being murdered, and I had to make sure they'd be safe..."

Draco didn't say a word, because he had no idea what he could possibly say. He had questions, but his instincts warned him to wait until she had crested some peace of mind before he had any hope of dragging the specifics out of her. He shifted awkwardly on the bed; comforting people was hardly his forte at the best of times, and he reasoned that perhaps his actions would do more to alleviate her pain than his uncertain words.

Pressing his face a little harder into hers so their noses touched, he tugged her into his lap, perhaps a little too roughly, and tangled his limbs around her. His witch clutched at his arms and chest, like she was trying to melt into him or share his warmth. Leaning forward, Draco plucked the cup of tea from the table and shoved it into her hand.

"Drink this," he told her. "You haven't had anything today." He watched her intently as she brought the drink to her lips to take tentative sip, and she hummed in thought before giving him a confused look. "What?" he questioned.

"You make nice tea," Hermione mumbled thoughtfully, and she felt his scoff of irony-laced amusement ruffle her hair.

"I'll take your word for it," he said, loosening his arms around her. "Granger, I-

"Do you know what the worst thing is?" she interrupted him, her voice a mixture of distress and resentment now. "I never...I never thought it was in me to truly hate someone; I mean really hate someone...to the point that I wish they were dead."

Draco cringed at her cracked tone but decided it was best to let her speak and empty her burdened mind. His fingers toyed with the tips cocoa-tinted curls as he listened to her empty her soul for him with a sobering level of trust.

"V-Voldemort has ripped apart so many lives and childhoods," she continued, lifting her chin and meeting his eyes. "Harry's, Neville's," she listed, reaching for his hand and grasping it tight. "Even yours."

Draco exhaled and eyed their entwined fingers with an odd sensation tickling his stomach. "Granger-

"I hate him," she spat angrily, as fresh tears fell from her hazels. "I really hate him-

"Granger, breathe," he instructed steadily, a little relieved to hear the fire back in her voice. "Drink some more tea-

"Thank you," she blurted suddenly, and Draco's head jerked up in surprise. "For listening to me. I...I feel a little better."

He gave her an uncomfortable nod and frowned as he watched a betraying tear splash against his knuckles. Listening to the synchronised thuds of their hearts, he tilted his head to catch her lips with a brief but reassuring kiss. Evidently, her melancholy was far from over, but he knew she would chase it away in her own time, because she was too strong to be lost in a lamenting limbo.

"What do you want to do now?" he asked quietly.

"I'm tired," Hermione confessed, fidgeting in his arms and giving him that look when she was about to ask something she knew he wouldn't like. "Will you stay with me until I fall asleep?"

He hesitated but slowly bowed his head with compliance before carefully manoeuvring them under the covers, and allowing his lover to bury her face into his chest and sniff away some stubborn tears into his jumper. As he tossed a lazy arm across her waist, he realised they'd never done this before; simply slept together without the exhaustion of post-coital bliss lingering between them.

If anyone ever asked him in the future, he would say that this was the point when he acknowledged that his feelings for Granger had reached a potent, and ultimately dangerous, level. So strong had they become, that he could honestly say they had blinded him to her impure blood.

He really didn't care anymore.

Chapter End Notes

I always thought that JK kinda skimmed over this part in Hermione's life, and while I know Hermione is a strong character, I can't think of anything worse than knowing your parents don't know you, and I always thought she'd have a bad reaction, especially if Harry and Ron weren't around. I thought the film handled it quite well, so I stole a few ideas from there... So yeah...I just don't want people to think I'm making her all weak, I just think everyone has their bad days, and she's having a hard time...I'll cut my rant short.

I received a review from a girl from Brisbane this week, and I'm sure everyone is aware of the terrible floods they are dealing with. Hearts and thoughts go out to them, and there is a fanfic related group that is helping to raise money. If you want any more info, email me.

On a fuck-me-sideways amazing note, kite1011 has done a BEAUTIFUL piece of FanArt for chapter 18 (the ice skating scene) and it is stunning. Links are on profile page (or just look up 'tae-' on deviantart or they're on my facebook page) and you should all go and tell her how amazing she is...Because really...it's wonderful...~chuffed sigh~

Anyway, I hope you liked the chapter, and I'll admit I had a little cry while writing it... So please let me know your thoughts because this chapter was very interesting to write, and I'm dying to know what you guys think! And hope the song choice worked well! And thanks for all the review so far...I really am very touched...

By the way; 'Bryn Glas' simply means 'Blue Hill' in Welsh. I am a Welsh girl, so there may be a few more of these. This a/n is far too long...

Read and Review please!

Scars

Chapter Notes

Best do this at the beginning again, just to be safe. This chapter contains sexual content. Pour yourself a glass of wine (if you're of age!), and I would recommend either Radiohead - Nude, Placebo - Running up that Hill, but I think Placebo - I'll be Yours has perfect lyrics for this chapter, so that's what I'll be listening to! I hope you like the chapter!

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

As Draco was slowly stirred awake by the hum of feline purrs, his brow creased with confusion when he realised that the space next to him was empty, save the snoozing cat that was near his feet.

Quickly ignoring the pet, he flattened his palm against the spot where Granger should have been and felt the traces of her warmth tingle his skin. Hesitating as his sleep-blurred brain caught up, he slowly twisted his body to find her sitting at the window; her silhouette set against the garish and gold light of the morning. Squinting as his eyes adjusted, and rising into a sitting position, he concentrated on her weary and strained expression, and frowned at her distracted gaze.

Still clad in yesterday's clothes and her cheeks glossed with yesterday's tears, she was clutching her legs tightly to her chest and resting her chin against her knees. Her lips were dented from relentless chewing, her mouth bent in a mourning frown, and her eyes were bag-crested and bloodshot. All she did was stare through the window pane.

So still.

Barely breathing.

He absorbed every detail of her with calculating eyes, churning the information around in his head and trying to determine what he was supposed to do. Merlin knew he didn't have the slightest idea how to ease her distress, but the need to scratch under his skin anyway, and he didn't even try to resist it.

He cocked an eyebrow when she parted her lips and breathed heavily against the glass, lifting a finger to draw a mindless pattern in the condensation. With a sigh of defeat, he called her name.

Hermione absently dragged her finger across the misty window and narrowed her eyes when she realised what she was doing. She and her mother had left little messages on the bathroom mirror when she'd been little; just little things like I love you or Goodnight.

Her hand fell limp at her side as she read what she'd absently scribbled.

See you soon.

She shook her head when Draco's blurred voice seeped into her ears and snatched her back to reality. "What?"

"Have you even had any sleep?" he repeated in a blank tone.

"Oh," she exhaled. "A little...I mean enough-

"Doesn't look like it," he said stiffly, tossing her blankets off him and sitting at the edge of her bed. "You should get some more."

"No, it's fine," she mumbled, and Draco hated how distant she sounded. "I wouldn't be able to fall back to sleep now anyway-

"Don't say you're fine when you're clearly not," he scolded, perhaps too bluntly. "It's bloody irritating-

"But, I am-

"Save it," he grumbled. "Why you Gryffindors insist on covering everything up with fucking fairies and sunshine is beyond me-

"I'm not-

"You feel disorientated, right?" he questioned sharply. "Like your mind is doing cartwheels, and you have no idea what to do with yourself."

Hermione felt her mouth move with silent words. "I...how...

"In case you haven't noticed, we're in a similar boat here, Granger, so I know it's fucked up."

"A similar boat? What do you-

"I've been missing since June," he reminded her in a deadpan voice. "I'm sure my parents think I'm dead; decomposing somewhere in a shallow grave dug by one of your lot."

She cringed. "Draco-

"It's true," he interrupted, regarding her with a detached expression. "What other believable story could Snape have invented to account for my absence?"

"I'm sorry," she murmured sincerely. "I didn't realise it had been so long for you, but perhaps Snape-

"Even if he said I was missing, I would be presumed dead after this long," he reiterated, cocking his head when she grimaced. "Don't give me that sympathetic look, Granger. It's not like I'm actually dead-

"But maybe-

"I have accepted that, Granger," he silenced her. "And you will accept your circumstances too, but you need to get over all that 'I'm fine' crap-

"Draco-

"So we're going to have a shower," he stated sternly, rising to stand and scowling at the uncertain look she gave him. "Come on. Get up."

"Draco," she sighed wearily, bowing her head. "I don't think I'm in the right frame of mind for-

"I never mentioned shagging you," he interjected with a scowl as he neared her. "Now come on-

"Draco, I just want to stay here-

"Tough shit," he snapped, snatching her arm and yanking her to her feet. "Don't make me drag you-

"Draco, let go," she groaned, struggling against him. "You're hurting me."

The determined blond flinched but kept his grip firm at her elbow as he pulled her with him, adamantly refusing to acknowledge her protests no matter how much her pleading tone harassed his ears. He knew he was being rough but he forced himself to be indifferent, because it was necessary. Granger might not see it, but she needed this. Needed him.

His scowl hardened as she dug her heels into the floor and clawed at his hand.

"Stop fighting me," he warned over his shoulder, slinging his other arm around her abdomen to get a secure hold. Her flailing limbs were making it difficult. "Fucking hell, Granger-

"Just leave me be," Hermione tried, frustrated tears threatening to slip past her lashes. "What difference will a sodding shower make anyway? It won't-

"Stop it," he growled as he finally managed to get her out of the bedroom. "Trust me when I say the inactivity will only do more damage-

"I said I was fine!" she shouted. "Put me down!"

"No!" he yelled back, shoving her into the bathroom and slamming the door behind him. He gulped down the uneasy feeling wedged in his throat when he realised she was crying again, but he remained firm with his intent. "Don't you fucking dare try the door, because I'll just drag you back in here until you get the message."

He tried not to be affected when she put distance between them and studied him with wary eyes. Did she really believe that he would hurt her? Scoffing and shaking his head to cover his offence, he stalked over to the shower and flicked it on, testing the heat against his fingers and keeping his eye on his dejected lover in the mirror.

"This is ridiculous," Hermione muttered behind her breath. "You are being ridiculous-

"Take your clothes off," he instructed steadily, tugging his own top over his head. "Or are you going to be an awkward bitch again?"

She stared at him with the sparks of defiance flickering in her eyes, before she released a haggard breath and began to slowly tear her away her clothes. Draco kept his unflinching glare on her as he pulled down his trousers and boxers in one swift motion and then stalking up to her with heavy strides. He ripped her jumper out of her grip and chucked it to the side with growing impatience, batting aside her hands before he reached for her jeans and knickers and yanked them down her legs.

Hermione sucked in a hefty gulp of air and attempted to back away, but his hand was already fixed around her wrist. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I haven't got all fucking day," he hissed coldly, spinning her around to remove her bra before she could protest.

He battled the temptation to admire her nudity and give into the instinctive twinge in his groin as she stood before him; infinitely alluring to him since the first night he had bedded her. Every inch of her honey skin belonged to him, whether she liked it or not, but he needed to carry this out and finish what he'd started. Feigning indifference, which was testing when his body yearned to react to her, he tugged on her wrist and guided them to the shower.

"Get in," he told her, rolling his eyes when she predictably hesitated. "Fucking fine. We'll do this the hard way then."

She yelped in surprise when he picked her up, and he gritted his teeth in an effort to ignore her bare and squirming body as he stepped into the shower and positioned them under the scolding rain of whispering waterdrops. The sweet steam wrapped around them like a veil, and Draco silently willed her to forget the outside world in this misty cocoon.

Reality was an obstacle.

Always getting their fucking way and screwing with their secret sanctuary away from it all.

Away from the War.

From his past.

From everything.

And he came to acknowledge that he had settled into their sanctuary, despite every attempt at resistance. Reality was simply a muffled memory in here. With her.

What the hell would he do when...

He felt her hands pushing against his chest.

"What are you playing at?" Hermione questioned hotly. "Let me out of here-

"No," he refused, keeping her in place under the water. "This is what you need-

"Don't tell me what I need to do," Hermione argued in a low voice. "Don't you dare tell me how I should be dealing with this-

"So, what?" he goaded. "You're just going to sit in your room and mope all day?"

"I was not moping!" she protested loudly. "Shut your mouth, Draco!"

"Well, stop being so fucking pathetic!" he carried on relentlessly, invading her space and looming over her. She really had no idea how beautiful she was to him then; her cocoa curls streaked across her face and shoulders like rivulets of coffee, but he baited her regardless. "Crying about it like some shitty little Hufflepuff is hardly going to make things all rosy again!"

"I know that!" she spat, giving him a futile shove back. "Don't you think I know that?"

"Then stop whining about it!"

"You were a sulky prick when you first came here, so don't be such a sodding hypocrite!" she fired back. "I have every right to be upset! I am human!"

"Then why the fuck bother lying and say you're fine?" he retorted sharply, bringing his face close to hers. "Come on, Granger! Let it out! Why say you're fine when you're clearly not?"

"BECAUSE I DON'T KNOW WHAT ELSE TO DO!" she screamed, her features creasing into a look of weary acceptance as her chest heaved between them. "WHAT THE HELL CAN I DO, DRACO? I CAN'T DO A BLOODY THING!"

There you go. Scream it out, Granger.

"AND IT FUCKING HURTS, DOESN'T IT?" he roared back, hating himself when she clenched her eyes shut, but she needed this. He knew she did. He knew her. "YOU CAN'T DO ANYTHING ABOUT IT-

"Stop it!"

"YOU ARE HELPLESS-

"STOP IT!"

"BUT THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN DO!" he shouted, so loud it scorched his windpipe. "ACCEPT IT, HERMIONE! THERE'S NOTHING YOU CAN-

She slapped him. Hard.

And in the next second she was grabbing his face and smashing her lips into his.

Do what you need to do...

She sucked, licked, tasted, gorged.

Draco felt her claw her fingernails against his scalp and grab desperate fistfuls of his ice-blond hair to pull him even closer. As close as possible. He could taste her need behind her teeth and at the back of her mouth, and he knew he'd accomplished what he'd intended. He matched her; tongue for tongue and bite for bite, as his hands went wild over back, sides and waist.

All his.

But he willed himself to remain poised. This was about her. What she needed. And for a moment, that terrified him.

Her throaty moan glided over his tongue and brought him straight back to the now. Her. Twisting them together, he slammed her up against the tiles with a wet slap and dipped his hand between them to cup the heat between her thighs. Entering her with two fingers, as deep as he could, and thumbing her sex-bud with a practiced pressure that he knew made her tremble, he swallowed her sigh and kissed her hard. Hard enough split lips and coax blood. Her blood, his blood. It all tasted the same.

"Take what you need from me," he murmured, his husky tone rumbling between the heavy breaths and thrumming lips.

Keening and stabbing her nails into his shoulders, Hermione rocked her hips into his touch, encouraged by his words and too consumed to resist. Godric, she loved his hands and fingers - in her hair, on her skin, inside of her - and right now they were pushing perfectly against the enigmatic spot beneath her stomach, and coaxing smouldering sensations to flutter in her system.

But it wasn't enough.

"More," she whispered between clashing lips, hoping he would understand her meaning.

Draco immediately withdrew his hand and grabbed her thighs, hitching them up and snaking them around his torso. He didn't trust himself to slip between her folds. Not yet. He needed to keep his head. He was so hard that the muscle under his strained skin throbbed with pain. She'd never been like this; uninhibited and her nerves completely discarded as she let the passion and her need to forget overtake her, and it was so fucking arousing. But he needed to keep his head. It was about her.

Her. Her. Her.

She was breaking the kiss again.

"Draco," she hummed, like his pulse. "Please..."

Catching her bottom lip between his teeth to stifle his groan, he hoisted her a little higher so he could grab his length, and the moment he'd pressed himself at her slit, she clamped her

legs tighter and engulfed him. Draco sucked in a shallow breath at her unexpected and brazen movement, but this was what she needed; to let the instincts ride her and abandon thought.

Abandon reason.

Abandon everything but the flesh and the ache.

She was tugging at his arms, neck, face; anything she could reach to pull him into her. To melt them together. Her legs were like a possessive vice around him; locking him in her slick warmth, so tight that Draco shuddered. Blind lust. Raw. The most honest kind. He bucked into her, guided by the own desperate sways of her body to invent a rhythm of obliging thrusts to the sounds of smacking skin and the drumming shower. And it was fast.

Frantic.

Frenzied.

Feral.

Fucking friction. Everywhere. From their scraping teeth, to the thuds of hips, and the clawing hands; all wrapped up in humid steam and echoing whimpers. And Hermione was alive, almost knocking him off his feet as she writhed and tried to find her release. Find the fire. Hunt for it. A strangled sound tumbled out of her mouth when he pushed against the spot that burned her core and made her soul quake.

"There," she sighed, parting their lips and lifting her chin. "Kiss my neck."

Draco instantly buried his face into the sensitive curve by her shoulder and sucked her skin. He knew where his tongue teased her best; right under the line of her jaw and beneath her earlobes, and her fingernails grazed up his spine to confirm what he already knew. Her moans were louder now, no longer lost between lips, and they spilled into his ears and pushed him just that little bit closer to the edge.

But that was okay.

That was okay because he could feel the muscles in her legs beginning to tense and clench with spasmodic jolts, and her lusty mewls were climbing to a higher pitch.

There it is...

Nothing felt closer to bliss than those twitching ripples that marked the beginning of the end. The climax. The everything and anything. Like bold feathers gliding over steel. He couldn't help but tip his head back to witness her rapturous features; eyes sealed, slack-jawed and her whole body rigid as she let it course through her veins, blood, bones. Anywhere it could reach.

Tucking his hand between them, his fingers sought to massage her swollen flesh again, just to make her sex-static last for those few extra moments. He let her absorb every millisecond of the madness, waiting until her internal flexes ceased before he stole two more thrusts and found his own release.

He smothered his choked groan into another kiss as he let go; his vision blurring at the edges, and the tension behind his navel bursting. Let her have him. His climax was short-lived; he'd worked solely around her needs and wants, and subsequently rushed his own desire, but he really didn't care. It had been for her.

Her. Her. Her.

But the exhaustion swept over Draco anyway, and he surged all his strength into his arms to keep his lover steady as his knees crumbled and caved. They slid down the tiles and landed in a graceless mess of weak limbs at the base of the shower; foreheads touching and panting so hard their lungs ached and threatened to rupture.

Hermione was completely limp against him as he used the remainder of his strength to gather her close and lace his fingers into her tangled curls. Trembling. Shivering. Relishing. The shower droplets sprinkled their flushed bodies, slowly bringing back normal sensations and urging their senses to function again.

Let it subside.

Let them linger.

"I...", Hermione struggled to speak through her heavy breaths. "I think I got a bit...carried away," she finished, and Draco could picture the blush crawling into her cheeks. "I'm sor-

"Don't you dare fucking apologise, Granger," he grunted.

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Merlin knew how he managed it, but he'd carried them back into her bedroom and settled them at her window-seat, covered in a clumsy collage of damp blankets and towels as she rested her back against his chest and sat between his legs. He couldn't help but indulge in a private smirk as a sated sigh left her and shattered the lazy silence.

"Feel better now?" he asked with a cocky tone.

He could practically hear her brain working as it dawned on her. "You were winding me up on purpose before," she accused slowly. "Weren't you?"

"Very shrewd of you, Granger," he replied, his lips twitching with amusement. "Yes, I was."

"Dare I ask why?"

"Because you needed to vent," he provided with a blasé shrug. "Despite what you Gryffindors preach, sometimes anger is the answer."

Hermione tossed his statement around in her head and dampened her lips. "And you thought riling me up when you don't have a wand was a good idea?"

Draco snorted. "I'm pretty confident you won't be firing anymore hexes my way, Granger," he said. "I'm sure you like all of me in working order-

"You may have pushed me too far if you'd carried on," she warned, but it was half-hearted. "You were being a right tosser-

"But it worked," he reminded her smoothly. "So now we're past all the 'I'm fine' crap, we can move on-

"Godric, you are such a conniving git," she mumbled with an edge or irritation. "I suppose the sex was a nice little perk to your plan?"

"I didn't know you were going to pounce on me," Draco told her, his voice rich with mirth. "I assumed you would simply shout for a while and possibly give me a few slaps." His chuckle vibrated down her spine. "But it was certainly a decent surprise."

Her brow creased with thought. "You really didn't plan that?"

"I planned to piss you off," he explained with another shrug. "I didn't know exactly what you would do. But like I said; you needed to vent."

Hermione opened her mouth to speak, but quickly snapped it shut before a word could escape. The temptation to point out that he had done something dangerously close to unselfish made her tongue tingle, so she clamped it between her teeth. With the shower-steam still ghosting across their skin and the atmosphere relaxed, she didn't dare risk a comment that would make him defensive and shatter the calm. And she felt...normal again; still inevitably upset about her parents, but better.

He had made her feel better.

He had thought about her.

The silence was stretching as her eyes fell to his leg, and she leaned forward to finger the scar she'd never noticed before. "How did you get this?"

"When I fell off my broom in the Quidditch match," he replied after a pause. "Second Year."

She hummed as the memory stained her brain. "And this one?" she asked, moving her inquisitive fingers to his other leg, just below his knee.

"Same as the other one."

Finding herself intrigued, she carefully shifted to face him and peeled away the blankets, leaving him bare and beautiful with only a towel to cover the tops of his legs and his crotch.

Ignoring Draco's suspicious look, her eyes roamed him curiously and glinted when she found a thick mark on his arm. "I think I know this one," she couldn't help but smile, pointing to it. "Hippogriff?"

"Very fucking funny," he drawled, cocking an eyebrow. "Are you done?"

"No," she quipped, moving to his chest and finding another. "This one?"

Draco clenched his jaw and met her eyes. "That one's from the Curse Potter hit me with last year."

Cringing as the unavoidable tension drifted between them, she desperately searched for another scar to comment on, but the rest of him was apparently flawless. "Is that all of them?"

"You missed one," he told her, lips lifting into a smirk as he pointed to a barely-there mark by his nose. "Ring any bells?"

Her eyes widened as she peered at the tiny blemish. "From when I punched you?" she questioned, grinning when he nodded and eagerly abandoning the Sectumsempra scar. "You know, I'm not apologising for that."

Draco snorted. "I never asked you to."

"And I have one to match," she smiled, showing him the faint graze on her knuckles. "Should have known better than to punch your pointy face."

A sarcastic retort almost shot her down, but he let it fizzle in his mouth when he spotted the long, white mark on her shoulder. "Since we're on the topic," he said, gesturing to her flaw. "What's that from?"

"Last year," Hermione said, tilting her head to give it a glance. "Ron accidentally shoved me off the couch and I caught the table."

Draco rolled his eyes. "Weasley is such a clumsy twat," he muttered, but his eyes narrowed when he caught sight of the rather nasty scar on her ribs, just peeking above her towel. "How the hell did you get that one?"

"Department of Mysteries," she frowned, adjusting the towel to hide it completely. "Dolohov got me with some Curse. Quite a bad one."

The uncomfortable silence returned.

Draco momentarily wondered how he'd missed the flaws to her sun-kissed skin, but maybe he'd just never really seen her before, or taken the time to look. That odd flicker in his gut was back with a vengeance; practically permanent now, and he still had no idea how to broach it, but he tried not give it any heed as Hermione slowly eased herself back into her previous position, leaning against him.

And he knew her; flaws and all, and it only seemed to encourage the inappropriate stirrings in his stomach.

She had scarred him.

And he didn't mean the mark on his face.

Hermione's mind was equally distracted, for she knew exactly how to identify the erratic sensations in her gut. She just didn't know what to do about them.

And a scary thought had seeped into her skull.

Harry and Ron. Her parents. All gone.

And her separation from Draco was ultimately inevitable, no matter how much she'd been ignoring that fact.

What would she do when...

"Do you want to read another book?" she rushed out frantically, summoning her wand into her hand.

His sigh tickled her shoulder-blades. "Fine."

"Any preferences?"

"Not another depressing play," he remarked in a dry tone, secretly relieved for the distraction. "That Shakespeare bloke you're so bloody fond of must have been suicidal, or wanted his readers to be."

"He wrote comedies too," Hermione murmured, flicking her wand to Accio one of her favourites. "I love this one."

She felt his chin sink into her shoulder as she turned to the first page, adjusting the book against her knees so he would be able to read it comfortably. She'd selected *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; a book laced with magic, conflicts and forbidden romances.

And a happy ending.

Hermione closed her eyes.

Because that can happen in fiction.

Chapter End Notes

I am soooooo sorry that this is short...(don't hate me...)! I have an exam Tuesday so my time has been a little buggered, but I'm hoping that the content makes up for it, and assure you that I will be back to regular updates and longer chapters once my exams are out of the way! Promise!

Thanks so much for the response so far, I really have been blown away, and have had the pleasure of meeting some lovely people on facebook (you know who you are!). The reviews have been lovely to read, and I can't explain to you how flattered I am.

Text mentioned was William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream (obviously...). And if you listened to the songs I suggested, let me know what you thought. Or if you had any of your own, let me know what they were!

It's pushing three in the morning and my wine glass is empty, which means it's bed-time!

I enjoyed writing this chapter, so I hope you enjoyed reading it!

Read and Review!

Storm

Chapter Notes

Can I please suggest another song for this chapter? I can't seem to stop now...I was thinking Blue October - Ugly Side or Muse - Butterflies and Hurricanes for Draco's thoughts towards the end of this chapter. Let me know if they fit okay! - s/n: The lovely MrsFWDarcy recommended Stateless - Bloodstream for this chapter, and it is bloody perfect! The lyrics are spot on! Thanks so much!

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

Days and hours rush by when the company makes you smile for no reason.

Time becomes irrelevant.

It was a good few days since Hermione's outburst in the shower, and things had been easy and almost peaceful in the dorm; just sleepy mornings and smooth afternoons basking in the calm. It was easy and effortless, with the minutes playing host to sarcastic arguments, which were more for amusement than spite, and comfortable silences, as though neither of them dared break the moment.

In those silences, Draco often found his stare lingering on her charming features; absently counting the spatter of freckles across her nose, or secretly grinning as she mumbled something incoherent to herself when she was engrossed in a book. He always caught himself before she noticed and scolded his behaviour, but his eyes would always find their way back to her again, and learn the details of her face.

But the unanswered questions about her parents tingled the back of his throat. She hadn't mentioned them again, and he had refrained from broaching the subject in an effort to keep the relaxed atmosphere, but he needed to know. His instincts warned him that it was something to do with the War, and after months of being stashed away in here and oblivious to the outside world, he was sick of being left in the dark.

Things were happening. Significant things. He could feel it scratching the pit of his stomach.

Hermione could feel it too; the eerie static flickering in the air that smelled like Dark Magic. The snow was beginning to get lighter, and the rain would come soon, washing away the beautiful, white landscape that she loved, and making way for bleak thunderstorms.

Godric curse her for being selfish and a little naïve, but she had shoved the War to the back of her skull for the past few days to savour these moments with Draco. She felt something deliriously close to contentment in his presence; taking every excuse to touch him and memorise how his skin felt beneath her fingertips. Whether it was searching for the blue

specks in his smoky eyes, or studying the softening of his face before he fell asleep, she relished all of him and remembered how to smile.

Because she knew it was only temporary.

The calm between storms.

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It was his witch's squirming that slowly stirred Draco from his sleep, and he tightened the arm around her torso to keep her still. He had given up trying to keep a distance from her in bed; his body always sought her warmth anyway, and there was something instinctively pleasing about waking up in a tangle of limbs and body heat.

He could feel her hair tickling the tip of his nose and he pressed his face closer, but hesitated when he realised that something was off. Her normally silky curls felt coarse against his cheek, and when he slowly peeled open one eye, he was confronted by rusty fur instead of the chestnut mane he'd become accustomed to.

"What the..." he mumbled, rearing back to eye his lover's cat with distaste. He wrinkled his nose when the pet had the audacity to creep even closer to him, and he reached over to prod Hermione's arm. "Granger. Granger wake the hell up."

Groaning into her pillow, the sleepy brunette twisted around to face him and squinted against the first rays of morning. "What's wrong with you?"

"Your vile cat is pawing at me," he growled. "Get him off me."

"Don't call him vile," she said, stifling a chuckle when she realised Crookshanks was indeed trying to gain some affection from Draco. "He just likes you."

"Well, I don't like him," he grumbled, picking up the cat and dumping him into Hermione's lap. "Scruffy, bloody thing-

"Oh hush," Hermione tried not to laugh. "He doesn't like many people, so you should be flattered-

"Yes, I'm bloody ecstatic," he drawled, rolling his eyes. "It hardly helps his case when he wakes me up on a Sunday morning."

"It's Sunday?" she frowned, glancing at her Charmed calendar and then her clock. "Damn, I need to meet McGonagall in a bit."

He arched an eyebrow. "What for?"

"Michael's coming back today," she explained, missing the flash of jealousy that dented his expression as she climbed out of bed. "Everyone will be coming back soon, and we need to discuss preparations-

"And how long will that take?" he questioned sharply, admittedly irritated that the Head Boy was ruining his chances of a morning quickie. "Fucking Corner-

"Don't start," she told him, shrugging on some clothes and casting a spell to make herself a bit more presentable. "It shouldn't take long; maybe an hour or so. Could you feed Crookshanks while I'm out please?"

"Wouldn't it be more beneficial to society to just let him starve?" he mumbled, flinching when she spun around to slap his arm.

"Don't be such a-

"Fine," he grumbled reluctantly, before his lips moulded into an knowing smirk. "Naturally, I'm going to ask a favour in return."

Her mouth stretched of its own accord, and a playful blush coloured her cheeks. "Dare I ask what it will entail?"

"I'm sure I will think of something by the time you get back," Draco shrugged, but his eyes widened when Hermione suddenly leaned in to smother his mouth with a quick kiss. Studying her curiously and subtly licking his lips as she pulled away, he slowly arched an eyebrow as she flashed him a perfect smile. "What was that for?"

"Does there need to be a reason?" she asked, twisting around and heading out of the room. "I'll be back in a bit."

Staring at her retreating back with pensive eyes, the click of the door snapped him back to the present, and he shook his head, raking his fingers through his hair. It had become so natural to be this way with her now; unguarded and comfortable in her presence, but the moment he was left to his own devices, he berated himself for getting so close.

Too attached.

But there was little he could do about it now. His interest in her was embedded into his system and crawling in his veins, making his heart throb faster when she was close enough to inhale. When once it had felt like an infection, it now felt like brandy; warm and pleasant.

And the War was the hangover. The headache, the sickness, the reality.

The storm.

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The second Hermione stepped over her threshold, she knew something was wrong.

The air felt thick and humid, and she hesitated outside of her door when she noticed all the Magical Portraits were peculiarly subdued or absent from their frames. The quiet hum of distant sounds was vibrating along the corridors, too low to discern but ominously consistent, and her feet began moving towards the source. When something that sounded eerily like a muffled scream harassed her ears, she quickened her steps and withdrew her wand.

By the time she could hear the shouting and panic clearly, Hermione realised she was sprinting towards the Medical Wing, and the metallic tang of blood was drowning her senses, stinging her eyes and simmering on her tongue.

Bursting into the room, she skidded to a stop and gasped at the chaos surrounding her; thirty or so people were crowded into the small space, and littered across the scarce beds and floor, all writhing in pain. Her vision blurred as she tried to make sense of it all; her focus lingering on an elderly wizard with blood weeping from his temple, before shifting to a young witch, whose arm was contorted in an unnatural shape. And then to another person with a different injury. And then another. Another...

Someone was calling her name...

She looked up and locked eyes with McGonagall, and absently registered that the Headmistress, Madam Pomfrey, Professor Sprout and a couple of Mediwitches were tending to the victims as best they could, but there were so many...

"Hermione!" McGonagall called again. "Go to the classroom next door! Horace needs help-

"Wh-what's going on?" Hermione interrupted in between laboured breaths. "What the-

"St Mungo's was attacked!" she shouted over the racket. "I need you to help Horace! Go! Quickly!"

Nodding dumbly and spinning on her heel, she raced to the adjacent room and found a similar disturbing scene; perhaps fifteen scattered victims strewn across the desks, chairs and floor, smeared with red stains and crying in agony. Professor Slughorn and a Mediwitch were amongst the injured, frantically mumbling Healing Charms and prying open mouths to feed them potions.

Hermione was momentarily frozen to the spot as her brain sucked it all in.

There was just...so much blood...

Puddles of it were peppered across the floorboards, dissected by footprints and handprints from people scrambling around and seeking help. Some of the victims were choking on clots

and coughing it up into their laps or cupped palms, mixed with watery vomit and bile. Limbs were twisted and bent in revolting shapes, flesh was sliced with deep gashes, and midnight-blue bruises were smacked across every inch of skin she could see.

This was it.

This was the reality of War.

This was the storm.

Hermione sucked in a deep breath and rushed into action.

Her eyes darted around and did a quick assessment, trying to establish who required immediate attention, before running over to a wizard on the floor with gruesome abdominal wounds, and who seemed to have trouble breathing. Sinking to her knees and dismissing the sick squelch as she landed in pool of blood that climbed up her jeans, she studied the sticky mess of his body warily and shut out everything else to concentrate on this battered stranger.

Using her wand to peel away his clothing, she flinched as she registered just how bad the damage was; splintered ribs protruding out of his torso and a wide slash halving his stomach, but she gritted her teeth, ignoring her reflex to gag, and began reciting the appropriate Healing Charm. Glancing up, she found the middle-aged man's weak gaze fixed on her, and she absently used her free hand to give his face a soothing touch.

"It will be okay," she whispered to him reassuringly. "It will be okay."

She wished she believed her own words.

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Draco scowled at the clock for the sixth time in forty minutes.

When Granger had failed to return after an hour, as she had promised, he had gnashed his teeth and surrendered to jealous notions about Corner's intentions. But when the fifth hour had passed by and the day had slipped into the afternoon, he had started to feel uneasy. Granger's cat had also been rather jittery, and while he hadn't paid much attention to her boats about Crookshanks' incredible intuition, something niggled at the back of his brain and warned him to be on his guard.

Releasing a frustrated breath, he headed into Hermione's bedroom to fetch a book and distract himself. Absentmindedly rummaging in her vast collection, he accidentally caught a stack

with his arm that sent several texts flying across the floor, and a curse grumbled in his windpipe as he bent down to pick them up, but his eyes narrowed at one particular book.

It was tattered with time and the title was too distorted to read, but he could make out the letters H, C and X, and his brow creased with anxiety. Surely she wasn't reading about...

He reached for the book and frowned when a few sheets of parchment fell out, decorated with hasty scribbles and signed 'H&R.' He couldn't help but roll his eyes. Salazar forbid that Potter and Weasley learn something about the art of being cryptic, but he didn't have time to mull over it, as a quick glance at the first page of the book told him what he'd suspected.

Horcruxes.

Apparently Potter and Weasley were searching for them.

And he didn't have a bloody clue how to feel about that.

He despised Voldemort; that creature had put a price on his head for his failed attempt at Dumbledore's assassination, and had forced him to go into isolation. It had all made sense when he'd been so fixated on his pureblood ideals, and even though he had accepted that Granger's blood no longer bothered him, that was only Granger. He had no idea how he felt about the other Muggle-blooded hybrids.

He might want Voldemort dead, but the idea of championing Potter's side of Muggle-huggers was far from desirable. And just where did his parents stand in all this? Surely they still couldn't be supporting Voldemort when he'd threatened their only son with death?

He didn't know how to feel about anything anymore. He. Did. Not. Know.

Tucking the letters into the book and placing it back where it had been, he shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. Merlin, everything was so monumentally fucked up.

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Hermione sleeved away the sweat on her forehead.

Of the fifty-one casualties and staff who had managed to escape St Mungo's, four had died, and it was doubtful several others would see tomorrow.

Healing Charms drained the energy of the caster and transferred it to the subject's body, so when the scant supplies of Dittany, Wound-cleaning Potion and every other helpful concoction had been used just after she'd arrived, all they'd had was their wands. Hermione

had taken two vials of Vitamix just to keep her standing, and had recited every Healing Spell she knew for six hours straight, refusing to finish until everyone had been seen to.

Hermione's muscles were aching with exhaustion and her head was spinning with dizziness, but she refused to blink until this young girl's femur had been fixed. Cringing at the sound of shards of bone clicking back into place, she glanced around to see who needed her attention next, but everyone looked like they'd been seen to.

There was some level of order now; chairs and desks had been transfigured into beds, and the wounded had been wrapped in thick blankets; black if they'd been assessed, and white if not.

Aside from the young witch at her side now and the wizard that the Mediwitch was healing, everyone was donned in black blankets, and Hermione was ready to weep with relief. She knew it was far from over, and that the victims would require surveillance well into the night, but the worst of it was dealt with, and for that she was grateful. Waving her wand to change the young witch's blanket black, she started when a comforting hand rested on her shoulder.

"Good job, Miss Granger," Professor Slughorn nodded tiredly. "That's everyone now. Maybe you should take a breather-

"No," Hermione refused. "There must be something else I can do to help."

"The best thing they can do is rest," he told her gently. "Unfortunately, I have run out of Dreamless Sleep Potion, so I shall have to brew some more."

"I have some in my room," she mumbled, getting to her feet. "I don't know if I have much though. I'll go and get it, and I'll help you make some more when I get back-

"Perhaps you should have a nap while you're in your room-

"I'm fine," she assured her Professor, turning to leave before he could argue. "I'll be back in minute."

After spending the morning in a room filled with the devastated and dying, walking down the corridor felt surreal, and the air was fresh on her lungs. She sucked it in with greedy gulps and tried to comb her fingers through her hair, but they got stuck in the matted curls, and the sticky blood gathered under her nails. She absently noticed that her jeans and white jumper were spattered with it too, but she didn't care; it hardly seemed relevant under the circumstances.

Her steps were slow and weary as she neared her dorm, and as she raised a weak and shaking hand to open her door, she silently prayed that she could get in and out before Draco noticed. While a part of her wanted nothing more than to crawl into his lap and steal his warmth, he would have inevitable questions, and her mind was too laden with the day's events to give him any solid answers.

Almost tumbling into the room when her balance wavered, she caught herself and instantly met Draco's wide and wild eyes; flickering with concern and confusion as they studied the state she was in.

"Shit," he breathed raggedly, jumping up from the couch and stalking towards her. "Fucking hell, Granger, you're-

"I'm fine," she interrupted, lifting her hand to stop him. "It's not my blood-

"You're covered in it-

"I know," she murmured, trying to move past him. "Draco, I need to-

"Are you hurt?" he demanded, grabbing her elbows and keeping her steady. "You look like hell-

"Draco, let go of me," she said, struggling in his grip. "I need to get back and help-

"Help who?" he asked. "What the hell happened?"

Sighing in defeat, Hermione placed her palms against his chest and closed her eyes. "St Mungo's was attacked," she told him in a deceptively even voice. "Some people managed to escape in time, and they're here-

"Attacked?" he repeated. "What does that mean?"

"It means that this War has begun," she frowned at him, pulling out of his grip and putting some space between them. "It means that you are going to have to make some decisions."

Draco's brow lowered. "And what the fuck does that mean?"

"Voldemort is getting more powerful, Draco," she explained. "If Hogwarts is next, then you are going to have to decide exactly which side you are on-

"That's not fair, Granger, and you know it-

"Don't you dare talk to me about fair!" she blurted hotly. "I just had to watch fifty people struggle to survive, so don't you dare make yourself into some kind of victim!"

"Do you realise what you're asking of me, Granger?" he fired back. "Just because that psychopath wants me dead, it doesn't mean I'm going to jump on Potter's sodding bandwagon-

"This War is bigger than your pathetic issues with Harry, Draco!" she shouted with frustration. "We're not children anymore! You need to start thinking for yourself and stop trying to be your father-

"Don't mention my father!" he warned loudly. "This is what my family do, Granger! There's nothing I can do about that-

"You could stand up for yourself!" Hermione argued tenaciously, bunching the fabric of his top in her fists and meeting his eyes. "You might have Death Eaters in your family, but you also have good in your family-

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Look at Sirius and Regulus!" she supplied quickly. "They both betrayed your family to try and defeat Voldemort-

"And look what happened to them!" he spat coldly, tearing out of her grip on his shirt. "They're fucking dead!"

"There's Andromeda too-

"What the hell do you want me to do, Granger?" he barked, tossing his arms in the air with agitation. "You would have me fight against my own family?"

"I would have you fight for what you believe in!"

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT THAT IS ANYMORE!" Draco roared, his breathing elevated as he eyed his lover coldly. "You screwed everything up!

Hermione shook her head. "I know you don't think the way you used to anymore," she argued adamantly. "I know that you don't-

"Don't tell me how I think-

"But it's true!" she retorted. "And you can stand there and claim I've brainwashed you all you like, but you know that you came to your own conclusions-

"Don't start with your psychoanalytical crap, Granger," he scolded in a dark voice. "I will admit that I have moved past my hatred for you, but that doesn't mean my views on other Muggle-borns have altered-

"Yes it does," she told him smoothly. "You might be in denial, but I can tell you are different."

He snorted. "You see what you want to see-

"You are not who you were!" she contested, catching his face between her hands and forcing him to match her eyes. "I know you now, Draco. I do-

"You are too quick to seek the positive in people, Granger," he muttered quietly, watching his reflection in her hazels. Lifting his hand to her cheek, he thumbed the smudge of blood there and then dragged his finger across her bottom lip. "Why do we have to fight at all, Granger? Why don't we just...leave?"

Hermione blinked. "You mean run away?" she clarified, wincing when he dipped his head. "You know I can't do that. If Voldemort wins this War, then the other Muggle-borns and I will be killed. I have to fight-

"No, you don't-

"Yes, I do, Draco!" she yelled, backing away from him. "I will die trying! I will not run away like some coward! If you want to, then that's up to you-

"Don't call me a coward," he hissed. "Don't ever call me a coward!"

"Then stand up for yourself!" she snapped back, taking a deep breath to prepare for her next question. The question that had been eating at her brain since she'd begun to fall for him. "If Voldemort agreed to take you back as a Death Eater, would you?"

He hesitated, and Hermione felt her heart drop. She averted her eyes and stalked towards her room, unable to look at him and reminding herself that she'd returned to her dorm with a purpose.

"Don't walk away from me, Granger!" Draco called, his footsteps following behind her. "And don't give me that fucking look!"

She refused to acknowledge him as she retrieved three vials from her trunk, spinning around and crashing into his sturdy body in the doorframe. "Get out of my way, Draco-

"We are not finished here-

"Yes, we are," she interrupted breathlessly, keeping her eyes on his chest. "I can't...I can't believe you would even consider supporting Voldemort after what has happened between us-

"I never said I would-

"You couldn't give me a straight answer," she reminded him sadly. "You couldn't-

"It's not that simple, Granger. It's complicated-

"No, it's not-

"Granger," he murmured quietly, attempting to grasp her shoulders, but she shrugged away his hands. "Hermione, come on-

"I don't want you near me right now," she whispered with a wavering tone. "I can't even look at you."

Draco's defiant stance faltered at her words, and he clenched his fists as she brushed past him. "Where the hell are you going?" he asked as he swivelled around. "Hey! Don't bloody ignore me!"

"I'm going to help those people-

"How long will you be?"

"I don't know, Draco!" she shouted over her shoulder. "As long as it takes!"

He opened his mouth to retort, but the shrill slam of the door cut him off, and a husky growl vibrated behind his teeth. Agitated pants steamed past his lips as he cradled his head in his

hands, and his fingernails stabbed his scalp. Merlin knew why, but his feet carried him to the bathroom, and he hunched over the basin; spitting out the bile that had gathered in his mouth.

You are going to have to make some decisions...

His chest heaved as his lover's words rattled around in his skull, pulsing against his temple and making him feel light-headed. The angry heat paced through his veins and throbbed underneath his skin, and he ripped his top over his head, ignoring the sense of déjà vu as his hands clutched the sink. His knuckles paled as sweat broke out on his forehead, sliding down his face and raining against the porcelain.

Maybe there were tears mixed with them. Maybe not.

You need to start thinking for yourself...

He lidded his eyes and clenched them tight, biting his tongue and eyeing the pinkish ribbon of salvia slithering towards the plughole. Flicking on the cold tap, he splashed his face with water and warily raised his tumultuous glare to his reflection. The person staring back made his anger rise.

I would have you fight for what you believe in!

Draco flinched. Why couldn't she understand that he didn't know what to believe in? Why couldn't she grasp that everything in his world had been flipped around and left in a mess that he couldn't decipher? Why the fuck couldn't she realise that he just wanted to disappear in her kiss and abandon the world beyond these walls?

You can stand there and claim I've brainwashed you all you like, but you know that you came to your own conclusions...

"Shut up," he grunted under his breath.

He studied his pseudo-self in the mirror and found Hermione everywhere. The whispers of her kisses staining his lips, her midnight murmurs still tickling his ears, the remains of her fingerprints against his chest; it was all there. She had melted into him. Inside and outside. Physically and mentally.

I know you don't think the way you used to anymore...

"Shut up," he bit out, louder this time.

He hunted his reflection for a shred of evidence that he wasn't the cold bastard he'd been, but he looked the same. The same, but so different that it haunted him. A stranger with his face. His thoughts shifted back to Hermione, and how affected he'd been when he'd seen her covered in blood. It had shaken his soul. He didn't want to see her hurt...Didn't want anything to do with her being hurt. Maybe that was the answer? Maybe that was his decision?

You are not who you were!

Then who was he?

"SHUT UP!" he screamed, hurling his fist into the mirror and instantly feeling the tension leave his muscles as his reflection shattered. That was better. It was distorted now; fractured and broken, and he absently flicked away the glass in his hand as the warm blood trickled down his fingers.

If Voldemort agreed to take you back as a Death Eater, would you?

"No," he confessed to the tiles. No hesitation this time. "No."

And there was his answer.

Dropping his head with surrender, he collapsed to the floor in a heavy heap and stayed completely still as the minutes drifted by without meaning or reason. So lost was he in his trance, that he didn't hear the sound of his lover returning when the time had slowly seeped into the early hours of tomorrow, nor did he notice her entering the bathroom and gently purring his name.

Only when she crouched in front him and slipped her hand into his did he recognise her presence, and he desperately reached for her and pulled her as close as he could. She was coated in dry blood and smelled of hard work and death, but he didn't care. He pressed his face into hers and relished the taste of her breath ghosting across his chapped lips. Her thumbs stroked away the damp tracks on his cheeks, and she freckled his jaw with demi-kisses as his fingers dug into her sides, refusing to let her go.

"I'm sorry," he heard her mumble. "I know this isn't easy for you, but you need to decide what you're going to do, Draco. We can't...we can't do this if we are going to fight each other."

He watched her beneath his lashes and felt the comforting warmth in his chest swell.

"I don't want to fight you," she continued, gulping back a sob. "I just want us to be...okay. I want us to be more than distant memory trapped in these walls. I want you."

His grip on her tightened, and he licked his rough lips and swallowed away the dry scratch in his throat.

"I will not fight for your side, Granger," he mumbled carefully, feeling her stiffen in his hold. "But I will not fight against it either."

She shifted in his arms to gaze at him with wide and curious eyes, and he leaned in to plant a fate-sealing kiss against her mouth.

"I will not fight in a War when I don't know what to believe," he explained in an exhausted tone. "But I won't support Voldemort. I swear to you that."

Chewing her lower lip and nodding with understanding, she rested her head against his collarbone and sighed with relief.

"I think that's good enough for me."

Hermione nestled into his strong frame as a foreboding rumble of thunder echoed outside, closely followed by the hard thuds of heavy rain. Knowing the storm would wash away the beautiful snow, she searched for Draco's hand again, and tangled their fingers.

If the storm was here, she wanted to hold his hand.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the wait...been a busy week with going back to Uni and everything! I hope this chapter was okay! The songs I suggested at the beginning were kind of intended for Draco's mirror bit, and I hoped they worked! If you have any suggestions, let me know!

There was a...shall we say, heated discussion? in my reviews after the last chapter, and I feel I should say something. I won't say your name, I will simply say that while I completely appreciate you trying to be honest, I think there was something about the way you worded your review that came across as a little condescending, which I'm sure was unintentional, and I think that's why it received such a backlash. I have had critical reviews before that haven't received that kind of response, and I would never ask reviewers to refrain from being honest, but something about your review just seemed a little...off. I would like very much if we could just ignore it, and move on. If you wish to discuss it further, feel free to PM me.

On the plus side to that, I discovered that I have some lovely reviewers who have shown me support and truly made me feel so flattered, and I want to thank you for being so lovely. You know who you are...love, love, love! Oh and thanks for pushing me past 1500 reviews! It's crazy! As always, feel free to add me on facebook for some Dramione chatty-ness! Oh and to answer a question, I'm not certain, but I reckon this fic will be somewhere between 35 and 40 chaps...I'm not sure though...

I'd like to thank wine, energy drinks and you wonderful people for this chapter! Read and Review! Lend me your thoughts!

Limbo

Chapter Notes

I can't seem to stop the song suggestions now...Sorry! Can I recommend Ingrid Michaelson - Morning Lullabies for Hermione's thoughts please? And Kent - 747 for the general feel of the chapter? If anyone has any suggestions, I love to hear them! Some of you have fantastic ideas!

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

"Draco?"

"Hm?"

"Will you help me wash the blood out of my hair, please?"

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The turbulent weather and his agitated movements roused her, and Hermione carefully removed her arm from under Draco's torso.

She must have coiled herself around him during the night, but she ignored the dull ache in her elbow and cheated some morning minutes to study his unknowing face. An agitated groan escaped him as he resisted the disruptive demons of his subconscious, and Hermione decided to linger and try to chase them away. Lifting her hand, she smoothed away the creases of his frown with her fingers, and relished a secret smile when he instantly calmed under her touch.

He was so beautiful like this. Unaware of her admiring gaze. Her fingertips caressed him gently; from the proud curve of his lips, to the blond dusting of his eyebrows, and every inch of milky skin in between. Her ministrations move to his hair, which was barely affected by bed, and her nails parted his cream stands in lazy circles. He might be oblivious to it, but the harsh edge that had once darkened his presence had eroded. Inside and out. And the difference made her heart tremble.

It struck her then

As hard as thunder, and as soft as lullabies.

She was falling.

Not yet love, but kissing the seams.

Her lips parted in a silent gasp, and she withdrew her curious hand. It felt wrong to have such romantic notions when the wounded and dying were just a few corridors away. Was there even room for love amongst the raucous throbs of impending War? Shaking her head and hastily leaving him alone in the bed, she scolded herself for misplacing her priorities.

There was work to be done.

Love would have to wait in the corner.

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His dream was simple; neither obscure nor corrupted with metaphors or enigmas.

He was standing in a dark and dull room that vibrated with silence.

Standing in one corner were his parents; his father's face scrunched up with scorn, and his mother's aged with dejection and stress. In the other corner waited Granger; a hopeful look on her face and typically chewing her lip, and behind her was a misty and translucent version of himself.

In his dream, Draco's conflicted stare shifted between them for hours, before he finally gulped down a lung-splitting breath, and lifted his foot.

And then it ended.

Draco's eyes snapped open as he bolted upright in the bed, shudders itching down his spine and a cold sweat glistening across his body. Dropping his face into his hands, he groaned against his clammy palms and wondered why goosebumps were bubbling under his skin. His attention drifted to his side, and he frowned at Granger's hollow indentation in the mattress, but the quiet sounds of shuffling beyond the bedroom door informed him where she was.

The cold chill in the room nibbled at his pores, and he slipped into his baggy pyjama bottoms and an oversized t-shirt as he left the bed. He paused to watch the thunderstorm raging outside the window; the pane distorted by hammering rain and whipping winds, but he could see that it had washed away the snow.

Granger wouldn't like that.

Heading out of the bedroom, he stopped in his tracks and quirked an eyebrow when he saw her. Leaning over her cauldron and muttering measurements of ingredients to herself, her hair was a gravity-resistant mess surrounding her flushed features as she sprinkled some purple powder into her concoction. Nodding with satisfaction, she lifted her busy eyes and finally noticed him, and Draco's lips twitched in response.

"Good morning," Hermione said quietly. "Well, afternoon actually."

"Afternoon?" he repeated, glimpsing at the clock to find it had just pushed past midday. "You should have woken me."

"I thought you might need the rest," she shrugged. "You were quite restless in your sleep last night."

Ignoring her comment, he nodded his head at her cauldron. "What's that for?"

"It's just another batch of Dreamless Sleep Potion," she explained, giving it a quick stir. "I found some Murtlap Essence and Burn-Healing Paste too." She hesitated. "Draco, would you like me to save you some Dreamless Sleep Potion?"

"I'm fine," he grumbled, his brow creasing with irritation. "Perhaps you should take some, seeing as you were apparently up all night, taking notes about my sleeping habits."

"It was simply a suggestion-

"An unnecessary one," he interjected calmly, wrinkling his nose as the sharp tang of mingling potions hit his nose. "That smells like shit."

"I brewed some Skele-Gro earlier," she told him. "It stunk out the kitchen a bit-

"Earlier? Did you even sleep?"

"The rain woke me up pretty early," she mumbled. "I wanted to get these done anyway-

"You look shattered," he remarked, moving closer and noting the dark smudges under her eyes. "You should go back to bed-

"I'm fine," she shook her head. "I need to get back and help-

"Of course you do," he drawled, rolling his eyes.

He expected his witch to make a defensive retort, but then he should have learned by now that it was futile to predict anything about Granger's behaviour. Instead, she simply studied him from beneath her lovely lashes with a knowing glint in her eyes. He didn't like that look, and he blamed his vow last night, when he had assured that he would not serve Voldemort again. She regarded him like he was different; somehow...better, and he shifted his weight with discomfort.

She didn't get it.

Did she honestly believe that it had been born out of some moral revelation? That he gave a shit about Potter and his band of feckless fools? He almost snorted. His motivation was entirely selfish; he knew now that he cared for her welfare, and he didn't want to see her hurt or killed. Simple as that. Also, they shared an enemy in Voldemort, and she could pose the 'what if he asked you to rejoin the Death Eaters' question all she liked, but the mentally-deranged psychopath was hardly renowned for his forgiving nature.

Deciding to remain neutral was the rational decision. The only issue with that was the state of his parents, for he had no idea how they'd reacted to his disappearance, or whether their loyalties still lied with Voldemort. Snape had told him that his father had been broken out of Azkaban, along with many others, about a month after the Astronomy Tower incident. He would like to believe that his parents would have resisted, but his father's fear-induced desperation to please Voldemort made Draco doubtful.

"Granger," he started hesitantly. "The attack on St Mungo's. Were...were my parents involved?"

Hermione couldn't suppress her cringe. "I don't know, Draco. They all wear masks-

"But it's likely," he finished for her. "I get it."

"Draco," she sighed. "I really don't know. There is a possibility that the...circumstances with you might have altered their-

"But you don't know," he said in a jaded tone, resting his weight against the kitchen counter and clicking his jaw. "So what do you know, Granger? What exactly is going on out there?"

He watched her intently as her spine stiffened, and the muscles in her shoulders tensed. He could see her designing sentences in that ever-working brain of hers, wondering how much information to divulge, and measuring her level of trust in him. The dynamics had shifted now; he had verbally resigned as her enemy, and that changed everything, whether he liked or not.

"It's getting worse," she finally rushed out. "Before Christmas, the Ministry seemed to have some degree of control over the situation, but since the Muggles were murdered on New Year's-

"New Year's?" he interjected with narrowing eyes. "Does that have anything to with your parents?"

He almost regretted the question when he witnessed the pain flash across her features, but his curiosity had waited long enough to be sated.

"They were killing the parents of Muggle-borns," Hermione told him with a shaky voice. "I erased their memories and sent them somewhere safe." She swallowed down the lump in her throat. "At least, I think they'll be safe."

Aside from the slight flex of his fists, Draco neither moved nor spoke, but the hard pound of guilt in his stomach almost doubled him over. He didn't know where it had come from. He'd played no part in her soul-stuttering ordeal, but the guilt chewed at his insides anyway. That indefinable feeling for Granger burned a little harder in his bones as he watched her; struggling to keep her emotions subdued, and wearing a façade of composure that strained the muscles in her face.

"And now St Mungo's has been attacked," Hermione murmured, bringing them back to the current chaos. "The Ministry will be next, and then he'll be able to do whatever he wants." Her eyes shimmered with thought as she paused to glance around her dorm. "Hogwarts won't be safe anymore. Nowhere will."

Draco clicked his tongue. "Granger, where will-

"I don't know what will happen to you yet," she cut him off with an exasperated breath. "I need to discuss it with McGonagall-

"I was going to ask where you will go," he blurted, and his comment shocked them both. Recovering quickly, he donned a stoic mask and straightened his back. "Just out of curiosity, Granger."

Hermione blinked once. Twice. "I don't know," she repeated. "I will probably stay with some of the Order-

"And then you and your Gryffindor comrades will march into battle," he snapped in a scathing tone, wrinkling his nose with distaste. "How fucking gallant and noble-

"Draco, don't do that!" she demanded sternly, fixing him with a critical glare. "Don't undermine us like that!"

"Well forgive me for trying to talk you out of a suicide mission!" he countered. "You said it yourself! They are getting stronger-

"Then we will get stronger!"

"Don't be so bloody naïve!" he yelled, tossing his arms in the air with frustration. "This isn't a fucking fairytale! Good doesn't always conquer evil, Granger! You need to accept that you might not win this War-

"Then I will die trying!" she shouted hotly, and while Draco knew he should feel disgusted with her remark, he only felt his chest constrict with affection for his fiery witch.

"No!" he spat firmly, slapping his palm against the counter. "You can't-

"Why not?"

Because you're all I have left...

"BECAUSE YOU CAN'T JUST SOD OFF AND LEAVE!" Draco roared, his voice raw with intensity as he buried his pride. "YOU JUST CAN'T!"

Hermione tried to reach for his hand. "I'm not leaving-

"Not yet!" he barked, swatting away her touch. "But you said that when Voldemort infiltrates the Ministry, you will go to the Order! I'm not thick, Granger! I know that I won't be able to go wherever the hell you're going, so what? I just get tossed on my arse and left to fend for myself?"

"I told you," she sighed sadly. "I don't know where you will go, but I will talk to McGonagall-

"That old cow doesn't give a shit about what happens to me," he mumbled in a low tone. "You'd be wasting your breath-

"That's enough!" she shouted, slicing the air with her hand. "This War is bigger than you and I, Draco! People are dying! How can you be so selfish?"

His lips made an audible clap as his mouth slammed shut, and the silence pulsed in his ears. He refrained from flinching as her disappointed eyes studied him, desperately hunting for an indication of moral decency, but he knew she wouldn't find anything.

"Do you..." Hermione whispered hesitantly, moving around the counter until she could feel his breath cooling her face. "Do you care about anyone but yourself?" She worried her lip. "Do you care about me?"

Pride crumbled between his grinding teeth. "Have you forgotten that I asked you to leave with me, Granger? Do you think I just said that for laugh?"

"That doesn't answer the question-

"Yes, it does!" he argued fiercely, raising a hand to massage his forehead. "This is ridiculous. Your sodding Order put me in here, and now that I've become... accustomed to our situation, they're going to shove me somewhere else? I am sick of this mind-fuck bullshit."

"Change is inevitable in War, Draco," she said, wrapping her quivering fingers around his wrist. "All I can do is try to ensure that you will do somewhere safe-

"Stop doing that," he seethed through tense lips. "Why do you have to be so bloody concerned about what happens to me?"

Hermione gulped down the emotion wedged in her windpipe. "You know why."

Draco felt the beats in his chest quicken into an erratic staccato as he considered the subtle confession in her words. He didn't know whether to feel charmed or horrified, and once again he found himself lingering in between. Between Dark and Light. Loathing and Lust. His family and Her. What he'd been told and what he was and what he could be.

Just trapped in this soul-splitting limbo that seemed infinite, and yet somehow enlightening.

He remembered how he would have smothered Granger in her sleep and surrendered his inheritance to get out of this room, only mere months ago. Now, the prospect of the world

beyond these warm walls seemed toxic and suffocating, and the idea of being separated from Granger made him feel queasy. She was both a sedative and stimulant; addictive perfection that sanity told him to reject, but instinct urged him to drown in.

"I need to get back to the medical wing," Hermione severed his thoughts, pulling away from him to organise her potions. "Professor Slughorn needs these-

"We haven't finished our discussion-

"Then we can finish it later," she mumbled, slipping the vials into her charmed bag. "I have to-

"Granger," Draco mumbled, snatching her arm and twisting her to face him. "I don't..." he released a husky breath of defeat. "I don't want this...thing to end yet."

"Yet?" she echoed, her eyes finding the floor. "Then you do intend on it finishing at some point?"

A frown marred his features. "I didn't-

"Let me ask you a question, Draco," she mumbled, and her heart faltered as she prepared a question with a potentially devastating answer. "What if we both survive this War? What then? What about our...thing, as you so eloquently labelled it?"

His stubborn silence and the indifferent haze in his rain-cloud eyes made her feel sick, so she tucked a brazen curl behind her ear, and lifted her chin with contrived poise. Again, she reminded herself of the injured victims on the other side of the Castle, and it put her personal feelings in perspective.

"I don't have time for this," she said steadily, brushing past him. "I have things to do-

"Granger, wait-

The slam of the door was louder this time, and it ricocheted around his skull until his ears felt like they were leaking blood.

More questions.

More decisions.

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The bones in Hermione's fingers felt brittle and ready to snap.

After thirteen hours on her feet, with only the residual effects of Vitamix to lift her limbs, she could feel her body starting to shut down with exhaustion. When she had first arrived, her veins had been pumping with anger-fuelled adrenaline from her argument with Draco, but that had long since withered away as the day had dragged into night.

She had just finished redressing the Murtlap Essence-laced bandages around a young wizard's abdomen when McGonagall called her over for some assistance, and Hermione's eyes fell to the traumatized witch in the bed at the Headmistress' side. She instantly recognised the fragile woman, seemingly in her mid-twenties, as she had caused quite the stir in the afternoon.

After remaining unconscious since her rescue from St. Mungo's, Annabelle Snowbloom had awoken to discover that her husband of less than six months wasn't amongst the fortunate who had escaped, and she had screamed the screams of a broken-brained madwoman for hours, until her voice had simply shattered. Hermione neared the injured witch, and the sympathy was crippling as she noted the eerie void in her eyes, and how her shivering fingers absently toyed with her wedding ring.

"Could you replace the bandages on Miss Snowbloom's arms please, Hermione?" McGonagall asked, her voice scratchy with fatigue. "I just need to see Horace for a moment and get some more Dreamless Sleep Potion."

"Of course," she mumbled, moving closer to Annabelle and studying the deep and gory dents in her wrists, from what must have been a violent Incarcerous. Sticky and weeping blisters speckled her flesh like macabre bracelets, but Hermione had become immune to such wounds, and she barely flinched as she withdrew her wand to clean away the pinkish mix of blood and puss. "Let me know if I hurt you, okay? This looks very sore."

Annabelle remained completely unresponsive, so Hermione started reciting her Spells and applying the dressings with gentle but precise attention, in a silence that was too tragic to be awkward.

"Is there anywhere else you were hurt?" she asked when she was close to finishing. "Or is there anything I can do for you?"

Annabelle's dead stare shifted towards her like a bullet. "Can you bring back my husband?"

Hermione flinched. "I'm sorry," she murmured, because she had no idea what else she could say. "I'm really sorry-

"It would have been better if I'd never woken up," the too-young widow said in a deadpan tone. "I don't want this life. It doesn't feel real."

Hermione's hands fidgeted in her lap. "Would you like some-

"You're a pretty girl," she remarked suddenly, but her expression didn't change, and her voice sounded bitter. "Tell me, have you lost someone you love yet?"

She nodded and felt guilty for it; it seemed wrong to compare when Annabelle's grief was so fresh. "I have lost friends-

"But not someone you wanted to spend your life with," she interrupted. "Not your soul-mate." Her voice cracked. "The person who makes you feel indestructible and vulnerable at the same time." She glanced down at her wedding ring. "The person you would die for, and die without."

An image of Draco instantly flashed across Hermione's conscious without prompt, and her heart shrivelled like a burning leaf; crackling and shrinking, just from the thought. Oh Merlin...it made a heavy lump of dread plummet in her stomach, and a shaky groan passed her lips when a stab of physical pain hit her. All from a thought. She forgot to angry at him. Words refused to form as the unsettling sensations harassed her nerves, so she simply shook her head, and refused to cry in front of a newly-made widow.

"I hope you never have to feel like this," Annabelle told her, her mourning gaze drifting back to stare at nothing. "Because it feels like dying, only worse."

Hermione could see the mental cocoon take over the witch's mind again, and she remained silent until McGonagall returned a few minutes later, placing a small vial of the purple potion next to Annabelle. "Take it when you're ready," the Headmistress instructed softly, steering Hermione away from the damaged witch. "We have done all we can for today. You should go and rest-

"I need to talk to you," she rushed out. "Privately."

"It has been a long day. Can it wait until tomorrow?"

"No," Hermione refused, keeping her voice low. "I want to talk about it now. I need to talk about it now."

Sensing the urgency in her protégé's tone, Minerva bobbed her head and led them to her office, noting the younger witch's stiff posture and her distracted expression. The moment she closed the door to ensure them privacy, Hermione began to pace around the room with impatient strides, her movements restless and quivering, like the thistle in Autumn winds.

"Calm down, Miss Granger," McGonagall advised, swishing her wand to summon a chair. "Take a seat-

"I want to know what's going to happen to Draco," she blurted heedlessly, encouraged by flashbacks of Annabelle's ordeal. She did not want to be that broken-hearted and soul-torn woman. "I want to know where he will go."

The greying professor pursed her lips with consideration. "You mean if Voldemort infiltrates the Ministry, and Hogwarts-

"Don't say if," Hermione interjected with an irritated bite. "There is no if anymore! You know as well as I do that St Mungo's couldn't have been attacked like that if there wasn't already

some corruption in the Ministry, so I want to know what happens to Draco when the Death Eaters take over."

"Hermione, we have more pressing issues-

"Just answer the question!" she exclaimed, clenching her fists until her nails pierced her palms. "I need to know!"

Aside from the slight arch of one cinereous eyebrow, McGonagall seemed unaffected by her outburst. "What would you suggest I do with Mr Malfoy?"

"I-I don't know," she stuttered with frustration, whipping her hair out of her face. "There has to be somewhere he can go. Somewhere he will be safe."

"Hermione, you must understand that I have lot on my plate-

"I know you do," she sighed, rubbing her bag-crested eyes. "I know you do, and I'm sorry that I am being selfish about this, but I just-

"Look," McGonagall breathed cautiously, taking a moment to select her words. "I am not blind. I know that you have become somewhat...fond of Mr Malfoy, and while I may not understand your reasoning, I have refrained from saying anything because you have seemed more...like yourself recently."

Hermione contemplated denying it, but the tell-tale blush warming her cheeks betrayed her, and a guilty tear punctuated the confession. "I never intended for it to happen-

"I know you didn't," the Headmistress assured her softly. "And I'm not angry, but you must understand my predicament. What would you do in my position? Mr Malfoy's behaviour has been completely unacceptable-

"He's different now," she defended her not-so-secret lover. "Really, he is-

"Hermione, you are-

"Please listen to me!" she implored loudly. "He told me! He swore to me that he wouldn't serve Voldemort again! Surely that changes things?"

McGonagall's green eyes flashed with surprise, but it disappeared as quick as it had come. "You will understand my reluctance to trust anything that he says-

"Then trust me," she persisted. "I know he has made mistakes, but he was a victim of circumstance. You said yourself that it was important that he didn't go through with killing Dumbledore-

"Yes, but-

"He has changed so much," she continued with desperate haste. "And I know you probably think my feelings are effecting my judgement, but I promise you that I'm telling the truth."

The older witch regarded her flustered companion thoughtfully. "Exactly how strong are your feelings for Mr Malfoy, Hermione?"

"I care about him," she admitted after a thick pause. "He has become...important to me."

"And you believe he returns these...feelings?"

She sucked in a soothing breath. "Yes, I do," she whispered. "I think I mean something to him, but even if I didn't, I would still need to know that he was somewhere safe."

Minerva felt that maternal twinge flicker in her chest, and she dipped her head with weary acceptance. "I can't promise anything," she said in a hushed voice. "But there is a possible place Mr Malfoy would be safe. I will see if I can make arrangements."

Hermione lidded her eyes as the relief swamped her, and she placed a hand over her reassured heart. "Thank you," she exhaled. "Thank you so much, Professor-

"Please don't get your hopes up, Hermione," the Headmistress stopped her. "This is entirely dependant on someone else's judgement and I can't guarantee that they will agree to it."

Curiosity crept in. "Who does it depend on?"

"It's best I don't say until I contact them," she explained, smothering a yawn with the back of her hand. "It has been an eventful day. You should go and get some rest. I assure you I will do what I can."

"Thank you," Hermione repeated, making her way towards the door. "And thank you for... understanding."

"I am not certain I do understand," McGonagall disputed, leading the younger witch towards the door. "But emotions are what make us human, and I can't condemn you for having them. You are old enough to make your own decisions; all I can do is urge you to be careful."

"I will," she said, a pseudo-smile capturing her lips before she turned to leave. "Good night, Professor."

McGonagall simply nodded and watched Hermione disappear into the inky darkness that flooded the hallways. She replayed their conversation in her head and wondered if she should have done anything to discourage her protégé's interest in the boy with a brand on his forearm, but she had secretly guessed that there was something going on weeks ago, and had decided against intervening.

She absently questioned what Dumbledore would have done in her situation, and had a sneaking suspicion that her late friend would have praised the circumstances, and the dormant romantic in her couldn't help but feel a little moved by the dilemma.

No, it wasn't Hermione's confession that had surprised her, but the revelation that Draco Malfoy had apparently vowed to sever his connection with Voldemort, and furthermore that he reciprocated Hermione's risky affections. The concept was absurd, and yet, as she meandered through the memories of the last few months, she noticed subtle clues that

indicated it wasn't a one-sided romance; be it fading glamour charms on Hermione's neck, or the faint hint of a male scent clinging to her clothes.

If anyone else but Hermione had told her such details about the Malfoy heir, she would have dismissed it at nonsense.

But Hermione had told her, and that meant it was true.

Perhaps Albus had been right about the boy's soul...

Rubbing her age-creased forehead, she slowly made her way over to the fireplace and tossed in some Floo Powder, as she recited an address she had used many times in the recent months. The emerald flames rippled and twirled in bold patterns, until a familiar face hovered above the hearth, and stared back at her with confusion.

"I'm sorry it's so late," McGonagall apologised. "But I'm afraid I have another favour to ask of you."

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry. I really do feel awful. After a week of writer's block, my computer decided to delete some of this chapter, and it's just been a crap few days between oral presentations and assignments...but I know that's no excuse, and I'm really sorry! Don't hate me...?

On a brighter note Masha19 has created a stunning piece of FanArt for chapter 22 (Draco's mirror scene) and you should all go and tell her how amazing it is! (link is on my profile page).

I have little to say except I hope you liked the chapter, although I know it is mainly a filler (a calm before the storm, if you will). I am sooo excited to get started on the next chapter! Oooooo...I've been looking forward to writing it for a while! Let me know your thoughts on this chapter, and thanks again for being so patient and lovely! Read and Review! Love, love, love! Wine, wine, wine! The next chapter is likely to be a little late sorry...I have a few assignments due...sorry sorry sorry!

Bex-chan

Hours

Chapter Notes

Thoughts are with the people of Japan.

Apparently suggesting songs has become addictive...I have a few for this chap, sorry.

Ingrid Michaelson - Keep Breathing (for Hermione) and Andrew Belle - In my veins (for Draco. Both for the first half of the chap. Both are beautiful and just perfect, I think.)

and then James Blunt - Goodbye my Lover, Mumford and Sons - Thistle and Weeds or Landon Pigg - The way it ends (for the last bit...).

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

The bitter breeze thrashed around her, like it was trying to sneak into her pores and freeze her blood.

Merlin knew why, but her feet had carried her to Astronomy Tower, and she would swear the residual energy of Snape's Killing Curse was still clouding the air up here. The atmosphere felt thicker and close, and a niggling itch had scratched at her spine the moment she had arrived.

Leaning against the railing, her troubled stare searched the skies and tried to look past the shadows of storm clouds to find the stars, but only Vega and Arcturus were bright enough to wink back.

Forgotten voices ricocheted around her skull.

I have to do this...

She shuddered. Harry had told her exactly what Draco had said that night, and she would swear on Godric's grave that she could hear the whispers of his words crawling across the walls.

I have to kill you, or he's going to kill me...

She gripped the railing tighter and closed her eyes, and the ghosts of the past formed in her mind. She could see it all so clearly; the scene repeating itself in her head. Draco, Dumbledore, Snape, Bellatrix. So alive and fresh, like she could graze her fingertips over their forms and feel the beats of their hearts.

Hermione focussed on the image of Draco that her brain had conjured as he lowered his wand, just like Harry had described, and her heart felt like it was throbbing in her throat. He looked so vulnerable, and it made her fall a little harder for him, but the logical voice in her head reminded her that this was purely her interpretation of the events.

Just before Snape lifted his wand to murder the man she had admired so much, she felt a breathy murmur tingle her ear, and her eyes snapped open. Spinning around with a sharp gasp to inflate her lungs, she frantically hunted for the source, but she was alone.

Completely alone.

And it petrified her.

Her surroundings seemed to vibrate with sinister shadows, and eerie whispers were buried in the dark. The space became suffocating, and her chest was suddenly heaving as the icy chill coiled around her limbs.

Breaking into a sprint, she ran to her dorm, leaving the spirits of the past to fizzle behind her in the Tower. The slaps of her racing footsteps echoed down the empty corridors and she dived into her room, skidding to a stop and shutting the door behind her. Pivoting on her heels, her eyes softened when they landed on Draco; snoozing on the sofa with Crookshanks resting in his lap. A sad smile pulled at her lips as his husky breaths drifted over to her, and that painful pulse of affection drummed in her chest.

"Crooks," she whispered, tip-toeing towards the couch. "Come down, boy."

With a lazy stretch, her faithful pet obeyed and wandered into Draco's room to give them the privacy she wanted. Reaching out with uninhibited fingers, Hermione stroked his face. She had repeated these ministrations before, but had never taken the times to feel how he was between the caverns of her fingerprints, and he felt like liquid Autumn; pleasantly cold and like the firm flesh of plums. Closing her eyes, she engraved the sensation into her brain, noting his lips were the texture of melting wax and the fine stubble on his jaw tingled like static.

"What are you doing, Granger?"

Her eyes snapped open just as Draco's lids slowly peeled back to fix her with a suspicious glare. Her body went still for a moment, but with a single tug of her lip with her teeth, she simply sighed and lifted her chin.

"I met a woman who lost someone she..." Loved. It was what she wanted to say, but her tongue hesitated. "Someone she cared about."

Draco's brow furrowed, but he remained silent.

"I know our...relationship is complicated," Hermione continued, a little relieved when he didn't scowl at the 'r' word. "And I never meant for any of this to happen-

He snorted. "You think I planned-

"Please, Draco," she interrupted. "Just let me finish. I don't think either of us planned any of this." She swallowed and caught his eyes. "But I don't regret anything. I care about you. And I don't want us to be separated, but there's nothing I can do about it."

Draco tensed his jaw, but some of his resolve simmered as he watched her shoulders droop with fatigue and defeat. Her cheeks were shimmering with hour-old tears and her hair was wild from wind-play, but she was so raw and real like this, and it kicked him in the gut.

"But I can do something about the goodbye," Hermione said with a purposeful tone. "I will not fight with you anymore."

He arched an eyebrow. "What are you-

"I don't know when we will have to leave," she mumbled. "But I will not let our last days involve us at each other's throats-

"We fight, Granger," he stated with a stoic shrug. "It's what we do-

"I don't mean the harmless stuff," she said with frustration. "You know what I mean, Draco; all the fights we've had recently, and I won't do it any more. I refuse."

She paused, waiting for him to speak, but he simply regarded her with that familiar look of detachment that made her fists clench.

"I just..." she trailed off, her fingers finding their way back to his face. "I want to remember you like this. Calm and...and not looking like you hate me."

Draco frowned but absently leaned into her touch.

"So that's it," she spoke, dropping her hand back to her side. "I don't know what's going to happen to us. McGonagall said she might have found a place for you, but I don't know anything else. I have given you all the answers I can, so I will not argue about our circumstances anymore. I am tired of it-

"Granger-

"So if you can't do that-

"Granger-

"Then I don't want to speak to you-

"Granger," he growled with impatience, snatching her hand and yanking her into his lap. "Take a fucking breath-

"I'm serious," she told him, stiff and resilient in his arms. "I won't do it."

Draco's expression slowly morphed into an amused smirk, and Hermione studied him warily, subconsciously halting her breaths as he clicked his tongue. "Always so stubborn," he remarked with a low and quiet rumble of his vocal chords. He licked his lips. "Fine, Granger. No more questions."

She couldn't help the loud sigh of relief that left her lips and toyed with some of his blond hair. "Thank you," she said, relaxing in his lap and brushing a delicate kiss at the corner of his

mouth.

Draco tucked his hands between the backs of her knees and gathered her closer, adjusting her legs into a comfortable straddle as he pressed harder into the kiss. Something about Granger's gentle but determined nips and licks always roused a hungry and inescapable urge in his veins. Knotting his fingers into her rebellious locks, he held her head in place and sucked at her lips with something devastatingly close to desperation.

Dropping his damp nibbles to the swoon of her throat, he resisted a shiver when one of her moan-come-gasps ticked the receptive skin of his shoulder and glided down the bumps of his spine. His fingers stabbed into the denim-clad pinch just beneath her buttocks when she roughly tugged at the hem of his top and broke the kiss to rip it over his head.

Broken kisses taste better when they're fixed.

She was doing that thing he secretly adored; softly scraping her nails across his chest and freckling barely-there pecks against the shell of his ear. Hastily tearing off her jumper, he grazed his teeth over the rise of her collarbone as he fiddled with the clasp of her bra.

Both bare-chested and starting to glisten with pre-bliss sweat, an unvoiced agreement was shared between them as they stole some sacred minutes, just to relish all the details that teased the senses.

To kiss...touch...bite...sigh...savour...

To memorise.

But the trapped heat beneath her stomach made Hermione squirm, and she tore herself away from him and got to her feet to step out of her jeans and underwear, while Draco swiftly eased out of his trousers and boxers. He could see the beginnings of her insecurities in her hazels as he openly stared at her, willing his brain to remember every inch of her body before her anxiety shattered the image.

Why couldn't she understand that she was fucking beautiful?

Perhaps because he'd never told her.

She made to settle next to him on the sofa, but his hand shot out and latched onto her wrist, slowly but firmly dragging her back to where she had been; thighs against thighs. He pushed away the brandy-tinted tresses hiding her face, and he could see the uncertainty reluctantly etched into her charming features. They'd never done it like this before, her on top and needing to set the pace, and he lifted her chin so she would meet his encouraging look.

"You will like this," he assured her, snatching her lower lip between his teeth. "Trust me."

Hermione's eyes widened and her shoulders relaxed as a slow smile graced her nibble-swollen lips. "I do trust you," she confessed quietly, gripping his shoulders as one of his palms settled on her back, his fingers rousing pleasant shivers to trickle down her spine.

His other hand traced an imaginary trail from the wave of her hip to the moist slit that he craved and dipped two fingers inside, catching her keening whine with his mouth. He only teased her for some stolen minutes, sprinkling tongue-heavy kisses against her chest and growing harder as her dulcet purrs tingled his ears. She tried to reach for his erection, but he pushed away her eager hands; he wanted this to last a while. He wanted to be consumed by the experience of the intimate link, instead of striving to reach the climax.

He didn't know why. He just did.

Just a couple of strokes against her most sensitive flesh to ensure she was ready, and he slowly slid her up his legs until her cherry-tipped breasts were against his chest. With a slight wriggle of her body, she swallowed his desire inside, arching her back and adjusting herself to the unfamiliar but delicious angle.

Draco sucked the air through his teeth as he melted into her warmth, and his grip on her waist tightened as a twist of her hips made his gut pound with lust. Moving her body to help build a rhythm, he rocked her slowly against him, his lips remaining securely fastened to any inch of skin he could taste.

Something between seconds and hours passed with the gradual build-up; gentle sways of bodies and languid brushes of lips. She was making those husky little moans that sounded too pure for his side of reality, but he inhaled them anyway. Her head lolled forward until their brows touched, spilling her coffee-curls around them like a veil to muffle the rest of the world.

Kisses match the flow of sex; slow but deep, and setting nerve-endings on fire. As the imminent bliss began to inflate beneath his stomach, Draco locked his arms around her torso so she was flush up him and took over the tempo, bucking into her a little faster and harder. He knew from her tell-tale twitches and her elevated breaths that she was reaching the peak of her pleasure, and he broke their kiss, grasping her face so he could witness the moment dance across her features.

The parting of her lips. Her blinks of bewilderment. The dilating of her pupils. Her choked whimper.

"I want to remember you like this," he mumbled, almost accidentally as the vibrations of her release brought on his.

Forehead kissing forehead and harsh breaths clashing between them, Draco absently stroked lazy patterns against her hairline as the orgasms simmered away to leave that playful tingle in their bones. Her hum of satisfaction ghosted across his shoulder and her lids fell shut, but he didn't let her head drop as some damning words tumbled out of his mouth.

"One final question," he rasped out, and her eyes reluctantly opened to meet his. "How long do we have left?"

Hermione's sated expression creased into a heartbroken frown, and she gulped down the clot of sorrow in her windpipe. "Not long."

* * *

Time is subjective to the happiness of hearts.

Time is bitter and selfish; won't slow down no matter how hard you beg.

Time breezes by when you stumble across something close to contentment.

They spent the next few days tangled in each other's limbs, amongst the bed-sheets or shower spray and tried to block out the world beyond the door, as young lovers do. In the fragile hours between, they perched on the window-seat, watching the wild displays of the January thunderstorms and absently reading Shakespeare, Byron or Donne between lazy kisses.

Draco resented the moments when Hermione had to leave for a couple of meetings with McGonagall and to help the St Mungo's victims in the Medical Wing, but he chewed his tongue to keep the peace, as he'd said he would. Although the shadow of the impending War never left the room, she'd been wearing a subtle smile since their talk, and he was adamant he wouldn't chase it away.

"Draco."

"Hm?"

"Do you want to go to bed?" she asked. "You look a little tired."

Sleep was a waste of time.

"I'm fine," he mumbled, gesturing for her to flip the page. "Might as well get to the end."

Hermione craned her neck to nip the corner of his mouth.

She had fought hard not to be seduced by a false sense of security, but Draco's relaxed demeanour had been like a drug to alleviate her dread. Hogwarts had felt more peaceful too; most of the survivors of the St. Mungo's attack had made quick recoveries and been sent home, and around forty students had returned to the school from the extended Christmas break. The rest of her classmates were due to return tomorrow on the Hogwarts Express, and she was looking forward to seeing Ginny and Neville, if only to say goodbye before the Ministry was overthrown and she would need to leave.

Among the forty who had returned were the Creevey brothers and a third-year named Joanne Preston; Hermione's fellow Muggle-borns, and her main priority when the inevitable happened.

McGonagall had outlined evacuation plans for the Muggle-borns meticulously, but remained decisively vague about Draco; simply nodding her head and assuring that 'something had been arranged.' The stressed wrinkles dissecting the Headmistress' face had been a little deeper recently, and Hermione had refrained from pushing the matter, trusting her mentor implicitly and shoving her concern to the side.

And she really was concerned about Draco; so much that it terrified her.

She had mentally prepared herself for the fall of the Ministry and Hogwarts, but the idea of Draco's looming departure made her breathing falter. These final days spent wrapped up in his scent, voice and warmth had been soul-soothing and possibly the most beautiful in her short life.

But everything has an expiry date.

"Granger."

"Hm?"

"You haven't turned the page in about ten minutes."

"Oh," she frowned. "Sorry. I was thinking about something."

"Shocker," he drawled with rich sarcasm, feathering a kiss behind her ear. "Come on, Granger. Turn the page."

Numbly doing as requested, Hermione tried to sink further into Draco's body heat and scolded herself for letting precious minutes slip through her fingers.

The clocks were mocking her.

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She woke to a nervous knot in her stomach.

It was still dark, and Draco's arm was belted around her waist as his sleepy breaths ruffled her hair. Glancing at the clock and finding it was almost five in the morning, she cautiously eased herself out of the bed and tried to establish what had stirred her, hunting for something out of place.

Sparks of lightning illuminated her room between low roars of thunder, and she shuffled warily over to her window, eyeing the navy skies that played host to the flaunting storm.

Another twinge of unease invaded her stomach, and pronounced goosebumps bubbled across her skin, but she had no idea why.

Something just felt...off.

Something in her gut told her to leave her dorm, and she quietly changed into her jeans and shrugged on one of Draco's tops and a jumper to confront the chill. Grabbing her wand, she hesitated on her way out to gently stroke her sleeping lover's hair before pushing open her door to find Crookshanks agitatedly pacing around the sitting room, making troubled growling sounds and clawing at the floorboards.

"Calm down, Crooks," she whispered, giving him a gentle pet. "I'll be back in a bit."

Allowing intuition to guide her, she tip-toed down the empty corridors with only the thuds of her heart to disturb the eerie silence. Absently wandering in a direction she didn't really want to go, she dragged her fingers across the stone walls, as if she was somehow trying to soothe the school itself for what was to come. Climbing a flight of stairs and realising where she was heading, her eyes widened when she found that someone had already sought answers in Astronomy Tower in the early hours of this peculiar morning.

"You feel it too?" she asked, coming to stand at her Professor's side.

"Yes," McGonagall nodded, her hands gripping the railing and her thought-laden eyes studying the battling clouds. "Something is not right."

"What is it?"

"I'm not sure," said the Headmistress tightly. "The storm is different. It feels...unbalanced"

"Do you think..." but Hermione trailed off as she caught sight of a lustrous white sphere shooting towards them like a comet. "What is that?"

McGonagall bowed her head and clenched her eyes shut with dismay. "Our warning."

They both retreated a few paces back as the light bounded in the tower and burst into the stunning the Patronus of a doe, and Hermione thought of Harry's mother. "Professor, whose-

"Quiet, Hermione," the older witch hushed her. "This is important-

"One hour," a familiar male voice echoed around them. "They are coming, Minerva."

The glowing doe disappeared as fast as it had arrived, and Hermione released the breath aching her lungs as she looked to the Headmistress expectantly. "They're coming?" she asked. "The Death Eaters?"

"One hour," McGonagall repeated distantly. "I don't know if that will be enough time-

"Was that Snape's Patronus?"

"Yes," she nodded, turning to her student with a grave stare. "Listen, Hermione, I need to alert the other Professors. You must wake up the Creeveys and Miss Preston and take them to my office. I will be with you as soon as I can-

"I thought we were going to evacuate them with the Thestrals-

"There's not enough time," she shook her head. "Just get them to my office and I will be with you shortly. Do you understand?"

Her Gryffindor instincts took over, and she straightened her spine before she gave her Professor a firm nod. "Okay. I'm going-

"Be as fast as you can!" McGonagall called after her as she sprinted away.

By the time Hermione reached the Gryffindor dorms, her muscles were sore and her head was pounding with adrenaline. Waking up Dennis, Colin and Joanne, she fidgeted fretfully as they hurried to gather some of their belongings, throwing worried glances at the clock and willing them to hurry.

Sweet Merlin, it's happening....

Nineteen minutes later and they were all gathered in the Head's office; Colin trying to comfort his frightened brother, and Hermione trying to reassure thirteen-year-old Joanne that she would get home safe. But as the minutes drifted by, Hermione became increasingly restless, trembling with nerves and impatience as the time dissolved and the threat of the Death Eaters became louder in her head. Each flick of the clock's hand meant one less minute to get Draco out of the Castle, and she fought hard to keep her mind on her duty to McGonagall and the Muggle-borns.

"Where is McGonagall?" Colin questioned with panic shaking his voice. "You said she wouldn't be long."

"She's on her way," Hermione replied, unsure if she was lying or not. "It will be fine."

What if it's not fine?

Waiting can drive a mind to ruin.

With only twenty-two minutes to spare, the Headmistress finally burst into her office, and Hermione had never seen her mentor look so flustered; her brow covered in a thin sheen of sweat and creased with stressful lines. Rushing over to the fireplace, the aging witch recited a quick spell before she turned to the four teenagers and gestured for them to come closer.

"You're going to Floo to Kingsley Shacklebolt's home," she explained in a edgy voice. "He will make sure you all get home safely, okay?" The three youngest heads bobbed with understanding. "His address is Twenty-three Wordsworth Way," she told them, reaching for her bowl of Floo Powder. "Miss Preston, you go first, and remember to say it clearly. We have to be quick."

Hermione watched as Joanne disappeared amongst the garish spurt of emerald flames, closely followed by Dennis, and finally Colin. A small dose of relief dulled the heavy beats in her chest, but she frowned with confusion when she realised McGonagall was holding out the pot Floor Powder in her direction.

"Come on, Hermione," the Headmistress prompted. "You have to leave-

"I'm not leaving," she disputed, backing away from the other witch. "I have to get Draco out of here-

"There's not enough time-

"But I need to-

"Hermione, the Death Eaters are on their way!" McGonagall snapped strictly. "You have to leave-

"NO!" she screamed, balling her fists. "I am NOT leaving! I need to get him out of here! You swore to me-

"Hermione, please be reasonable-

"You're just wasting more time arguing with me!" she insisted angrily, frustrated tears spilling down her cheeks. "If I have to do this without your help, then I will! But I am not leaving until I know he is away from here!"

McGonagall went stiff before she exhaled in defeat, eyeing her student with weary eyes as she reluctantly made her way over to her desk. Waving her wand to open a drawer, she removed a small round-shaped object wrapped in fabric, and a wand Hermione recognised to be Draco's.

"So be it," McGonagall mumbled on a sigh. "Listen to me carefully, because I only have time to say this once. Use the back entrance and run down to the edge of the Forbidden Forest by Hagrid's hut. Don't go too far in; just enough to remain unseen."

"But what if someone sees him in the school?"

"All of the Professors are gathering in the Great Hall and most of the students are still asleep," she supplied. "You will get there fine-

"And what do I do when I get-

"This coin is a Portkey to a safe-house," she interjected, holding up the cloth-covered item. "When you leave here, I will let them know you are on your way."

Hermione swallowed as the Headmistress pushed the Portkey and Draco's wand into her hands. "You're not going to tell me where he's going, are you?"

McGonagall shook her head. "You know it is safer if less people know-

"But he will be safe?" the younger witch implored, pocketing the two items and ensuring they were secure. "You promise he will be safe?"

"I promise," she nodded. "Now listen, Hermione. After Draco is gone, you need to head back the way you came. On the fringe of the Forest by Hagrid's hut, there is a red rock underneath an Oak tree. You will be able to Apparate from there. Go to Tonks' home, and I will Fire-call her to let her know you're coming so she can alter her Wards."

"Red rock under the Oak tree," she repeated numbly, before she practically pounced on the greying witch and clutched her in a rib-cracking hug. "Thank you so much. For everything. I'm sorry for being so selfish."

McGonagall accepted the gesture with a sad frown and patted her companion's back. "You need to go," she advised, pulling away and manoeuvring them towards the door. "Go now. You don't have time for this." The Headmistress paused and exhaled a haggard breath. "I wish you both luck."

Offering Minerva a parting look of gratitude, Hermione's body jolted into action. Stumbling on haste-clumsy feet, she fled the office; her devastated heart lodged in her throat, and the world crumbling around her.

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Draco sat up in bed and eyed the cold dent of Hermione's outline in the mattress with lowered eyebrows.

Where the fuck...?

It was quarter to six and the sky was barely beginning to soften into a lighter shade of blue, so just why was he alone in bed? And furthermore, why couldn't he hear the sounds of a shower, or her shuffling around in the kitchenette?

Scowling with irritation, he tossed aside the covers and tugged on the clothes he'd been wearing the day before in an effort to beat the winter air that had snuck into Granger's room. Padding his bare feet across the floorboards and heading into the living area, he almost stumbled when his lover's pet blocked his path.

"Clever cat, my arse," he mumbled, giving the half-kneazle a scolding look. "If you're so smart where's-

He was cut off as Hermione surged into the room, panting wildly, cheeks shimmering with tears and tripping over own her feet. "Oh thank Merlin you're awake!" she wheezed,

clambering towards him and grasping his jumper in her shaking fists. "We-we need to go-

"What the hell?" he blurted, gripping her wrists and steadying her. He'd never seen her this way, and his insides twisted with dread as he absorbed her frantic behaviour. "Where have you been-

"We have to leave!" she shouted. "The Death Eaters. They-they're coming! We need to go! Now!"

"Granger, just bloody breathe-

"You're not listening to me! We have minutes!" she yelled, ripping herself out of his hold and flicking her wand to Summon his shoes and coat. "Put these on, Draco! Quickly! I need to get you away from here! Just hurry!"

The gravity of her words and the desperation in her voice smacked him in the chest like an Impedimenta, and he did as she bade as she ran into her room and returned with her charmed bag and a jacket. He'd barely fastened the first button of his coat when she snatched his hand and began dragging him out of the room, her fingers clamped around his so tight it cut off circulation.

"Crooks!" she called over her shoulder as she flung open the door. "Follow, Crooks! Come on!"

Her intuitive pet cantered ahead as she yanked Draco into motion, both of them breaking into a clumsy sprint and charging down the Castle's barren passageways, fuelled by fear and refusing to unlink their hands. Reaching the back doors, the wind and rain hammered against them with relentless force as they skidded and staggered across the mud-slicked grounds towards the Forbidden Forest. Passing Hagrid's hut, they dived into the trees, shoving aside the clawing talons of branches and twigs that tried to hinder their escape. In the corner of her eye, Hermione registered a flash of burgundy, and she halted her burning legs to bring them to a too-sudden stop.

She kept Draco's hand clamped in hers.

"Fuck," he cursed, narrowly avoiding slamming into her back. "Granger, what the-

"Red rock," she murmured to herself, eyeing the towering Oak tree McGonagall had mentioned. "Come here, Crooks," she beckoned her pet, who had raced a few yards ahead but quickly came scampering back to her side. "Stay here, boy. I'll be back soon."

Satisfied that her magical familiar understood, she was pulling Draco and running again, blood seeping between their palms as their fingernails hooked into each other's skin. Another spasmodic crash of lightening and thunder exploded above their heads, and Hermione blinked away the sodden strands of hair trapped between her lashes and itching her eyes. Her bones felt like fracturing glass and her lungs were straining against her ribs, but she couldn't stop running.

Keep going...

Have to get him away...

Need to get him to safety...

"Granger, stop!" Draco shouted behind her, digging his heels into the ground and tearing his hand out of her vice-firm grip. "Just fucking stop!"

Hermione whipped around and tried to unsuccessfully reconnect their fingers. "Draco, we need-

"This is far enough!" he snapped. "What the hell are we doing here?"

She felt her weather-battered face scrunch up with anguish as she tried to find the words. Oh Godric...her heart was aching. Gazing at him now; hair ruffled by the wind and his ashen features raw from the punch of the cold, he looked so human and perfect, and the emotion strangled her.

"We...we're here to say goodbye," she mumbled through quivering lips and chattering teeth, watching his brow furrow with uncertainty. "Our time is up."

Draco shook his head stubbornly and his lip curled with defiance. "What are you-

A shrill and prolonged crack severed his words, booming throughout the Forest and vibrating the ground with its volume. He instinctively reached out for Hermione, grasping her elbows and drawing her close as the tremors subsided. Somewhere in the distance, he could hear the swarming hisses of approaching brooms and what sounded like panicked shrieks from Hogwarts. Even the trees seemed to groan and flinch, and Draco scrutinized his surroundings with a suspicious stare, keeping Hermione locked in place against his chest.

"What the fuck was that?" he growled as the eerie echoes died.

"The Wards breaking," she answered dazedly, glancing over her shoulder in the direction of the Castle. "They're here." She gulped back the grief. "Draco, you need to go-

"No," he spat harshly, loosening his grip so he could bring his face close to hers. "No! We need more time-

"There is no more time," she whimpered, her breath leaving her ghostly gasps. "You have to get away from here, or they'll find you-

"I'm not ready!" he interrupted, lifting his hands to brush away the drenched curls spattered across her face. Their blended blood smeared across her cheek, and he absently remembered the day in the bathroom, when she had sliced their palms and initiated their fated bond. Blood had been so different then. Now it was irrelevant. "Come with me," he blurted heedlessly. "Come with me and we can hide-

"I can't!" she yelled, breaking free of his arms. "We talked about this, Draco! We agreed-

"Well I changed my fucking mind!" he retorted fiercely. "What do you want me to do, Granger? Do you want me to get on my fucking knees and beg?"

"No!" she choked on a whine. "I want you to be safe! That's all I want!"

"And I want you to be safe!" he screamed back. "Don't fight in this War, Hermione! Don't-

"You know I have to-

"BULLSHIT!"

"Draco, please," she whispered, reaching into her pocket and fingering her wand. "You have to go-

"I need you, Hermione!" he barked his confession. Fuck you, Salazar. "Is that what you want to hear? Is that what it will take?"

"I didn't want to say goodbye like this," she murmured, more to herself as she withdrew her wand with quaking fingers. "I didn't want it to be this hard-

"What the hell are you doing?" he questioned, eyeing her with a wary and cautious glare. "Lower your wand, Granger!"

"I'm sorry," she moaned, straightening her wrist. "I'm so sorry, Draco, but I need you to be safe-

"Don't you DARE, Hermione-

"Petrificus Totalus!" she cried, and Draco's body went taut and still as the spell took effect. He reminded her of one of those toy soldiers; firm and proud, but completely lifeless in the eyes, and she knew this would haunt her.

Her hand fell limp at her side, and she clenched her eyes tight as scalding tears blurred her vision and smudged the bloodstain he'd branded her with. Abandoning her plan to feign composure, she slowly neared him and nuzzled her face into the junction of his neck and sobbed against his throat.

This wasn't how she'd intended them to part ways.

The wind swallowed them, the rain was slashing at their skin and the cold was rousing violent shivers to harass every inch of her body. Draco was inevitably silent and motionless under the spell, and she would have sacrificed almost anything just to feel his arm snake around her waist. It was unromantic and bitter, but she locked the precious seconds into her memory, cringing when more sinister sounds from Hogwarts interrupted her tender touches, and she was forced to realise that their clock had stopped.

"I'm sorry," she mumbled again, raising her chin and stroking her trembling fingers across the line of his jaw and his lower lip. "But this is the only way."

She could physically feel her heart splintering as she studied his frozen expression one final time and silently pleaded with her brain to remember every aspect of the face she'd woken up to for the last several weeks and come to...

"If-if we both come out of this War alive," she breathed, despising the word if. "I...I want you in my life."

Reaching into her bag, she removed his wand and slipped it into the pocket of his trousers and then returned to she rummage for the Portkey. Carefully peeling away the cloth and staring down at the innocent-looking Galleon with resentment, she pinched it between the flimsy material, and hovered it hesitantly over his knuckles.

Sucking in a shaky breath to soothe her withering soul, she spread her free palm across the side of his face and brushed her thumb up the ridge of his cheekbone. Tilting forward on the tips of her toes, she pressed her quivering lips against his unresponsive ones to cherish the last kiss; barely a connection, but it warmed her for that sliver of a moment.

Pulling back, she cheated herself into believing that the raindrops freckling his milky skin might be tears, and the final weak strings of her heart snapped.

Her heart had broken, and the pain was crippling.

Time's up...

"I love you," she sighed sadly, before she slapped the coin against his skin, flinching as the air shifted to accommodate the Portkey's pull.

And then he was gone.

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry...I did consider ranting about my personal problems to account for the lateness of this chapter, but the events that happened in Japan yesterday have made me realise just how irrelevant my issues are. My friend was near the area of the Tsunami, and fortunately I have heard from her and I know she is fine. However, some of her relatives are missing, and words can't express how hard I am hoping they are okay. I think I can safely say that all our thoughts are with Japan at this awful time.

There's a couple of things I need to mention: A couple of you asked if I would be making a trailer for Isolation. I would bloody love to make one, but I don't have a clue... So, if anyone has the time and patience to educate me at all in that area, I would be very grateful!

Secondly, and I fear this is not going to go down very well, I will be posting a Twilight fic soon. *Ducks from hurled objects.* I am only doing this as a favour to a friend as part of a fic exchange! I AM NOT converting to Twi fics (no judgement if you're a twifan...it's just not my fandom). I am Dramione until the end, and I promise this is a one-off. Dramione forever!

Lastly, I really am so sorry for the lateness...Real life just kinda piled on top of me and smothered me for a couple of weeks...I extended this chap to make up for it a little, but will do everything in my power to make sure it doesn't happen again. This a/n is far too bloody long...if you're still reading, I'm gonna finish now.

Let me know what you thought of the chapter (not gonna lie, I got a little emotional...) and thanks so much for the reviews and interest so far. You have been amazing, and I couldn't ask for better readers...Read and Review!

Bex-chan

Miles

Chapter Notes

Yup...I got some song suggestions...again. Sorry! I know that Snow Patrol and Martha Wainwright - Set the Fire to the Third Bar is a rather obvious choice, but I simply adore that song. I am also listening to Jason Walker and Molly Reed - Down, and lastly, Damien Rice and Lisa Hannigan - Cold Water (my personal favourite). Hope they go well with the chapter!

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

Her glazed eyes lingered on where he had been.

There was nothing now; just a mocking gap sliced by spitting raindrops and a whining lash of wind that seemed far too eager to invade the void. The smell of the storm was beginning to drown away the remains of his scent, and the tingle of his warmth against her cheek was fading fast. Her body was frozen as if he was still there; the hand that had pressed the Portkey against his knuckles still outstretched and trembling, and her chin still tilted from her whispered words of goodbye.

I love you...

She couldn't move.

Couldn't rip her eyes away from the empty space.

Just stared at it...

But the hot sting of tears forced her to blink, and the world began to move again.

Dropping the thin sheet of material that had been wrapped around the Portkey, her arm fell limply to her side, and she choked on the lump in her throat. A scream was lodged somewhere in her chest, but her lungs were too strained to release it, and the suffocating sensation burned so hard, she could barely breathe.

And, oh Merlin, the ache in her heart was excruciating; like everything within her was collapsing in on itself.

Her knees caved, and she fell hard to the ground, ignoring the mud slithering up her jeans and pressing into her palms as she doubled over, barely managing to catch herself with her weary arms. Her eyes fell to the indentations of Draco's footprints; the only indication he'd been here mere moments ago, but the rain was pounding away the outline, and within seconds they had blended with the damp earth, and she was completely alone.

The wind turned crueller at that point, and she wrapped her arms around her trembling body in a futile effort to ease the bite of the cold and the loneliness. A howl of thunder drowned out a broken-hearted sob that made her stomach heave, and her eyes clenched tight as she tried to ride out her violent shudders.

"Oh Godric, it hurts," she sputtered to no one, holding herself tighter. "It hurts."

Annabelle Snowbloom's words whispered somewhere as the back of her brain.

It feels like dying, only worse.

She stayed there for some stolen seconds, simply trying to regain a sense of reason as she numbly rocked back and forth, but there was no time to seek some composure. The echoes of disorder from Hogwarts disrupted the rhythmic patter of rain, and Hermione reluctantly opened her eyes and glanced in the direction of the school. She remembered then; remembered that she couldn't stay here, and she scolded herself for letting the heartache consume her.

Sucking in a breath that felt so deep it stretched her ribs, she gritted her teeth and forced tension into her muscles to stop them shaking. She raised her hands and roughly palmed away the tell-tale tears, but every inch of her was speckled with raindrops, and she couldn't tell them apart as her sodden curls slapped against her cheeks. A frustrated whine scratched the backs of her teeth when she realised it was futile, and she dragged her hair out of her eyes, gagging on the lump in her windpipe that wouldn't shift.

Drenched to the soul and trying so hard to ignore the nausea that made her head swim, she swallowed several more hefty gulps of air and slowly hauled herself to her unstable feet. Smothering a moan when her limbs protested, she willed her legs to remain sturdy and keep her balanced, and with a final dejected look at the empty space, she clenched her fists with determination, and spun on her heels.

Her movements were clumsy as she jogged back the way she had came, barely noticing the clawing thorns and thistles of the Forest as she stumbled in what she hoped was the right direction. Her bearings were compromised and her vision was still hazy at the seams, but she trudged blindly through the thick, squelching dirt and searched desperately for the red rock.

"Crookshanks," she called with a croaky voice, minding to keep her tone hushed as the eerie sounds from Hogwarts grew louder. "Crooks."

A small meow responded somewhere to her left and she corrected her path, and she staggered through biting brambles and poison ivy as inhuman noises began to bustle around the Forbidden Forest. She had no idea if the magical creatures that dwelled here had sensed the attack and were panicking, or if there were Death Eaters whipping through the trees, almost breathing down her collar.

Summoning the final and flimsy remains of her energy, she drove herself onward with a pained growl, gripping her wand tighter. She burst through a stubborn wall of leaves and branches, coughing on a sigh of relief when Crookshanks bounded over to her, spitting low and agitated hisses, and his wide stare scrutinizing the space around them.

"It-it's okay, Crooks," she stammered, and she would swear her cat was looking past her to search for Draco. "He's gone," she mumbled, and the words sent a destructive bolt of angst to her chest. "C-come on, boy. We need to go."

Gathering her pet in her arms, she made her way to the rock beneath the ominous bow of the Oak tree and felt the air tingle with differing magic. She clutched Crookshanks tighter as she struggled to pacify her racing thoughts and frantic breaths, preparing herself to Apparate.

With a goodbye glance in the direction of Hogwarts, and a silent prayer that Draco was safe, she left their broken haven behind.

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Draco landed on buckling ankles.

Toppling forward onto his knees, he just managed to brace himself on his forearms before his face smacked into the dirt. Fisting his hands around crispy tufts of grass, the muscles of his back tensed as he tried to fight the churning spasms in his stomach. He gagged and retched as the brutal dry-heaves vibrated through him and bile scorched his tonsils.

Spitting against the soil and panting heavily, his watering eyes focused on the unfamiliar soil, and he watched drops of sweat, rain or possible tears splash against the backs of his hands. Fury and regret bubbled in his veins so hard it felt destructive, like venom eating away at his nerves and cells.

"Fucking hell, Granger!" he hissed to no one, punching the ground. "Fuck." Again. "Fuck." And then again. Until his knuckles were on fire and blood dribbled between the dents. "Fuck, Hermione."

His vocal chords knotted and his rant died in his throat. Too angry. Too troubled. Too lost. He lifted his chin and tried to scan the surroundings, but his sight was distorted and speckled with white dots, and he could barely see a few feet in front of him. All he could discern was a carpet of grass and the sickly shade of indigo that dawn had painted across the sky.

There was no storm here, just a cruel wind that clawed at his drenched skin, but he still smelled of Scottish rain and Hermione's soap.

He didn't belong here.

His mind cruelly began to replay what had happened mere minutes ago with unforgiving flashbacks that made his temple throb. He recalled the flick of her wand as she'd Petrified him, and the dangerous swell of dread that had twisted his gut. He remembered how she had

nestled against his statue-stiff form, her features raw with emotion, and broken words feathering across his jaw.

She had kissed him, and he had fought the spell so hard that his bones had felt close to shattering beneath his flesh, just to twitch his mouth and give her a response. The spell had been immune to tenacity and desperation; he knew she had been kissing dead lips, and he hated that.

And then...

I love you...

He stiffened. He didn't know what to do with those three words; three words that clawed at his brain but warmed...everything else. So calming and yet chaotic. It changed everything and yet nothing, because she had still sent him here. Alone.

If he'd been concerned about the state of his mind when he had first been shoved into that room with her, this reality was so much worse, like a Crucio to his psyche.

A part of him wanted to track her down and tell her he didn't want her love, that he didn't fucking deserve it, and that she was insane for wanting him in her life. He'd be the red and putrid stain on her white dress. The shard of glass wedged into her vein. He was not worthy of her. He knew that now. Had probably known it all along.

Another part of him wanted to find her and lick their wounds, maybe kick his pride to the corner again to echo her need. Because he did need her, and not in the romantic, naïve sense that stirred vomit, but the painful and crippling way that battered brains and stabbed at the soul. He'd blurted it once and he'd blurt it again if he had to. Pride suddenly seemed so irrelevant compared to the fucking agony swarming in his ribcage.

Maybe he even loved...

He didn't know, and whatever was coursing through his veins was completely foreign to him. Labelling it with some over-used word that was so carelessly tossed between strangers these days seemed insufficient for the feelings that had brought him to his knees. It reminded him of that odd sensation when fire is so hot that it feels like ice, or when ice is so cold it feels like fire. Nature's paradox.

If this was love, then it felt like insanity. It felt like torture. Or bliss. All the same.

He just wanted to return and do...something. Something to prolong their intertwined heartbeats.

His wand. She'd put it in his pocket.

His hand raced to grab it, feeling the comforting crackle of long-missed magic tingle his fingertips. Clutching it in his lap, he tried to steady his thoughts before trying to Apparate, but then there was hand on his shoulder, and he froze.

"The Wards won't let you go back," a soft, feminine voice spoke. "And she will have left by now."

Draco whipped his body around and scrambled to stand, barely managing to maintain his footing as he blinked away the salty haze in his eyes. Suspicion and shock creased his brow when he realised who had disturbed him, her face only recognisable to him from an accidental encounter in Diagon Alley and a tattered photograph he'd found in his mother's handbag when he'd been rummaging for a spare Galleon for a Chocolate Frog. The features were familiar too; the aristocratic lines and grooves that were so similar to Bellatrix's, yet notably more delicate and lacking the menacing edge that had always made him uncomfortable.

"You?" he hissed, too drained to put any real force behind it. "They sent me to you?"

"Yes," Andromeda nodded uncomfortably, keeping her wary stare on his wand.
"McGonagall-

"Has a sick sense of humour," he finished. "I don't need your help."

The Aunt he'd never known arched a slim eyebrow. "You are underestimating how bad things have gotten, Draco," she said slowly. "Believe me when I say that you do need my help-

"Why the hell would you offer to help me anyway?" he questioned, narrowing his eyes.

"I was reluctant at first," she admitted on a sigh. "But in spite of the past, you are still family, Draco. And apparently you and I have something in common now-

"What are you talking about?"

Andromeda hesitated. "McGonagall told me about your...relationship with Hermione-

"YOU KNOW NOTHING ABOUT MY RELATIONSHIP WITH GRANGER!" he barked, straightening his wand-arm. "FUCKING NOTHING!"

"Calm down!"

"DON'T TELL ME-

"Keep your voice down!" she scolded. "You will not wake the others! You might not like it, Draco, but I was in the exact same position as you many years ago, so I know what you're feeling-

"You don't have a bloody clue-

"And if McGonagall hadn't told me about your relationship with Hermione, then you wouldn't be here," Andromeda said in an even voice. "They both seem confident that you have changed your ways to some extent, and I am willing to give you the benefit of the doubt-

"How big of you-

"But I made it clear that if you put a foot wrong," she continued. "Then you would be on your own. I want to help you, Draco, but I have other people to consider."

"This is bullshit," he scoffed.

Andromeda clicked her tongue. "Do you have any idea how lucky you are?"

"Lucky?" he spat bitterly. "You think Voldemort wanting me dead is lucky?"

"I'm talking about the people who are trying to help you," she frowned. "Considering the things you have done, I would call that very lucky."

Draco's glare faltered and dropped back down to the grass. "You don't know everything that happened-

"I know enough," she cut him off, her expression softening slightly. "And I understand that you were put in an awful situation, but that doesn't excuse your actions."

The truth can be like bleach; it strips everything bare and removes the dirt. But swallow too much and it will devastate your insides. And maybe kill you. Despite his best efforts, he couldn't quite bring himself to despise the witch in front of him, perhaps because there was simply no space within him for any more damaging thoughts. Perhaps it was because he knew she was right.

"I know this isn't easy for you, but I promised McGonagall that I would keep you safe," she told him, releasing an exasperated breath. "And it would do you well to remember the risks Hermione took to get you here."

A scathing retort readied itself on the tip of his tongue, but somewhere at the back of his skull, he could hear Hermione willing him to accept the circumstances. Grinding his teeth as another wave of longing for his lover thumped his stomach, he lowered his wand, and his lids suddenly felt like lead. "What's the catch to your...hospitality?"

"No catch," Andromeda assured him. "All I ask is that you respect the others and my home."

"The others?"

"You'll see," she said. "I will explain everything properly in the morning when you've had a chance to settle in. I have a room ready for you."

It was only then Draco realised he was in a garden, and that behind his Aunt was a rather large yet modest cottage, drowned in darkness save one flickering glow on the ground floor. The temptation to continue the argument with Andromeda scalded his tongue, if only to grasp some flimsy dignity, but his need for a bed and some isolation to sift through his thrumming thoughts made him waver.

"Fine," he mumbled reluctantly, bowing his head. "Just...fine."

"Good," Andromeda nodded, although her tone implied that things were far from good. "Come on then, Draco. You look like you could do with some rest."

Too worn and weary to resist any longer, his feet moved of their own accord, and Draco absently realised that some of Hermione's scent lingered in the fabric of his coat. The coat she'd gifted him with at Christmas. The agonising and relentless craving for Granger's presence intensified and almost doubled him over, but he clenched his jaw and straightened his spine, sinking himself deeper into the lining of the coat.

He felt Andromeda's palm rest against his back as she guided him to her home, and while he knew he should shrug it away, he let it be.

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Her arms went limp, and Crookshanks landed gracelessly on her toes.

Hermione gazed blindly at nothing, lips slightly parted, and every muscle rigid to keep her standing. Godric knew she was trying to collect herself, but her body was refusing to cooperate, and she didn't dare move.

"Hermione!" a familiar voice called, breaking her trance. Suddenly there were arms around her, a comforting shock of purple hair against her cheek and a baby bump curving into her abdomen. "Thank Merlin you're okay. Where have you been? McGonagall sent her Patronus ages ago."

The younger witch tried to find her voice. "I...I got a little lost," she murmured, falling into the hug. "I had trouble finding the Apparation point."

"But you're okay?" Tonks asked, pulling back to study her friend. "You're not hurt or anything? No offence, sweetheart, but you like hell."

"I'm fine," Hermione lied, because she didn't know what else she could say. "I'm fine. I just... I tripped, but I'm fine."

It's funny; how the repetition of a word can make it unreliable and contradictory.

"Are you sure?"

Even though Hermione knew Tonks was oblivious to her involvement with Draco, she feared it was written in between every worry-wrinkle of her expression. She felt transparent. Fixing her posture defiantly and setting her lips into a thin line, she adopted the pretence of a witch who was in control.

"I'm sure," she nodded.

"Alright," said Tonks, evidently unconvinced but quelling her questions. Hermione felt a reassuring arm drape across her shoulders, and she was gently guided to her friend's humble home. "Let's get out of the cold."

"Okay. Where's Lupin?"

"He went to the Burrow when we got the warning," she explained, her tone laden with concern. "He thought Arthur might need help setting up some more Wards. We're trying to contact everyone, but it's difficult."

Hermione prayed her next words didn't sound too hopeful. "Is there any news on Ron and Harry?"

"No," Tonks sighed, squeezing Hermione's shoulder. "I'm sorry."

She didn't blink. "I didn't think there would be."

"I'm sure they're fine." That word again. Crookshanks skimmed between their legs as they entered the house. "I have some tea, if you'd like some?"

"No, thank you," she declined, barely noticing the buzz of a freshly-cast Warming Charm as she stepped over the threshold. "I know we need to discuss what's going on, but I'm really tired-

"Of course," said Tonks sympathetically. "We can talk about it after you've had some sleep. Do you remember where the spare room is?"

She nodded and grasped the banister of the stairs. "First door on the left. I just...I need to use the bathroom first."

"Help yourself to whatever you need. This is your home now."

Hermione knew that Tonks had intended to be reassuring, but she had to stifle a deflated grimace as she climbed the groaning stairs. This was not her home. Everything seemed so surreal; as fragile as clouds, and simply a distorted reality that her brain couldn't quite catch up to.

Numbly wandering into the bathroom, she bent over the sink and stared at the pristine porcelain for a long moment. When she lifted her head to confront her reflection, her gasp misted the mirror. Her face was smeared with cracked mud and crumbling blood, her eyes swollen with grey rims, and her lips an icy shade of violet. The rain she'd left behind in Scotland had done little but speckle the mess staining her features, but her curls and clothes were slicked against her skin like tar. She couldn't decide if she looked like one of those warriors who marked their skin before a battle, or if she looked like a battered soul lingering in the aftermath.

Combing aside her rowdy hair and twisting the taps, she cupped her palms and smothered her face with the water. It was freezing, and she sucked the air between her teeth, but she ignored it and rinsed away the red-tinged dirt with desperate and trembling hands. Pausing between

laboured breaths and checking the progress in the mirror, her agitated actions calmed when inch by inch of her fawny skin was cleansed, until there was simply a peppering of mud that mingled with her freckles.

She dabbed at them with her fingertips as her eyes fell to a small mark on her neck; the fading crest of a love-bite. A pang of longing smacked her, and she tilted her chin to get a better look. She normally disguised them with a Glamour Charm, but she wouldn't cover this one. She hoped it would stay a while.

Godric, she missed him.

Only minutes had passed since they'd parted, not even an hour, but she felt the weight of the miles between them.

The Sun must have breached the horizon, because a loud blast of rays burst through the window and hit the mirror. The light was the colour of flames, and it illuminated her face like the fires of war.

Her eyes dropped back down to the porcelain, and it was the colour of rust.

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With a final sweep of the damp cloth, Draco studied his ashen skin in the mirror and scowled. He'd been tempted to leave his and Hermione's mixed blood where it was, but he'd resented the mud that had blended with it, and the dark undertones to that thought had made him uneasy.

He hunted for hints of Granger in his reflection; a slight bump on his lower lip from a kiss, a small scratch beneath his ear from a pre-lust kiss, and the scar from third year. She was everywhere and yet nowhere.

Another flashback of their last seconds together made his eyes pulse behind his lids.

Petrificus Totalus!

I want you in my life.

I love you.

He groaned and rested his forehead against the mirror. He was so fucking angry. Angry at her for silencing anything he could and should have said. Angry at himself for leaving her no other option but to Petrify him. Angry at McGonagall for sending him here. Angry at his

parents for dictating his prejudices. Angry at Potter and Weasley because his lover was probably with them now. Angry at circumstances for ripping them apart.

And beneath it all was this dangerous pining that pierced his everything.

Anger he could deal with, he knew it well, but the ache in his chest was a different story. He felt broken; barely human and clashing with the situation.

Don't belong here. Belong with her.

Giving his reflection another disgusted glance, he shook his head and headed back to the room Andromeda had showed him to earlier. He hesitated in the long hallway and absently wondered just who exactly was behind the other six or seven doors, but he was too distracted to give the question any heed.

His new room was small and simple, containing a three-quarter bed that took up most of the space, a chest of drawers, and a few slanting shelves that were in dire need of a Reparo. Hermione's absence mocked him from every corner; none of her little trinkets, no bookcases caving under the weight of an army of books, and no peppermint and cherry scent.

His heartbeat faltered again, and he slowly shrugged off his coat, carefully hanging it on the door and letting his fingers trail across the fabric when he realised this was all he had that linked him directly to her. Tucking his wand under the pillow, he then he slipped out of his clothes until he was left in his boxers, and eased himself into the mattress, gathering the itchy and abrasive blankets around him.

He kept his body on the left side of the bed, and absently stared at the empty space next to him before lids fell shut.

He'd always slept on the left side in Granger's bed.

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Hermione stood in the spare room, gazing vacantly at the wall as her hands met to fidget in front of her. She was almost scared to settle into the bed, aware that days are broken up by sleep, and memories become less vivid as time crawls along. But her body was a whisper away from surrendering to the mental and physical exhaustion, and she needed to be well-rested tomorrow. There would be no place for her tears amongst the discussions of War and Order's plans. Tomorrow, she would be the prepared Gryffindor. Tomorrow, she would be fine.

Peeling her jumper away and discarding it at the foot of the bed, she went to the next layer of clothing, but stilled her movements when she realised it was his t-shirt. She drew in a sharp breath when she caught a trace of Draco's scent in the mornings; masculine musk with a hint of minty spice, and something that reminded her of new books.

She was so relieved to have this small symbol of their forbidden relationship, and she cast a quick Drying Spell that didn't erase the murmurs of his scent. Forgetting the pyjamas that were in her charmed bag and removing her jeans, she gave into fatigue and sank into the sheets, slightly comforted that she would be wrapped up in his shirt.

Nuzzling her face into the pillow, she felt the final few lonely tears glide down her cheeks. She fell asleep curled up into a tight ball with her palm across her bruised heart.

On the right side of the bed.

Chapter End Notes

I know...I'm late again...I am very sorry. I wish I could say it could be avoided, but I have an assignment due pretty much every week for the next month or so. All I can do is promise that I will do everything I can to deliver you a chapter as soon as possible. Sorry, sorry, sorry!

I'd like to dedicate this chapter to Masha (imaslytherinbitch), Manda (mandamedieval) and Davi (letmesignxx) for being bloody wonderful and for doing pieces of FanArt for this fic. It blows my mind...I finally got a photobucket, so all the links are on my profile page, and you should definitely leave these girls a message to let them know how talented and lovely they are! Seriously...these girls have some series skills! Also, happy birthday to Nicole (kite1011/nsart)!

I hope you liked the chapter and the song recommendations at the beginning. Thank you so much for the amazing response for the last chapter, if any of you are in my neck of the woods, I shall be tackle-hugging you to the ground and insisting on a wine party!

Read and Review! A few made me cry last time because you were just so bloody lovely! (but shhhh...don't tell anyone that...)

Bex-chan.

Ghost

Chapter Notes

Hmmm... You seem to be liking the song suggestions... Here's a couple for this chapter... I listened to Kings of Leon - Closer, Placebo - Sleeping with Ghosts and Thriving Ivory - Flowers for a Ghost. Hope they fit well! Let me know!

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

There were voices somewhere; muffled by doors and distance, but definitely voices. Voices she knew.

Her lashes were locked together with dried tears, and she blinked a few times to dilute the salty sting and the blurriness of sleep. She focussed on the empty space next to her and stroked her hand across the cold, crisp, and undisturbed sheets. Perhaps the lingering scent of Draco's t-shirt had deluded her subconscious, because a hopeful corner of her heart had almost expected him to be at her side, but the reality of yester-time was impossible to ignore.

Draco wasn't here.

She didn't know where he was.

And she had no idea if she would see him again.

The hollow ache that those facts left in her chest felt worse today, and she doubted the painful pangs would fade anytime soon. This nauseating sense of loneliness felt destructively permanent, like a festering tumour wedged between the tip of her spine and the base of her skull.

But.

She balled her fists and buried it; locked it in the attic of her mind with her thoughts of her parents and Harry and Ron. Because she had to. Because she'd promised herself she would.

The country was swarming with the promise of War, so what right did she have to nurse a broken heart when people were dying and mourning lost loved-ones? At least Draco was alive. At least there was a possibility that fate would allow their breaths to mingle again.

Hope is motivation, if nothing else.

The voices were still vibrating downstairs, and with renewed tenacity, she left the bed and rummaged in her charmed bag for some fresh clothes. She slipped into her jeans and pulled a baggy woollen jumper over Draco's top, reluctant to part with the masculine warmth trapped in the fabric that tingled against her skin. Taming her wild hair with a few combs of her

fingers, she glanced at her reflection in the mirror and frowned at the swollen, red smudges under her eyes, still glossed with tears. She dabbed her face with her bunched sleeve, sniffing and swallowing a few times so her voice wouldn't betray her, and then she lifted her chin with illusory poise.

The façade was almost perfect; perhaps a little cracked and fragile in the eyes, but her set jaw and the proud purse of her lips would be enough to deceive her friends in the Order.

She looked resilient and prepared. Battle-ready and thriving with purpose. Glowing with that unmistakable shine of Gryffindor optimism and courage. Just as she should be.

Giving her reflection a stiff nod, she grabbed her wand and headed out of the bedroom, following the low hum of the voices. She descended the stairs and meandered her way around the house, pausing outside the kitchen, and pressing her ear against the door to catch the muffled conversation.

"...Should have seen that coming. We could have sent people to King's Cross to help the students-

"We're not going to be able to predict everything they do, Alastor-

"We should have been able to predict that!"

"There's nothing we could have done anyway. McGonagall and the other professors will look after them."

"Remus is right. At least if they're contained in Hogwarts, they are still safe to a certain extent-

"And you think being kept there with Snape and those psychotic Carrow twins is safe, Tonks?"

"It's better than getting caught in the crossfire at Diagon Alley or running into some Snatchers."

"What about the Muggle-borns, Kingsley?"

"Most of them are in hiding, but we have word that You-Know-Who is putting his Muggle-born Registration Commission into effect as soon as Umbridge is ready. I have been trying to get a hold of Cresswell and Alderton, but it's difficult."

Hermione frowned on the other side of the door. Muggle-born Registration Commission?

"We need to get word around about the Taboo on You-Know-Who's name."

"I am trying, but our communication methods are becoming more limited by the hour. Tonks, did you Owl your mother in time?"

"Yes, she knows."

"What about our safe-houses, Alastor?"

"Some of the Wards will hold, but not all of them. Your home should be safe, Remus. Grimmauld Place too, and a couple of others, but we shall have to start finding other places to meet. It will only be a matter of time before the Wards on these safe-houses are broken too."

"Did you manage to make enough Portkeys, Kingsley?"

"I managed most of them."

"Will it be enough?"

"I have no idea."

There was a thick pause.

"You can come in, Granger!" Moody's booming voice called after a moment, and Hermione recoiled from the door when the harsh sound made her eardrums buzz. Her hand reached to hover tentatively over the doorknob. "Stop stalling, Granger. This concerns you as much as anyone."

Ignoring the odd bundle of nerves in her stomach, she pushed into the kitchen and greeted the four pairs of eyes with an awkward and apologetic nod. Shacklebolt, Mad-eye, Lupin and Tonks were all seated around the brittle dining table; their expressions severe, sleep-deprived and inevitably concerned.

"Sorry," she mumbled. "I didn't want to intrude."

"How are you feeling, Hermione?" Tonks asked, shifting in her seat to accommodate her bump. "You can go back to bed if you need more rest."

"I'm fine."

"You're a little old to be eavesdropping, Granger," Mad-eye remarked, although his tone was almost amused. "What exactly did you hear?"

"Not much," she shrugged. "Just about the Taboo... and what's the Muggle-born Registration Commission?"

"It's a bloody death trap, is what it is," Mad-eye spat heatedly. "It's a way for You-Know-Who to herd Muggle-borns like cattle until he slaughters them-

"Yes, thank you, Alastor," Remus shot a frown in his direction. "I think there are better ways to put it-

"Well, you can cover it with daisies and glitter all you like, Remus, but that is basically what it is." He fixed Hermione with a steady stare. "Don't worry; you won't be signing up. You will stay hidden and be safe here with Tonks."

Hermione narrowed her eyes with thought. "But what about all the other Muggle-borns?"

"We're doing what we can," Kingsley offered sullenly. "Most have gone into hiding, but there's not much we can do at the moment except try to warn people-

"Which is hard when everyone is Apparating in a panic and probably landing straight into the path of Snatchers," Mad-eye grumbled. "Potter and Weasley might fall into that category, so if you know where they are, Granger, you need to tell us."

"I have no idea where they are," she breathed, shaking her head. "All I know is they are looking for the Horcruxes and they destroyed the locket."

"Yes, they sent me a letter about that," Remus nodded. "But you haven't heard anything since?"

"Nothing relevant. Just a letter every now and then to assure me that they were...you know, alive." She tucked a stray curl behind her ear. "But, no. Never their whereabouts or anything like that. They know it would be too dangerous-

"And gallivanting around Merlin-knows-where with all this going on isn't dangerous?" Mad-eye scoffed.

Hermione's eyes shot back to the Auror. "They're not stupid, Moody-

"Well, their actions contradict that sentiment-

"They'll be fine," she interrupted, but the hitch in her voice was telling. "They will be fine."

"They've survived so far," Tonks said, absently stroking her swollen abdomen. "Have some faith, Mad-eye. I'm sure if they think they're out of their depth, they'll seek us out."

"We hardly have the time for commonsense to catch up with the pair," he grouched, rolling his good eye. "So that will be your task for the time being, Granger; figuring out where they are."

Hermione wrinkled her nose. "Wouldn't it be more beneficial for me to try and figure out where the Horcruxes are?"

"Well, if Harry and Weasley are doing what you say they are, then it's the same thing," Mad-eye replied, rising from his seat. "I have confidence in your intelligence, Granger. If anyone can find them, it's you."

She didn't know if he meant the boys or the Horcruxes, but she bobbed her head anyway. "Thank you, Moody."

"And keep up your combative training," he advised slowly. "We are at War now."

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"Draco."

He squirmed and buried his face deeper into the pillow. He was balancing on the blissful crest between sleep and reality, and he'd be damned if he be dragged away before he was ready.

"Draco."

"Bugger off, Granger," he murmured, as he often did when she tried to rouse him. "I'm trying to sleep."

A small silence followed, and Draco wondered if his persistent lover might actually allow him a peaceful morning for a change.

"Draco, it's Andromeda," the voice sighed, somewhat regretfully. "You need to wake up."

His eyes snapped open, and reality came bounding back into his brain like thunder clouds. He wasn't in Hogwarts. He was shackled up with the Aunt he'd never spoken to. Granger wasn't here. She wasn't anywhere, and the absence of her presence brought back the numb throb in his chest. He felt sick.

Granger...

He fired a scolding glance towards his Aunt as she leaned over him, her expression somewhere between concerned and cautious. Her resemblance to his mother struck him for a moment, but he kept his features trained and stern, ready to reprimand the witch for disturbing his lonely morning. He didn't want anyone to witness how this was affecting him.

"What do you want?" he asked in a quiet and defensive voice. "Don't people get any privacy in your house?"

"Draco," she started carefully. "You haven't left bed for three days."

His eyebrows rose high on his forehead. Three days? But it all felt so raw and fresh, like the rain was still peppered across his skin, and Hermione's parting words were still chiming in his ears. Wasn't time supposed to mend the ache of the initial shock? Three days, and he was fairly certain he had slept the entire time. Evidently, his subconscious had decided that sleep was preferable to waking without Granger pressed against his chest.

"So?" he scowled at Andromeda, sitting up in the bed and resting his elbows against his knees. "What difference does it make?"

"Firstly, I need to warn you that there is a Taboo on You-Know-Who's name," she listed. "And secondly, you need to eat something."

"I'm not hungry," he lied, ignoring the painful twinge in his stomach that contradicted his words. "Just leave me alone-

"It's not healthy," she insisted. "You'll make yourself ill."

"I don't give a shit," he grumbled coldly. "I will get up when I'm ready."

"Look," Andromeda sighed, impatience loud in her tone. "Isolating yourself in here isn't going to make you feel any better-

"What, and you think a piece of toast and a skip around the garden will make everything all dandy?" he quipped. "Don't be so bloody soft-

"A warm meal will do you some good," she told him, and his stomach twitched again at the notion. "And perhaps a talk with the others will help-

"And just who the hell are these 'others' you keep on mentioning?"

"People in similar positions to you," she said, and Draco felt his curiosity stir. "Come down for some breakfast and you'll see."

"I don't think so-

"Oh, grow up, Draco," Andromeda scowled, slicing the air with her hand. "I do not have the time to stand here and baby you-

"Well, no one's forcing you!" he shouted back. "I think I've made it pretty clear that I don't want you here-

"Tough luck," she sighed, massaging the bridge of her nose. "There are clean clothes in the drawers. If you're not dressed and ready in fifteen minutes, I will kick you out of bed-

"I'm not ready!" he exclaimed, clenching his fists and slamming them against the mattress. He felt some of the fight leave him, and his shoulders slumped as the next mumbled confession left his lips. "I just... I just want to be left alone. I am not... ready to deal with this situation."

Andromeda's features softened slightly. "I am trying to help you-

"If you want to help me; leave-

"I'm not dropping this, Draco," she told him firmly. "But I will offer you a very generous compromise; if you come down for breakfast this once, then I won't hassle you again. I will leave food outside your door, and you can stay in here to mope all you like."

"And if I refuse?" he asked.

"Then I will drag you out of bed today and every other day until you get the message," she warned. "And you might think you'd be able to hold me off, but I have several people

downstairs who would help me, and I doubt you want your wand confiscated when you've only just had it back."

"I am getting so fucking sick of people telling me what to do," he snarled, nostrils flaring as he dropped his face into his palms. "I bet you're loving this; watching the son of the sister who betrayed you in such a pathetic state."

Andromeda released a heavy breath. "That' not true but I really don't have time for this," she said, turning and heading for the door. "I will wait outside your room, and if you're not dressed and ready in ten minutes, we will do this the hard way."

Draco heard the click of the door and groaned into his palms, feeling hot anger burn behind his eyes as his thoughts dragged him back to Hermione. Never would he have imagined craving the shrill pitch of Granger's voice when she was agitated, but he did. He thought of those first few weeks in her dorm; insanity creeping up on him with every word she spoke and every clash of their paths, and the sour-tasting irony almost made him chuckle with dark mirth.

Funny how what had once made him question the state of his mind now seemed the only thing that felt rational and genuine.

Fate was a temperamental bitch with a fetish for mind-fucking.

Apparently, this was how it felt to miss a lover; like someone had fired a brutal Impedimenta right to his chest, and then crushed the reasonable part of his brain and the irrational section of his heart under their heel. He wanted to scream into his pillow loud enough to slit and scratch his windpipe, or slam his fists into the wall until his knuckles splintered his flesh, and he felt somewhere close to rational or balanced again.

He needed to regain control.

He could picture Hermione in his head, telling him to accept the offer of a decent meal and drop the abrasive front, probably with her hands on her hips and rolling her pretty hazels at him. He would wager his questionable inheritance that she would mention the day after she'd been forced to Obliviate her parents, echoing what he'd said to get the grief out of her system on that blissful day in the shower.

Trust me when I say the inactivity will only do more damage.

So, what? You're just going to sit in your room and mope all day?

Snap out of it. You have more strength than this.

"Draco," Andromeda called from the other side of the door, interrupting his trance. "You have five minutes left."

Another painful spasm of hunger made him cringe, and he exhaled with defeat, realising too that his limbs felt weak and sluggish from days without nutrition. His bones cracked and

protested as he left the bed, absently selecting a simple pair of black trousers and a turtleneck of the same colour from the chest of drawers.

Heading to meet his Aunt, he glimpsed his translucent reflection in the window pane and froze. Blurry, bloodshot eyes stared back at him as he studied his face; his expression gaunt and tormented, and his normally groomed hair dishevelled and knotted. He looked tenuous and flimsy, like a limbo-lingering ghost.

And he didn't give a flying fuck.

"If you think I am bluffing, you are mistaken," Andromeda warned, and Draco glowered at the door before he grabbed his wand. "You have one minute."

Muttering a chorus of profanities under his breath, he straightened his posture and joined his Aunt in the corridor, fixing her with an incensed glare. "Happy now?"

"This is hardly for my benefit," she said calmly, starting down the hall. "But yes, I am glad you decided to get out of bed and show a bit of backbone-

"I'm only doing this to shut you up," he quickly pointed out as they walked. "Remember, you said you'd leave me alone if I had breakfast this one time."

"I know what I said."

"Then let's get this over with," he mumbled, breezing past her and guessing the route to the kitchen.

"Draco," Andromeda said, coming up to his side. "I feel I should tell you that the others already know you are here, but I haven't told them where you've been until now or who with. I thought it was best for you to decide how much you wanted to reveal to them."

His brow creased with confusion. "These people know me?"

"Oh yes," she nodded. "And you know them."

"Then why not just tell me who they are?"

"Partly because it's easier just to show you," she shrugged, but he noticed the wrinkled corner of her mouth twitch. "And partly for my own amusement."

His bit down on his back teeth at that remark but didn't respond as they came to a stop in front of the door he presumed led to the kitchen. The seductive smell of porridge and coffee wafted into the corridor and instantly triggered more memories of slow Sundays in Granger's dorm, crunching burnt toast and smirking at her morning-mussed hair. He was suddenly very aware that his witch would not be on the other side of the door, drowning in one of his oversized t-shirts and nursing a cup of tea with a book perched in her lap. He didn't have a clue who was inside Andromeda's kitchen, but it wouldn't be Hermione with a lazy, forgiving smile, and an odd bout of anxiety flooded his gut.

"Wait," he said, before his Aunt could grip the doorknob. "The people in there; do they know the things I have done?"

Andromeda's wrinkles deepened with her puzzled frown. "Yes, they know about what happened with Dumbledore."

"Right," he mumbled, disgusted by the unease in his tone. "Then they hate me."

"No," she disputed quickly, as though she had predicted his comment. "They are like me, Draco; confused and wary, but willing to give you a chance to prove that you are not the evil brat everyone thinks you are."

She barely gave him a moment to ponder that statement before she was nudging him forward, opening the door and thrusting him into the kitchen. Draco was instantly struck speechless; his pupils dilating and his jaw going slack as he took in the occupants of the room and tried to comprehend the implausibility of this situation. Five sets of suspicious and guarded eyes gaped back at him, and he didn't even attempt to hide his bafflement as his erratic attention darted from one familiar face to the next.

Andromeda had been right; he knew them. He knew them well.

His brain was roaring with questions as he fixated first on Tracey Davis, balanced on the kitchen counter and nervously tapping her fingers against her knee. Stood beside her with a more pronounced scowl was Millicent Bulstrode, and on the other side of Tracey was Miles Bletchley, his back straight and his chin tilted, as if prepared for a confrontation.

Draco's bewildered eyes then drifted to the two figures sat at the table, focussing on Theodore Nott, who was leaning back almost nonchalantly in his chair, arms folded across his chest but his eyebrows high on his forehead with surprise. And finally, Draco landed on Blaise Zabini, and he bristled under his old classmate's dark, calculating stare. Blaise's chin was rested against the back of his hand, his lips twitching as he licked his teeth, and his features fixed in a trained and unflinching mask of indifference. Only from years of experience did Draco notice the mistrustful and pensive strain of the other wizard's features.

And it suddenly dawned on him.

These people, who he had once considered acquaintances and even friends, were not who he remembered, and it was so obvious as they each regarded him with doubt and intrigue suitable for a stranger who had stumbled across their den, instead of the respect and camaraderie they'd shared in Hogwarts. They were no longer who they had been, and he was no longer one of them.

They were different, and he was an outsider.

"Well, spank my arse and call me Morgana," Theo's droll voice filled the air. "We thought you were fucking with us, 'Dromeda."

"For Godric's sake, Theo," she muttered, moving further into the kitchen and leaving Draco stunned in the doorway. "How many times must I warn you about your language?"

"Excuse me for trying to break the awkward silence," he shrugged. "This is going to be an interesting morning."

Draco felt his voice-box click back into action. "What the hell is going on?" he blurted. "What the fuck are you lot doing here?"

"I think the more pressing question is what are you doing here?" Theo fired back, stretching his arms over his head. "Everyone thought you were dead."

He flinched, absently glancing at Blaise, who had yet to even blink. "Everyone?"

"Pretty much," Tracey spoke up, and Draco noted that Bletchley subtly adjusted into a protective stance beside her. "They said you got caught in the crossfire when you were trying to escape from Hogwarts."

"But then how-

"Hang on," Theo interrupted swiftly, leaning his elbows against the table. "I believe it was our turn to ask a question."

"This isn't a fucking game, Nott," Draco snapped, too flustered to keep his cool. "I want to know what the hell is going on-

"And so do we-

"Well, you're being an arsehole about it-

"Call me an arsehole again, and I'll break your face, Malfoy-

"Enough," Andromeda hushed their ricocheting jibes. "Look, you are going to have to figure out a way to talk this out properly. I need to head back to the other house, and I'd like to believe you're all old enough to handle this maturely."

"Don't hold your breath-

"Shut it, Theo," Blaise finally spoke, shooting his companion a warning glare. "How long will you be, 'Dromeda?"

"Just a few hours," she said, and Draco realised how peculiarly comfortable his Aunt was with his former classmates. "Millicent, I was going to ask if you would mind coming with me? I might need some help sorting through the supplies." The younger witch nodded, and his Aunt turned back to Blaise. "You're in charge while I'm gone."

"Shocker," Theo rolled his eyes. "Favouritism gets you everywhere-

"So does acting like an adult," she frowned at him, gesturing for Millicent to follow her as she headed for another door at the back of the room. "Don't kill each other while I'm gone."

With that, the two witches exited the kitchen, and the tense silence returned to take its place between the remaining inhabitants, and it clawed at Draco's eardrums. Blaise had barely

moved during the exchange, his head still propped up by his knuckles and still studying Draco with an intense concentration that felt almost invasive.

"Bletchley, Davis," he addressed the pair on a sigh, slowly turning to acknowledge them. "Would you mind leaving us alone for a bit?"

Miles seemed hesitant. "How come?"

"I think it will be easier if Malfoy only talks with Theo and I for now," he explained, his bistre eyes back on Draco. "Don't worry, you will get your chance to ask questions too."

Miles opened his mouth to protest, but Tracey settled her hand on his and hopped off the counter, whispering something in his ear meant only for him. "Alright," she said, tugging on her companion's wrist. "Give us a shout if you need anything."

As the couple side-stepped Draco to leave the room, Blaise kicked out a chair and cocked his head. "Take a seat, Malfoy," he instructed calmly, waiting until Draco complied before he spoke again. "Tell us where you've been."

"No," he shook his head stubbornly. "Tell me what the hell you're doing here first-

"For fuck's sake," Theo cut in again. "You don't have any right to-

"Give your jaw a rest and calm the hell down," Blaise told him in a low tone. "Try to remember that you were in Malfoy's position not so long ago-

"Yes, but I wasn't the one who let the bloody Death Eaters into Hogwarts."

"No, but you could have been," he replied steadily. "It could have been any of us."

Theo's agitated demeanour faltered before he clicked his tongue and raised his hands in surrender. "Fine," he breathed reluctantly. "Carry on."

Blaise flicked his eyes back to Draco. "The Death Eaters call us 'The Defected,' and the Order calls us 'The Enlightened,'" he said. "I prefer to think of us as the ones who had a lucky escape."

"You defected?" Draco repeated. "Why would you-

But he was interrupted when the back door flew open, and in walked Luna Lovegood with her usual air of tranquil ignorance, and the surprise of her abrupt entrance knocked the wind out of Draco's lungs. She glimpsed at him out of the corner of her eye and, aside from the slight stretch of her smile, gave no indication that she was thrown or perturbed by his presence.

"Morning, Lovegood," Theo greeted casually.

"Good morning, Theo, Blaise," she returned, and Draco didn't miss the softening of Blaise's stoic exterior when she hummed his name, nor did he miss the way Lovegood glided an

affectionate hand across his shoulders as she walked past. "And good morning to you, Draco."

"What the fuck-

"See," she murmured in that blank tone of hers, looking specifically at Blaise. "I told you I saw him in Hogwarts at Christmas."

Chapter End Notes

You may need to cast your minds back to Chapter 18 for this bit...But yeah...I am hoping these chapters where Draco and Hermione are apart aren't too blah for us Dramione lovers, but there are things that need to be sorted and stuff that needs to happen...I'm nervous to see how this new development will be received...Very nervous actually...

I just want to wish Robbi and Nicole a belated happy birthday! And also to the gorgeous Emma Watson! It's my birthday in a few days (23rd of April) too! Yay for April! I'm hoping someone bought me Tom Felton...*sigh*...I wish. I also want to thank Masha, Manda, Ronnie, Nicole, Breanna, Chiara and Davi again for taking the time and effort to do FanArt...I continually stare at them wide eyes and wanna hug you guys for being so bloody lovely. And I can't believe Iso has reached 2000 reviews...I literally have no words for this, except...Wine and Love for everyone!

Sorry about the wait...Writer's block is apparently stalking me now...Hoping to get back to weekly updates once these exams are out of the way! I have ranted enough...
Read and Review!

Bex-chan

Truth

Chapter Notes

Thanks to the people on tumblr who responded to my request for song ideas! I listened to Sanders Bohlke - The Weight of Us, Aqualung - I Fall, and (not my choice, but a favour to a friend, and the lyrics are good for this chapter...) D-side - Real World.

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

Draco gawped at Luna Lovegood like she had just predicted the day he would die. The seemingly innocent blonde flicked her eyes from Blaise over to him, and she had a slight bend to her smile that suddenly seemed deliberate and intuitive, as though she had purged his mind and kept all his secrets for leverage. And then she blinked and turned her back to them, idly washing her hands in the sink and humming under her breath like the ditzzy girl he'd always assumed she was.

He moved his baffled stare to Blaise, who was now wearing a subtle smirk and the telling look of a man who had answers. Draco frowned and risked a glance at Theo, expecting to see a similar expression of cocky recognition, but he looked just as confused as Draco felt.

"What are you on about, Lovegood?" Theo asked over his shoulder.

"Nothing," she replied breezily.

Theo arched a dark eyebrow. "Looks like she's having one of her funny turns again," he mumbled, and his head jolted forward when Blaise dealt him a firm smack to the base of his skull. "OW! What the hell-

"Mind your mouth," his friend warned quietly. "You're such a gobby prick-

"You need to gain a sense of humour, sunshine-

"I swear on Salazar's grave, Theo-

"I was going to start some of the washing," Luna announced, and again, Draco observed the clenched muscles in Blaise's face relax. "Would one of you mind helping me? I could do with an extra set of hands."

"Sorry, Lovegood," Theo shrugged, nodding his head at Draco. "We're in the middle of something-

"Theo, go and give Luna a hand," Blaise interrupted. "I want to talk to Malfoy alone."

"What? Why the hell should you-

"Because you're getting on my nerves and you might as well do something useful," he grumbled, tilting his head and catching Luna's eyes for a brief moment with an almost apologetic twitch of his lips. "I'm serious, Theo. Give me an hour and then you can hassle Malfoy all you like-

"But, Blaise-

"Theo, stop bitching like a first year Hufflepuff," he warned. "Either go and help Luna, or I'll have 'Dromeda confiscate your wand again."

Theo fired Blaise an irate glare and growled, smacking his palms down on the table and brusquely leaving his seat with a piercing screech of his chair and a muttered list of profanities under his breath. "One hour," he bit out, making his way towards the door. "And remind me to spit in your food later for being such a wanker. Come on, Lovegood."

"Why would you remind him to spit in your food?" Luna asked as she made to follow him. "Seems like a silly thing to say."

"He says a lot of shit," Blaise mumbled, reaching out to brush his fingers against her forearm before she slipped past. "If he behaves like a tosser; Petrify him, lock him in a cupboard or something, and I'll deal with it afterwards."

"Okay," she nodded with smiling eyes, and Draco almost choked on the air when she lifted a hand to gently touch Blaise's cheek. "You look a little stressed. Have some of that herbal tea I bought you."

"Maybe later," he agreed, his eyes lingering on Luna's back as she retreated out of the room. With the closing click of the door, his features quickly morphed back into a stern frown, and he met Draco with a cautionary stare. "Wipe that look off your face, Malfoy-

"You and Lovegood?" he blurted incredulously. "What the fuck was that?"

"It's none of your business unless I decide otherwise-

"But she's-

"Shut it," he snapped. "I'm not prepared to discuss the details of my relationship with Luna with you just yet-

"And if you knew I was in Hogwarts, then why ask me?"

"To see if you would tell the truth," Blaise said calmly, the words slow and deliberate. "Would you have told the truth?"

"Why should I?" he retorted. "You're not being honest with me-

"I have been nothing but honest with you, Malfoy. I told you we had defected-

"Yes, but you haven't explained why," he interrupted. "You haven't explained how you all got here. And what the hell is Lovegood doing here if this is a safe-house for people who have

defected?"

Blaise rubbed his lips together with thought and released a long breath. "Luna's here because she and her father have been helping 'Dromeda to keep us hidden."

"Right, then what about you and the others?"

Another thoughtful pause. "Theo and I came here a few weeks after you went missing. Davis and Bulstrode had already been here a couple of weeks, and Bletchley came a few days after Theo and I-

"Yes, but how-

"Dumbledore approached me in sixth year when he saw me putting my fist through a window," he continued, smirking when Draco's eyebrows shot up. "Come on, Malfoy. Did you honestly think you were the only Slytherin Dumbledore was keeping an eye on? The world doesn't revolve around you, you know-

"What the fuck?" Draco scowled, clenching his fists until his knuckles clicked. "That doesn't make any sense. Last year you-

"Are you going to shut your gob and let me explain, or not?" Blaise snapped, waiting until Draco sat back in his seat before he resumed. "I didn't listen to Dumbledore straight away but...", he hesitated and cleared his throat. "But when I saw how fucked up you were after taking the Mark, I knew I didn't want to end up like you-

"Cheers, mate-

"So he asked me to keep an eye on you," he revealed in a measured tone. "He knew what you'd been told to do, and he'd hoped you would back out of your...mission, but he knew you were determined. That's why he left a couple of signs; hoping you would defect before it was too late-

"Signs?" Draco repeated. "What signs?"

"Who do you think asked Myrtle to talk to you in the toilets?" he remarked flippantly. "Did you think it was a coincidence that the Muggle-born ghost just always happened to be around? And why do you think Snape was always there to bail you out of trouble?"

"You're serious?" Draco breathed in shock, but he quickly veiled it with a snarl. "And I guess Theo was spying on me for Dumbledore too?"

"No," he replied, shaking his head. "After you took the Mark, all the Death Eaters started volunteering their kids too to boost numbers for You-Know-Who's army, and Theo's father jumped right on the bandwagon. When I found Theo having a breakdown in his room, I told him to see Dumbledore, but it took a lot of convincing-

"Hang on a minute," Draco mumbled absently. "You said you came here after I disappeared, but Dumbledore was dead-

"I was getting to that," Blaise cut him off. "A few days after you vanished, my village bike of a mother made Theo's dad husband number eight-

"What? You and Theo are step-brothers?"

"Technically, yes," Blaise nodded, rolling his heavy brown eyes. "But we reckon with my mother's track record as a seven-time widow, it won't last long. Anyway, Theo's father is a huge prick and elected both Theo and I to take the Mark. We did a runner and Dumbledore must have told McGonagall that he'd spoken to us because the Knight Bus took us to some house in Essex, and she was waiting for us. She brought us to 'Dromeda, and we've been here since."

"Bloody hell," he murmured. "But it's just you five? What about Crabbe and Goyle, or Pansy?"

"Crabbe and Goyle are doing the only thing they're good at; following orders," Blaise remarked with a hint of disgust. "They're probably bent over a desk right now and spreading their cheeks. As for Parkinson, the last I heard she had opted herself for the Mark and was helping her dear old Daddy with rounding up Muggle-borns."

Draco felt a surge of disappointment. His former classmates and lover had always been weak-willed - hell, that was what had initially made them such useful allies - but he was suddenly aware of how much the dynamics and circumstances had changed since he'd been in Hogwarts. "Bugger me," he whispered. "Pansy took the Mark?"

"Are you honestly that surprised?"

"No," he admitted after a moment, dropping his face into his hands and massaging his throbbing temple.. "This is all just...fucked up."

"You wanted the truth, so there it is," Blaise reminded him, leaning forward in his chair with intrigue. "So, now it's your turn to be honest."

"You already know I was at Hogwarts," Draco sighed, his voice muffled against his palms. "What else could you possibly want to know?"

"How about what you were doing with Hermione Granger on Christmas day by the Black Lake," he countered, his lips tilting into a very Slytherin smirk, and Draco's head snapped up so quick his neck cracked. "Oh yes. Luna mentioned that as well."

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She'd needed to get of her room, and the kitchen felt less claustrophobic with its essential supply of coffee and biscuits, so she'd left Crookshanks snoozing on her bed and opted for the solitude that echoed off the tiles.

Hermione was hunched over the dining table, scanning the sentences with exhausted eyes and searching for something useful amongst the hectic mess of witness accounts and Auror statements from the First Wizarding War. Shacklebolt had managed to recover some old Ministry documents and restricted texts before Voldemort's infiltration, but endless hours of pouring over pages had proved futile thus far, and a volatile mixture of insomnia and heartache was making her fidgety and impatient. She was staring intently at the file between her elbows when a tear slipped past her lashes and kissed the parchment.

"Merlin, not again," she sighed to no one, lifting her fingers to rub her eyes until the friction started to agitate. "This is ridiculous."

The tears never really stopped; only subsided, and Hermione had learned three things in the last few days.

Firstly, it was better to tolerate the damaging effects of sleep-deprivation than to confront the nightmare she'd had on her first night alone; an exact replay of her final moments with Draco, except when she'd pulled away from their one-sided kiss, there'd been blood crawling down his chin, and she'd woken up screaming, retching and convinced she could taste iron against her tongue.

Secondly, the line between dedication and obsession is precariously thin. She had almost become dependent on her determination to help the Order, and a little voice in her head warned that if she put down the books, it would all become too real, and she might not handle it as well as everyone expected her to. She surrounded herself with her work, coating the walls in her borrowed room with notes she had scribbled, and only pausing to eat, nap or practice some defensive spells with Moody or Lupin. The world around her was blurred and muffled, and that was how she needed it right now. Distraction would keep her grounded; keep her sane.

And lastly, sometimes it was irrelevant how hard she focussed on her tasks. Random flashbacks - be them blissful memories or disturbing ones - penetrated her concentration without regard almost hourly, always leaving her dizzy and trembling ever so slightly. The moment would pass, she would berate herself for allowing her attention to waver, and then she would get on with life, dreading the next one. They seemed to harass her most in the shower, sometimes so vivid that the steam seemed to whisper with Draco's voice, but she had taken to having the water ice cold so her senses were on edge and she would be alert enough to snap out of it.

For the most part, she had managed to keep her composure, but every now and then, an inconvenient tear would splash against her books, like now, but she would hide it before anyone would notice.

Vulnerability was not her colour.

"Hermione," Tonks' warm voice made her start. "Please don't tell me you've been up all night."

"No," she lied automatically, stealing a glance at the clock. It was almost eight, and she wondered where the last four hours had gone. She hadn't even noticed the morning birds or the faint glow of the sun. "I just woke up early."

"If you say so," Tonks mumbled, obviously unconvinced as she slumped into the opposite chair with a little difficulty. "I think the baby has actually figured out a way to squeeze my bladder."

Hermione cracked a smile, but it was strained. "Do you want me to make you some breakfast or something?"

"No, I'll wait until Remus wakes up," she said. "Any luck with those files from the Ministry?"

"Nothing really, but I'm not really sure what I'm looking for. Just some clue about the Horcruxes, I guess."

"I'll give you a hand after we've had some food," she offered, and then she fixed the younger witch with a reassuring look. "He'll be okay, you know."

Hermione felt her heartbeats hesitate, and her stomach did a nervous flip. "What?" she asked in a croaky voice. "Who will be okay?"

"Whoever it is you're missing," Tonks said as though it was obvious. "I'm guessing it's the boy you mentioned when I visited you before Christmas?"

"I'm fine, Tonks," Hermione mumbled, dropping her eyes back to the book. "I just miss Harry and Ron-

"You've barely talked since you've been here, and I recognise that look of girl missing her-

"I'm really fine," she interrupted quickly. Almost frantically. "I just...I need to concentrate on this right now, and I can't-

"If you want to talk about him, you can talk to me," Tonks pushed, frowning when Hermione shook her head. "You know, you need to have a break every now and then or you'll drive yourself mad-

"Tonks, please," she tried. "Don't."

"Just one question, and I'll drop the subject," Tonks insisted. "If you answer honestly, I promise I won't mention him again."

Huffing out a frustrated sigh and combing her hair away from her face, Hermione hesitantly tipped her head in agreement. "Fine. One question, but that's it."

"Okay," she said gently, taking her time. "Does he love you back?"

And Hermione closed her eyes so Tonks wouldn't see her torment. The tears were back and burning the backs of her lids, but she'd be damned if she let one slide down her cheek.

"I honestly have no idea."

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"Granger," Draco echoed her name before he could help it, because it just didn't sound right coming from Blaise's mouth. A sudden headache pounded behind his eyes and he clenched them shut, forgetting to keep his expression trained with indifference.

"Then I guessed right," his companion remarked smugly. "You were fucking her."

The thud of Draco's fist against the table sent a glass tumbling to the floor, and Blaise warily shifted in his seat. "Don't talk about her like that," Draco hissed between his bared teeth. "I'm warning you, Zabini."

Blaise had the decency to look slight taken aback. "So, it was more than fucking," he mumbled, ignoring Draco's incensed glare. "You like her-

"Zabini, I swear to Merlin-

"Calm down, Malfoy," he said. "There's no reason to get so defensive. Luna had her suspicions. Hell, I owe her five Galleons now-

"Bollocks," he scoffed. "Since when is Loony Lovegood observant?"

"You'd be surprised," Blaise replied with a subtle grin. "So are you going to tell me what happened between you and Granger? Or would you prefer I jump to conclusions?"

"I'd prefer you minded your own sodding business," Draco spat, his body beginning to vibrate as he became more infuriated. "It has nothing to do with you."

"Malfoy," he breathed impatiently. "I am trying to do you a favour. If your views on Muggle-borns have changed because of Granger, like I reckon they have, then I might be able to trust you, and that would make your situation a lot easier."

Draco narrowed his eyes into suspicious slits. "And how exactly do you feel about Muggle-borns now, Blaise? You hated them just as much as I did-

"No I didn't," he argued quickly. "Did you ever hear me use the word, 'Mudblood'? And the only step-dad who didn't treat me like shit was a half-blood with a Muggle mother. I met her

back and fifth year and she was nice as hell-

"But you called people blood traitors and-

"It's all semantics," he said flippantly. "I just repeated what you lot did. I didn't even know what Mudblood meant until you said it to Granger in second year." Blaise paused to watch Draco cringe at that comment. "Which brings us back to the very interesting present; you and Granger."

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" he snarled quietly, tapping his finger against the table with frustration.

"Maybe a little bit," Blaise smirked. "Irony tastes good in the morning-

"Fuck you, Zabini. It's not a joke-

"Well, if you would stop being so bloody secretive, perhaps I might take it more seriously-

"No, you wouldn't!" Draco barked loudly, sucking in a sharp breath. "You just... You wouldn't fucking get it, Blaise!"

"Oh really?" he challenged. "In case you missed it, I am romantically involved with Luna bloody Lovegood. You know, the girl we tortured in Hogwarts, and a loyal supporter of the Order. If there's anyone who's going to understand, it's me, Draco, so you might as well just-

"YES! FINE!" he yelled, springing up from his chair and pacing a few steps away so he wouldn't have to look at Blaise. "Whatever the hell is going on between you and Lovegood, Granger and I are in the same boat! Wait, fuck that! We WERE in the same boat! But now I'm here and I don't know where the hell she is, and I don't know WHAT THE FUCK TO DO!"

He froze where he stood, forcing tension into his limbs to stop them shaking, and trying to steady his heaving chest. The heat of his temper was simmering under his skin, and he shook his head, feeling that same destructive sense of helplessness from the night Hermione had left. He could feel Blaise's eyes studying him, but he refused to meet them, transfixed on a crack in the wall and not trusting himself to move.

"She was the only thing made sense," he murmured before he could think, doubting Blaise would even hear him. "And now she's gone, there is...nothing. Nothing that makes sense." He glanced at his silent companion and knew that he'd heard every word. "Go on then, Zabini. Say what whatever you're going to say."

Blaise stayed still for a moment, his expression impassive, before he slowly nodded his head with something between satisfaction and approval. "Welcome to 'The Enlightened,'" he said evenly. "Sit back down, Draco. We're going to have a coffee, and you look like you could do with something to eat."

"That's it?" he questioned sceptically.

"I've heard what I needed to hear," Blaise shrugged. "If you want to tell me more, you can, but I just wanted to be certain that your being here is justified and safe."

Draco cocked a brow and hesitantly retook his seat. "Will you tell the others?"

"That you're in love with Granger? No-

"I never said I was in love with her," he retorted hastily. "I never used that bloody word-

"So you don't love her?"

"I..." he started uncertainly, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. "I am not even going to dignify that with a response. What would you say if I asked if you loved Lovegood?"

"I would say I do," Blaise answered without a flinch, and Draco's jaw sagged with disbelief. "So what?"

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Malfoy, in case you haven't noticed we're in the middle of a war," he said with a slight flicker of dread. "We could all die tomorrow, and Luna deserves to know she isn't just some shag-buddy to pass the time. Aside from that, I don't give a flying fuck what anyone thinks, and that includes you. So, if you didn't tell Granger how you really felt, then more fool you, because I hate to break it to you, Malfoy, but you might never see her again."

And although it didn't show on his face, Blaise's words stabbed at Draco's chest like splinters, and he felt sick to his stomach as a crushing wave of regret stuck him. "I will see her again," he disputed, but the doubt was so obvious in his voice. "I will."

Blaise exhaled and regarded Draco with half-lidded eyes. "For your sake, I hope you're right."

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Four days before Valentine's Day and her eighth day away from Draco, and Hermione was back in the bedroom with her pile of books and her shadow for company. A gruelling three-hour session on defensive spells with May-eye had left her sore and fatigued, but the day had just drifted into tomorrow, and midnight had become her favourite time to work. Everyone went to bed, and she was left undisturbed for at least eight hours, save the moments when Crookshanks would crawl into her lap for a little attention. She could also think about Draco and not feel too guilty about it, or worry that Lupin and Tonks might notice a stray tear or the quivering of her bottom lip.

She found herself daydreaming of ice-skating and window-seats, and she was just about to collect her things and head down to the kitchen for her caffeine fix when she heard a faint tapping against the window pane. When she saw the moonlight reflect off snowy white feathers, she shot out of her chair and scrambled over to the window, desperately fumbling with the latch. Hedwig dropped a letter into Hermione's hands and swiftly departed before the witch could even blink. She tore open the envelope with frantic fingers and read the ten roughly scribbled words in Harry's handwriting once, twice, and three times just to ensure she hadn't missed anything.

The Angel in the Circus. The time you were born.

And she knew exactly where she had to go.

Chapter End Notes

I know this is probably the shortest chapter I've done, and I'm really sorry, but exams are coming up and and blah blah blah real life shit getting in the way of my Dramione fantasies...Real life is such a tosser...Hope it was okay, and again, I know the chapters with them apart are less interesting, but bear with me...I promise an interesting reunion.

I want to wish my fic-wife Riri Whitlock HAPPY BIRTHDAY. I adore you, and I wish I could do an awesome manip to express my love, but photoshop hates me...Speaking of, some more lovely people have done some FanArt (all links are on my profile page) so thank you so much Lizzy, Erika, Robbi and Allie for taking the time. They're bloody gorgeous! Hugs and wine!

Also, my friend waterflower20 is involved with the Live Journal community stop_sids, and they are currently hosting an auction with the main goal to raise money for SIDS research. You can bid for fics, videos, even food! Check it out and don't hesitate to bid. You are really going to help.

I think that's everything I needed to say. Huge thanks to everyone who reviews and talks to me on facebook and tumblr. You are all so lovely, and I have made some wonderful friends who I hope to meet someday! Rambling...Read and Review, and again, sorry about the shortness. The next one will be a lot longer to make up for it!

Bex-chan.

Angel

Chapter Notes

Song recommendations for this chapter are Keith Caputo - Got Monsters, Brandon Flowers - The Floor, Christina Perri - Backwards. I think they go well with the chapter, so let me know what you think!

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

Contrary to popular belief, the infamous monument that stands tall in Piccadilly Circus is not a statue of the Greek God, Eros.

When Hermione had stumbled across an old Victorian text in The London Library referring to it with another name, she had naturally been intrigued and given herself a little research project to pass the time during her summer holidays before fourth year. It had originally been a statue of Eros' brother, Anteros, but had been renamed 'The Angel of Christian Charity' for some time, before being changed back to Anteros. Despite this, almost every tourism guide, signpost and local Londoner - be them cockney or otherwise - still call it 'The Statue of Eros.'

When she'd returned to Hogwarts, she had told Harry and Ron about her findings and they had predictably been indifferent, but she had scolded them every time they'd called the monument its incorrect name, and they had eventually grown tired of her lectures on the importance of appreciating its true title. Ron, for some reason, had had a little difficulty with the name Anteros, and he'd kept mispronouncing it, 'Antross,' which had only irritated her more.

Somehow, they had compromised, and they had started calling it 'The Angel of Christian Charity' - for at least that had been its name at one point - and then that had simply been shortened to 'The Angel.'

The Angel in the Circus.

She had been born at exactly half four in the morning, a detail she was surprised Harry and Ron had remembered, but perhaps they really had been listening between the eye-rolls and blank expressions.

She had to give the boys credit. The destination was cryptic with their inside joke, and Piccadilly Circus would be busy enough with London's constant bustle for them to go unnoticed at that time, but not too busy to get disorientated.

After throwing all her belongings into her charmed bag, including all the books she had yet to read and all the notes she had scribbled in the last week, she had whispered a goodbye to Crookshanks and told him to behave while she was away. It had barely passed midnight, so

she sat in the kitchen for a few hours, fidgety with anticipation and drumming her nails against the dining table, always checking the time.

A watched clock ticks slower.

When it was almost four, she jotted a quick note to Tonks and Lupin, apologising for her absence when they woke up and promising to be careful. As a precaution, she charmed her hair a light blonde, a few shades darker than Draco's, and fixed her woolly scarf to veil the lower part her face, just below her nose.

With a final glance at that bloody clock, which read ten past four, she took a deep breath to ease the odd bundle of nerves in her stomach, and walked out the door. She padded across the dew-licked grass until she felt a shift in the air which indicated she had gone beyond the Wards, and then she Apparated.

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Sleep was an evasive bastard.

There had been too many revelations in the last week. It was almost as if his body and brain were still trying to accept his separation from Hermione, and were too dented by the impact to really absorb this new environment and the people in it. Maybe he was simply rejecting this Granger-less reality.

He didn't know. It didn't matter.

Nevertheless, he had passively observed the routines and conduct of his old classmates and his Aunt, if only because there was hardly anything else to do. He had learned that this wasn't Andromeda's main residence but a safe house, and she was constantly returning to her home, usually with Bulstrode, who seemed to have quite a good relationship with his Aunt.

Davis and Bletchley were always in each other's shadow, lost in their own world. In the rare moments they emerged from their rooms for mealtimes and the like, they were rather affectionate, Tracey more so, but not to the point that it made Draco gag. Bletchley never rejected her, but he always had a protective rigidity to his posture that made the intensity of his feelings for the witch obvious.

Theo, was a different story. If Draco had been concerned that he was the only one having trouble with this bizarre situation, Theo was not in the same place as his companions. While the others seemed to have adapted rather well to the circumstances, Blaise had remarked how Theo had his good days, and his bad days. On no less than four occasions, Draco had heard

him mumble something derogatory about Muggles and Muggle-borns, and Draco hadn't been able to decide if he'd felt uneasy or relieved.

He might not be able to utter the word 'Mudblood' anymore, but hearing the slur was eerily familiar, and there was the faintest trace of a response to it. He was still questioning. He was still undecided.

It was only when Ted Tonks had paid a visit two days ago that Draco had witnessed one of Theo's good days. Draco had purposely kept his distance, but he'd noticed that his Aunt's husband had a laid-back and affable presence that was difficult to dislike, and Theo had lost all the revulsion in his expression. They'd played Wizard's Chess like it was the most normal thing in the world.

The others had refrained from asking him any questions, and he had a feeling Blaise had something to do with that. Draco could see he had a silent control over the small group, absently studying everyone and everything with seemingly dull eyes, except when Lovegood was around. Draco was still trying to really grasp their bizarre relationship, but he could hardly comment considering his own attachment to Granger.

Blaise and Luna had that hushed sort of love that you only noticed if you were watching; entirely expressed with lingering touches and secretive smiles. They would quietly disappear in the evenings without a word or whisper, and on the days when Lovegood was elsewhere, Blaise would wear that distant look of a man who didn't know if his soul mate was coming home.

Draco only recognised it because a similar expression had haunted his mirror every morning.

Between Blaise and Luna and Andromeda and Ted, he was surrounded by taunting reminders of his own unconventional attachment to Hermione, and it all seemed so natural to them. Like breathing.

Judging from the inky hue of the sky, it was somewhere between four and five, and he was outside, perched on the stone steps at the front of the house. He was wearing the coat Granger had bought him, inhaling the faint remains of her scent, and flicking his wand every now and then to renew the Warming Charm that shielded him from the frosty chill.

There was little to do but think here, and his thoughts were always as turbulent as a storm-licked sea. Tonight was no different. He didn't hear the door opening.

"Good morning, precious," Theo's droll voice broke the peace, and Draco shot him a cold look as he settled on the step next to him. "And why aren't you tucked up in bed?"

"Probably the same reason as you," he said.

"Morning wood?"

In spite of himself, Draco exhaled a low chuckle. "Not quite. Just...too many thoughts to sleep."

"Oh, that," Theo nodded. "Yes, this is hardly the best place to catch up on your beauty sleep, Malfoy. I would say that it gets easier, but if that was true, I wouldn't be here talking to you at four in the morning."

"Brilliant."

Theo drummed his fingers against his shin. "So, you really defected then?"

"Would I be here if I hadn't?"

"Fair point," he conceded. "And how exactly do you explain your sudden tolerance for Muggle-borns? I saw that look you gave me when I said 'Mudblood' the other day."

Draco sighed and closed his eyes. "A lot has changed since we last spoke."

"Care to elaborate?"

"Not right now," he shook his head. "How can I tell you my reasons when I don't completely understand them myself?"

Theo snorted and rolled his eyes. "That's just a poetic way of telling me to mind my own business."

"Then mind your own business," Draco shrugged. "Why are you being such a prick, Theo? We were mates once-

"Yes, but you said yourself, a lot has changed since we last spoke," said Theo, somewhat coldly. "Everyone has these little fucking secrets, and Blaise, Miles and Tracey are suddenly fine with Muggles. Fuck, even you-

"I'm not fine," he interrupted. "I am...confused, like you."

"And how would you know how I feel about all this?"

"I saw you with Ted, Theo. You don't hate him, and he's a Muggle-born."

Theo rubbed his hands together and dropped his gaze to his feet. "Ted's a good bloke," he started, his tone now and reluctant. "In my first week here, I downed some dark potion I'd nicked from my father. I was pissed off, and I just...wanted out."

Draco snapped his eyes over to his companion. "You tried to top yourself?"

"I don't know," he said quietly, closing his eyes. "I knew the potion was dangerous but I was just so fucking angry. It basically started eating at my organs, and it bloody hurt. Ted found me, pumped my stomach, and stayed with me for six hours trying to heal the damage. I asked him not to tell anyone, and he didn't." He paused and cocked his head to the side. "I'd called him a Mudblood the day before."

The silence between them was that static kind that warned you not breathe first; thick with angst because no words would ever be appropriate to follow what Theo had confessed.

Draco's brow wrinkled with his pensive frown, and he hesitantly lifted his hand and gave his old friend's back a firm pat of reassurance.

Theo cocked a cynical eyebrow. "If you're trying to hug me, I'll fucking backhand you."

"I wasn't going to hug you, wanker-

"Too right you weren't," he scowled. "Are we done with this unnecessary and pathetic discussion?"

"Apparently so," said Draco, frowning as Theo got to his feet and made to go inside. Huffing out an agitated breath, he tilted his head to call over his shoulder. "For what it's worth, Theo, I still consider you a mate."

"Should I do a little happy dance?"

"I'm just...If you need to vent, then you can, alright?" he offered flippantly. "I know how fucked up this all is. Believe me."

Theo hesitated, and Draco heard him clear his throat. "Noted," he mumbled, fumbling with the doorknob. "Likewise."

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Hermione Apparated to St. James' Park.

She knew the area well, and was careful to ensure she wouldn't be noticed, choosing a small collection of trees near the corner of Horse Guards Road and The Mall. Piccadilly Circus was barely a ten minute walk from here, and she immediately broke into a swift power-walk, reciting her pre-planned route in her head for reassurance. The guttural vibrations of traffic and city sounds made her ears itch, and she bowed her head to avoid the eyes of the handful of people that she passed.

On any other day, she would have lingered to admire the elaborate architecture on Carlton House Terrace, but she barely spared the regal buildings a glance as she moved up Pall Mall. The stream of pedestrians was thicker as she moved deeper into London's heart, and she gripped her wand in her pocket, remembering Moody's advice.

Constant vigilance.

Moving up Waterloo Place and Regent Street, she squinted her eyes as the brash advertisements of Piccadilly Circus stained the pavements with reds, blues and greens, and

then she saw the statue. She allowed herself a small sigh as she approached it with quickening strides, her eyes darting in every direction, searching for a flash of red hair or a glare of light bouncing off some spectacles.

As expected, there were people speckled around the area, meandering around each other or settled on the steps at the statue's base; European tourists with over-worked cameras, tipsy students who had lost their sleeping patterns, and a few busy professionals who were clearly struggling with deadlines. But no Harry or Ron.

She stopped walking and folded her arms to fight to the chill, studying the statue, and anxiously wondering if she had misinterpreted the letter. What if the boys had gotten her time of birth wrong? What if Hedwig had delivered the message on the wrong day? What if the letter had been intercepted, or had been a decoy, and she had just strolled straight into a trap like a bloody idiot?

She checked her watch. Twenty-five to five.

Punctuality had never been their strong point; hell, five minutes late was early for Harry and Ron, but risks breed doubts, and then paranoia sneaks up on you before you notice. She had almost made up her mind to abandon the whole plan, but something that felt like intuition crawled up her spine, and her eyes snapped to the side and locked on two figures marching in her direction.

The familiar, rusty tint of Weasley hair was absent; replaced with a deep brown shade. There were no glasses, black hair and been turned fair, and both faces had been altered slightly with different skin tones and missing freckles.

But she would have known them anywhere.

She was frozen for a second, but then she burst into a sprint, relieved tears prickling her eyes as she rushed towards them. They were running too, whipping around the late-night Londoners, and she lunged at them when they were close enough, wrapping her arms around two necks and relaxing into two pairs of awkwardly positioned arms. The trio stayed that way for a few peaceful moments, and then Hermione was ripping herself out of the familiar embrace and slapping her palms against their chests.

"OW!" Ron grumbled. "Hermione, what the-

"Don't you two ever leave like that again!" she snapped, batting away their hands. "I could bloody kill the pair of you-

"I told you she'd be angry," Harry mumbled with a slight grin.

"Too right I'm angry!" she scolded. "I haven't seen you in months-

"We missed you too," said Ron in warm tone, but Hermione avoided his attempt to drape an arm across her shoulders. He gave her a wounded look, and a pang of guilt hit her chest. "What's wrong, Hermione?"

"Nothing," she sighed, avoiding his eyes. "I just...it will be light soon. We should get going. Where have you been staying?"

Her two friends shared an uncertain look. "Well," Harry mumbled. "It's a long story, but we've kind of been moving around a lot. We thought areas away from the cities would be best, but we don't really know many. What was that forest you visited with your family?"

"The Forest of Dean," she supplied. "Yes, that's actually not a bad idea-

"But we need to get more supplies," Harry explained, gesturing to the rucksack hanging off his shoulder; the bag she had given him before he'd left, complete with an Undetectable Extension Charm. "The tent we had is falling apart and-

"I have a tent," she interrupted, patting her own charmed bag. "I have been collecting things I thought we might need since you two left-

"What about food?" Ron piped up with his rather predictable request. "We're running low-

"I have everything we need," she told them, frowning when she realised the morning was already beginning to lighten the sky. "Come on, we should go. Let's find somewhere to Apparate from."

"You're right, we should move," Harry nodded, and the three of them started to move down Shaftsbury Avenue. "Honestly, Hermione, we have so much to tell you. You wouldn't believe what's happened since we left you."

Hermione clenched her eyes shut for a moment and thought of Draco. "Yes," she murmured absently. "I have some rather unbelievable things to tell you myself."

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Chapter 28, Part 2: Adapt.

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A week later...

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Draco rested his weight against the wall, his eyes fixed on his Aunt, who was clearly fighting back the tears.

Andromeda had told them yesterday that Ted was going on the run. They'd received an anonymous warning, possibly from the Order, that the Ministry had been informed of Ted's whereabouts, and it was only a matter of time before they came looking for him. Theo had been quick to react, and he had dented the wall with his fist, demanding to know why Ted couldn't remain with them in the safe-house. Ted had had to calm him down, explaining that if Voldemort's followers knew he was being concealed, they would probably conduct a thorough search, and there was a risk that their hideout would be discovered. If they knew he was on the run, they would hunt him, and any attention would be diverted.

To put it bluntly; Ted was putting his life on the line to help a group of teens he hardly knew. Theo had been right; Ted was a decent bloke.

That notion had stirred a sobering amount of respect within Draco for his affinal uncle, and suddenly, there was a second Muggle-born in the world who he didn't despise. And just like Hermione, this Muggle-born was being forced to disappear from his life too soon.

It was almost like fate was taking time out of her busy schedule, just to screw with his head. She would plant these people in his path that would make him forget all his birth-taught prejudices, and then she would just rip them away like flimsy poppy petals, and he was left sore with confusion.

Draco shifted his attention to his uncle, who was ruffling Davis's hair, and mumbling some parting words to Bletchley and Bulstrode. Beside Draco, Theo was rigid with tension; fists clenched and quaking slightly, and his teeth grinding behind his pursed lips. His eyes fell to Blaise and Lovegood, noting that their fingers were intertwined - almost hidden, except from Draco's angle - and Blaise was stroking absent-minded circles against the back of her hand. Their fingers disentangled as Ted approached them, and Lovegood fell into his warm hug with that familiar distracted smile of hers.

"Remember to stay away from unripe blueberries and mistletoe," she said as she pulled away. "You don't want to upset some nargles."

Draco arched an eyebrow, but resisted the urge to scoff at her comment.

"I'll do that," Ted replied with a fond smile, leaning forward to shake Blaise's hand. "Help Andromeda keep these lot in line while I'm gone."

"Of course," Blaise frowned. "Good luck, mate."

Draco straightened his spine when Ted turned to him next, nearing him with a serious expression that made Draco feel a little apprehensive and awkward.

"You look after my wife," Ted said in a hushed tone, so only they would hear. "Look after your Aunt, okay?"

Uncertain what to say, Draco slowly inhaled and simply nodded his head, and the small gesture seemed to be enough to appease his uncle. Shifting his weight with discomfort, he averted his eyes as Ted finally moved over to Theo, and Draco cocked his head so he could discreetly catch the hushed words of their conversation.

"...your temper, count to ten," Ted advised. "And just try to think before you speak-

"Yes, yes," Theo grumbled dismissively, and Draco didn't have to see him to know he was rolling his eyes. "Hug a Hufflepuff and all that bollocks-

"You are a good lad, Theo," Ted cut him off. "I can see that, 'Dromeda can see that, and all them here can see that. You need to have more faith in yourself."

"Whatever," Theo mumbled after a sigh and Draco glanced at them to find them shaking hands. "Just come back alive, alright?"

"Sure," Ted agreed casually. Too casually. And he gave Theo firm pat on the shoulder before he headed back towards Andromeda, pausing midway and scrutinising the silent inhabitants of the room with critical eyes. "Well, you lot look bloody miserable. You know, I'll be back before you even notice I've gone."

Nobody said a word for some slow and stretched seconds, and for some reason, Draco found himself staring at Blaise and Lovegood's rejoined hands. Just when the silence began to ring in their ears, Andromeda reached forward to tug on her husband's arm, and all the persistent optimism on his face drained away.

"Come on, love," she bade, her voice trembling slightly. "You have to go, and I would like to say my goodbyes."

"It's alright," Blaise spoke up. "We'll leave you-

"No, it's fine," Ted stopped him, taking Andromeda's elbow. "We'll go outside." He hesitated, and flashed the sullen Slytherin a final cheerful smile. "I'll see you all soon."

The moment the couple had left the room, there was a collective whisper of released breaths, and the prior silence was shattered as everything started to move again. Tracy was sniffing a little and doing a shoddy job at hiding it, and Miles led her out of the room, closely followed by Millicent. A moment later, Draco flinched when Theo abruptly pounded his fist into the wall and stormed out the door, spitting out a list of profanities as he went.

"Theo!" Blaise called after him, but all that responded was a few thuds of inanimate objects being hurled to the floor, and Blaise growled as he turned to Luna. "I'm going to make sure he doesn't do something stupid."

And then it was just Draco and Lovegood.

He focussed on his shoes and chewed his tongue, waiting for her to leave her seat and go after them, but she barely moved.

"You didn't shake his hand," Luna remarked in her usual dreamy tone.

"I barely knew the man."

"But you would have liked to," she said, and her blunt comment threw him for a moment.

He shot her a cold look. "What are you getting at, Lovegood?"

"Nothing. It was just an observation," she shrugged, and the distant snap of Apparition punctuated her words. "That will be Ted leaving."

"No shit-

"Maybe you should go and see if Andromeda needs anything-

"And what the fuck could I possibly offer her?" he spat defensively.

"Sometimes, another presence is all someone needs," Luna mumbled as she walked past him. "Even if it is a reluctant one."

Finally alone, Draco found himself waiting for, his aunt to return from outside, tapping his foot impatiently against the floorboards and contemplating whether he should bother at all. After five minutes of staring at the door, his curiosity, and perhaps something else, got the better of him, and he huffed out an agitated breath as he decided to see exactly what was keeping Andromeda.

He found her sitting on the stone steps at the front of the house; the steps he had routinely rested upon when everyone had retired to bed, and he had masochistically lost his mind to thoughts and memories of Granger. He could tell from the slight trembling of her shoulders and her bowed head that she was crying, and something that almost felt like empathy caught him completely off guard.

"What do you want, Draco?" she asked suddenly.

He licked his teeth and wondered what he had actually planned to accomplish from this, but his shoulders slumped in defeat, and the truth found him before he could reject it.

"I wanted to tell you that...perhaps you were right," he muttered, almost half-hoping she wouldn't hear him. "Perhaps you and I are not so different."

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Hermione was reading the copy of *The Tales of Beedle the Bard* that Dumbledore had left her in his will.

The story of the three brothers and their deal with death had become a favourite of hers, and melancholic legends and the white glow of her Lumos were good company at midnight while Harry and Ron slept. It was her turn to keep watch tonight, which suited her just fine. She

had almost become paranoid that she would mumble Draco's name in her sleep when the nightmares ensnared her subconscious. She was also doing her best to avoid spending too much time alone with Ron, always making sure Harry was nearby or making excuses when he tried to initiate something that could lead to something beyond the realms of friendship.

Adapting to this new set of changes had been more difficult than she'd anticipated, despite the familiar company of Harry and Ron. Conversation had been a little awkward on her part, as she would over think everything she said, careful not to mention something that could somehow contain any hints of her time with Draco. For the most part, she had simply listened to the boys as they'd explained what had happened in her absence.

They had told her about their short stay at Grimmauld Place, and how they had established that R.A.B. had been Regulus Black's initials. They had described how a short interrogation with Kreacher had led them to Mundungus Fletcher, an original member of the Order who had turned to petty theft. A quick trip to Diagon Alley, and they had recovered the Horcrux, but they had struggled to find a method to destroy it, and the negative energy had caused some severe friction between her two best friends, although they had seemed hesitant to tell her what they had argued about.

They had decided to leave Grimmauld Place and had flitted between various locations when it became clear that Voldemort would eventually overthrow the Ministry. They had camped in woodland areas on the outskirts of the cities, occasionally returning to Grimmauld Place to search for any clues about a method to destroy the Locket. They'd been camping in Epping Forest when they'd discovered The Sword of Gryffindor, and her brow furrowed when she realised they'd never explained-

A twig snapped behind her, and she dropped the book and whipped around, her wand trained on her harmless target.

"Whoa," Harry whispered, holding up his hands. "It's just me, Hermione-

"Bloody hell, Harry, you made me jump," she breathed, lowering her wand as he came to sit beside her on the grass. "Everything okay?"

"It's fine. I just couldn't sleep. Thought I'd keep you company."

"Yes, of course," she nodded. "Actually, I was just thinking about something. You never said how you came across Gryffindor's Sword. How did you-

"My mother," Harry blurted, and Hermione watched an odd expression steal his face. "I know it sounds crazy, but just hear me out on this; a Patronus led me to it. And the Patronus was a doe. My mother's Patronus."

Hermione felt her heart sink as she recalled the night she had left Hogwarts; remembering the moment when she and McGonagall had been warned about the Ministry's fall by Snape's Patronus. A doe Patronus. A part of her contemplated if she should tell Harry about the secrets of their old Professor. After all, McGonagall had made it very clear that the information was not to be repeated, but it seemed too cruel to allow her best friend to clutch to some deluded belief that his mother was contacting him from the other side.

"Harry," she started with a grimace. "That wasn't your mother's Patronus-

"Look, I know how it sounds-

"No, Harry, just-

"But who else would have a doe Patronus who would lead me to-

"It was Snape," she rushed out, and Harry's eyes widened behind his glasses. "I know it sounds bizarre, but when I was in Hogwarts, McGonagall told me that he's a spy for the Order-

"But he killed-

"I know," she sighed. "But it wasn't that simple. Dumbledore asked Snape to carry out the task so that..." she caught the emotion building in her voice as she prepared to say his name. "So that Draco's soul would be saved. I think there's more to it, but I know that Dumbledore asked Snape to kill him. Snape's been on our side all along."

Harry's expression flickered between shock and disbelief. "No," he mumbled, shaking his head. "That's impossible-

"Harry, I saw his Patronus," she carried on. "He sent it to warn us that the Death Eater's were coming to Hogwarts, and it was a doe-

"But that doesn't make any sense!" Harry exclaimed, scrambling to his feet. "Why the hell would Snape have the same Patronus as my mother?"

"I don't know," Hermione confessed wearily. "Perhaps it's just a coincidence-

"I need to get my head around this," he muttered to himself, turning away from her. "I need to think-

"Harry, I'm sorry-

"I just need some time alone," he said, taking a few steps in the opposite direction. "Just give me a moment, and then I need you tell me everything."

Hermione felt the guilt swallow her chest.

Not everything. Not about Draco. Not yet.

"Okay," she agreed. "Just don't go beyond the Wards, Harry."

The darkness sucked him in like hungry tar, and she was alone again, wondering what chaotic thoughts were stampeding through her friend's head right now. Merlin knew she had hardly taken the revelation about Snape's covert activities well all those months ago, and she began thinking of what she should say when he came to her for more details.

She dropped her troubled gaze and it landed on The Tales of Beedle the Bard, the wind flicking its pages like ghostly wind died down, and she concentrated on the small symbol scrawled on the displayed page; the triangle, the circle and the line. She'd noticed the odd mark a few times and never paid it much heed, but something had just...clicked. With a gasp leaving her lungs, she delved into her bag and rummaged for a book she'd read at Hogwarts.

And the words 'Deathly' and 'Hallows' were on the tip of her tongue.

Chapter End Notes

Right, I need to make a HUGE APOLOGY for the lateness of this chapter. I know it's been forever, and I really am sorry. I had exams and presentations and stuff... This chapter was actually meant to be a little longer but then my computer died about two hours ago and ugh it's a piece of shit. Anyway, Uni is over now, so hopefully I shall be back to my regular updates! I should also apologise because it's currently 9am and I haven't been to bed, so there are probably a few errors in here. If you see any, let me know and I shall fix them when I feel a little more alive...

I also want to just quickly talk about something, if I may. A few weeks ago, my story was stolen and posted on a different website by someone with the penname bl33diinxh3artz (just typing that makes me cringe...and yes, I am naming and shaming). If you're reading this bl33...No, I can't type it again...Anyway, if you're reading this, I just want to let you know you're a disgrace to the fandom and you should be very ashamed of yourself, because I know you've stolen graphics too. Idiot. Thanks to everyone who helped me with that issue by reporting it etc. You guys are so lovely it hurts.

Anyway, I just need to say a huge thanks to everyone who has reviewed, and also to the guys and girls on facebook and tumblr for being so lovely. I mean really, some of you are friends for life. Oh also, Ashamed Kawaii has translated this fic into Spanish! Link is on profile page! This a/n is like a bloody book...I hope you like the chapter. Read and Review!

Bex-chan.

Weeks

Chapter Notes

Hello guys! Song suggestions for this chapter are After the Storm by Mumford and Sons and The Funeral by Band of Horses. Let me know if they go well with the chapter!

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

Hermione flicked aside another page with a huff of irritation.

After some intense reading about the Deathly Hallows and a futile hunt for any documented hints about the whereabouts of the Elder Wand, she had returned to her obsessive research on the Horcruxes. After a few weeks, with nothing accomplished but bags under her eyes and chewed fingernails, she could feel the inevitable tension sneaking up on Harry, Ron and herself.

It was only natural, she knew. While they would always be the closest of friends, spending every second of every day with only metres for personal space and drowning in all this angst and apprehension was taxing, to say the least.

It didn't help that they were all trying to deal with their individual troubles.

Harry was constantly uneasy, blaming himself for every death and swinging between moods of melancholy and madness, while Ron constantly fretted about his family and struggled to realise his significance in their little group, leaving him frustrated and testy. She knew she was hardly helping his insecurities with her rejection of anything that could lean towards something beyond friendship, but the thought of anyone other than Draco murmuring against her lips made her feel queasy and unfaithful.

And therein lied her own problems; guilt and heartache.

Hermione scorned herself for lying to Harry and Ron, but she went to bed each night begging nameless gods that she wouldn't call out Draco's name in her sleep so she could keep the secret just that little bit longer.

But she could feel the confession eagerly waiting on the tip of her tongue.

Lying to them was simply too hard on her conscience.

"Hermione," Ron's voice stole her, and she met his eyes over her shoulder. "Do you want some food?"

"No, thank you," she said, knowing Harry was resting in the tent. "I think I may be onto something, so I ought to keep reading."

The inevitable disappointment marred his boyish features. "You could come and sit with me for a little while?"

"I'll come back up in a moment," she offered. "I won't be long."

"Okay," he sighed with a nod, pivoting on his feet to walk the short distance back to the tent, his shoulders hunched with defeat.

"Ron," she called, frowning when he didn't turn back to acknowledge her. "Happy Birthday."

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A week later.

Draco had forgotten what it felt like to have sunrays kiss his face.

February had come and gone, and March had brought some Spring heat to warm the breeze. He was in his usual spot, sat on the stone steps and trying to ignore the irritating voices of Bletchley and Davis, who were having an unnecessarily loud lovers' tiff inside the house. He absently realised he'd been here just over a month now, residing in Andromeda's safe-house with the defected Slytherins. A month without Granger.

A fucking month.

The notion that time heals all wounds does not apply to the scars of young lovers separated too soon. Draco still felt as damaged as the day Granger had cried in the rain and sent him here.

He drifted between moments of blistering anger to a damning numbness that made his bones vibrate beneath his skin. He had tried to distance himself from the others, preferring to linger on the outside and only involve himself with their discussions when he decided the solitude was getting to him, but he seemed to find himself interacting with them more and more as the weeks rolled by.

Since Ted's departure, Andromeda's sleeping pattern had deteriorated and hidden itself under the floorboards, much like his, and sometimes they would find each other in the kitchen during the lonely hours before dawn. They would sip lukewarm coffee and pass the nights with only a handful of sentences between them, and although neither of them would ever admit it, their odd routine became something of comfort.

And it wasn't just his aunt's company that helped to keep him sane.

Draco and Theo had taken to playing Wizard's Chess in the afternoons, and Blaise would often join them when Lovegood was elsewhere, like she had been for the last seven days. As if to punctuate that thought, Blaise burst through the door so violently that it slammed against the wall and shuddered on its hinges.

He surged straight past Draco without acknowledgement, his strides heavy and harsh, and his wand clenched firmly in his trembling fist. Draco remained silent as Blaise came to an abrupt stop a few metres away and raised his arm to hurl a non-verbal curse at one of Andromeda's apple trees. It exploded with a shrill bang, and cinderling splinters rained down with red and orange sparks.

"Feel better?" Draco questioned.

"No," Blaise spat, slowly turning around. "I just felt like killing something innocent."

Unable to think of a response, Draco simply studied his old friend; from the shadow of week-old stubble glittering on his jaw, to the broken skin of his chapped lips, and to his swollen and bloodshot eyes.

Insomnia is never a secret. It carves itself into your appearance.

Seeing Blaise so affected by Lovegood's absence made Draco feel uncomfortable, for Blaise had always been the rational one, while Theo had a volatile nature that often led to outbursts, and Draco decided he was somewhere in between the two.

"Those two are doing my fucking head in," said Blaise, his voice hoarse as he started to pace back and forth. "Screaming at each other like a pair of ten-year-olds over something they can't even remember-

"They'll calm down in a bit-

"And Theo is pissing me off-

"Zabini, just take a seat. You're giving me motion sickness-

"It's been seven fucking days, Malfoy!" he blurted. "Seven! She's usually gone for three, maybe four at the most. Something happened-

"Blaise, just relax-

"Don't tell me to bloody relax, Malfoy!" he spat. "You don't know-

"I don't know what?" Draco cut him off, narrowing his eyes. "You think seven days is bad? Trying a fucking month."

Blaise hesitated. "You mean Granger?" he asked with a cynical tone. "It's different-

"No, it's not-

"You finally admit you love her then?" he challenged.

Draco broke their eye contact and stared at the smoking remains of the apple tree. "Ask me again when something good happens." He closed his eyes. "Ask me on a day when nobody dies."

Luna came back that evening and told them to turn on the radio, rambling about something called 'Potterwatch.'

Blaise shaved.

Draco wore the coat Granger had given him and destroyed two apple trees.

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Another week later.

In her dream, people were screaming, and she could neither move nor blink.

Draco, Harry and Ron were calling her name somewhere behind her, but she couldn't turn her head to find them, and the blood of the fallen was crawling her legs like a morbidly beautiful parasite. She willed her dream-doppelganger to twist or budge but it was futile, so she stopped fighting and just listened to the voices.

"Do you think Hermione's been acting a little odd recently?"

It was Ron's voice, and it sounded clear and close. She concentrated on it, and the howls of the dying started to weaken, and the dream began to fade.

"What do you mean?"

Harry's voice. She managed to blink, and her surroundings morphed into the familiar inside of their tent. Sucking the air through her teeth and shaking off the disturbing remains of her nightmare, she scanned the space for her two best friends and found their shadows near the entrance, flickering across the fabric. They were outside the tent, and she could hear the staccato crackling of a fire as she tried to catch their mumbled conversation.

"She's just...", Ron sighed. "She's been really quiet, and she's always reading one of those books-

She heard Harry scoff. "That sounds like classic Hermione to me-

"She won't let me touch her," Ron rushed out, and Hermione frowned into her pillow. "And I don't mean like...you know, like that. She won't let me hug her or anything, and it's like she

doesn't want to be alone with me."

"Maybe she's just trying to focus on finding the Horcruxes," Harry offered. "You know what she's like when she sets her mind on something."

"No, it's something else," Ron argued. "Do you think she might still be mad about the Lavender thing? I mean, I know I screwed up with that, but I thought after what happened at Bill and Fleur's wedding-

"Please don't give me any specifics-

"That we would be alright now," he continued quickly. "That we would be together and stuff, like boyfriend and girlfriend or something."

Hermione grimaced and closed her eyes, Ron's words eating away at her conscience.

"Maybe she's just upset about something, like the whole thing with her parents," she heard Harry suggest with obvious uncertainty. "You could always ask her?"

"I'd say something stupid to make it worse. You could ask her for me, though?"

"Ron, I'm not sure that's a good idea, and I don't really want to get involved-

"But she'll probably talk to you about it," Ron pushed. "Even if I tried to talk to her, she would just make some excuse and leave. I told you, she won't be alone with me-

"And what makes you think she would talk to me about it?"

"Because you two are close with things like that. You said yourself that you're like brother and sister-

"Yes, but-

"Please, mate," said Ron, and Hermione's heart sank at the desperation in his voice. She hated that she was the cause of it. "Just give it a go, and then maybe I could-

"Just give it a little more time," Harry mumbled so quietly that she barely heard it. "She might still be a little upset that we left her behind-

"No, it's something else-

"Just give her a bit longer, Ron," said Harry, his words firm this time. "Everyone is going to be acting differently right now because everything is different. Hermione probably had a few things going on at Hogwarts that she's thinking about, like the whole thing with Snape. There's probably other stuff too-

"Yeah, like maybe she doesn't see me that way anymore," Ron mumbled, so quietly Hermione barely heard him. "Maybe she started to like someone else."

She inhaled a sharp breath and locked it in her lungs, keeping as still as possible when the voices of her two friends paused. Her pulse sped up a little, and she wondered if she had indeed whispered something indicative in the rare hours that granted her sleep.

"Ron-

"Is that so hard to believe, Harry?" he went on. "We weren't with her for months. She could have easily fallen for someone else, like Justin or Michael or...Merlin, it could be anyone-

"You don't know that-

"But it could have happened. And...you know, of course I'd be gutted and everything, but I'd rather she told me-

"You're jumping to conclusions," Harry interrupted tiredly. "I think you should just leave her for a little while-

"But if nothing changes, you'll talk to her for me?"

"Yes, alright," Harry groaned. "But I think you're getting worked up over nothing."

"Cheers, mate," said Ron, and she knew he would be forcing a tight grin. "Hey, pass me the radio. I want to see if that 'Potterwatch' thing is...

Hermione felt the guilt nibbling at her heart again, and she blanked out their voices as a lone tear skimmed down her cheek and stained her pillow. She tucked her chin against her chest, and the comforting ghost of Draco's scent, still barely trapped in his t-shirt, fell against her tongue. It really hit her at that moment; just how much her secret was pushing pressure into the cracks of her relationship with her best friends.

She knew then that she would have to tell Harry and Ron.

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Another week...

In a rare incident of reluctant rapport, Andromeda, Luna and the defected Slytherins (minus Tracy and Miles, who had yet to emerge from bed) somehow ended up meeting for breakfast in the kitchen that morning. Draco scowled at the back of his aunt's head when their elbows clashed, causing him to pour a little too much milk into his tea, but she was too busy trying to prepare food with rushed spells and a clumsy wand arm to notice. Rolling his eyes and

deciding that starting from scratch would be pointless, he joined Millicent, Theo, Luna and Blaise at the table and stared at the steam rising from his mug.

"You make it the Muggle way," Luna remarked, dragging him from a daydream before it had even started.

"What?"

"Your tea," she said. "You always make it the Muggle way."

"I noticed that," Theo chimed in. "Your food too, now I think about-

"So?" Draco shrugged. "What's your point?"

"You're a spoilt prat who is used to taking the easiest option," said Blaise curtly. "You would normally use magic-

"I didn't have my wand when I was staying in Hogwarts-

"But you have it now-

"I've just gotten into the habit of doing it myself," Draco shot his friend an impatient glare. "Merlin, you lot are fucking nosey-

"Is the new way better than the old way?" Luna asked suddenly.

His attention shifted to her; his eyes wary and calculating. After fractured weeks in the eccentric presence of Lovegood, he had learned that she wasn't the dim-witted girl he had always expected she would be. On the contrary, he was convinced that everything she said had a hidden meaning or a riddle attached to it, which irritated him to no end, and he was just about to tell her to mind her own business when the radio in the centre of the table screeched.

Since Lovegood had introduced them to the pirate programme, the radio had remained in the kitchen, and he had half-listened to two broadcasts, which had featured 'River,' 'Romulus' and 'Royal' attempting to calm the public and encourage them to assist Muggles. He watched Lovegood tap her wand against it and mumble the appropriate password - Padfoot this time - and as the sullen voice of 'River' floated into the kitchen, Draco felt his gut twist with anxiety.

Listeners, we don't have much time...

Draco did a quick scan of the room and knew they all felt it too; a foreboding knot of apprehension in their chests. Andromeda had paused her ministrations and was nervously wringing her hands, her eyes fixated on the radio. The others were all so still and rigid that it looked like their bones might shatter beneath their flesh, particularly Theo, who seemed to be holding his breath.

It is with great regret that we inform you that we have learned of several deaths that have not been reported by the Wizarding Wireless Network News...

In his peripheral vision, Draco saw Lovegood grasp Blaise's hand so tight, her nails sliced into his knuckles.

Fuck, he missed Granger.

We can confirm that the following people have been murdered...

Everything got a little blurry for Draco at that point.

Annabelle Snowbloom...

Samantha Jones...

Lewis Gibson...

He didn't recognise those names.

Ted Tonks...

He heard his aunt take in a shuddering breath, and that's when everything began to fall apart. He couldn't tear his eyes from the radio, but he heard the drumming of stumbling footfalls and an unnatural strangled sound as Andromeda ran for the back door with sobs clogging her throat. Theo was up on his shaky legs a second afterwards, staggering out of the room and knocking over glasses and ornaments as he went.

Draco kept listening.

Dirk Cresswell...

"Fuck," Blaise swore behind his teeth. "I should-

"No," Draco heard Lovegood say. "You go and check on Theo. Millicent and I will go to 'Dromeda."

There was another rumble of rushing footsteps and chairs clattering to the floor. A door opened and the broken cries of Andromeda harassed Draco's ears before the door slammed shut and cut them off.

"Draco," Blaise called. "Come on, I might need a hand with Theo."

Blaise's voice barely registered.

A Goblin by the name of Gornuk...

"Draco, come on!"

"Just give me a minute," he hissed quietly.

Matthew Greenweed...

There was a heavy thud from upstairs and the piercing crash of exploding glass.

Blaise growled from the door. "DRACO, WILL YOU JUST-

"I SAID JUST GIVE ME A FUCKING MINUTE," he roared.

"What the hell-

"I NEED TO-" his voice broke for a moment. "I JUST NEED TO MAKE SURE THAT GRANGER ISN'T ON THAT FUCKING LIST, OKAY?"

That must've been good enough because he heard Blaise sprinting up the stairs, followed by muffled yells and heavy thuds that made the ceiling lights judder.

Timothy Stephenson...

Grace Hartwood...

He was panting, and his heartbeat was pounding against his eardrums.

And Dominic McGrath. We have to go off the air now, but as we do, we ask you to take a moment's silence, in memory of those who have fallen. Keep safe and keep faith.

Draco let go of a moaning breath and dropped his head with relief. He stole some selfish seconds to let all the trepidation ooze out of his pores, but a choked scream from upstairs snapped him out of his alleviating trance, and with uncooperative limbs, he stood up and went in search of Blaise and Theo. He followed the sounds of scuffling and disconcerting whines that sounded too raw to be human to Theo's room, and he found carnage.

A section of Theo's desk was charred and smoking, the window had been smashed through with what Draco guessed was a chair, and there was blood smeared across the spider-web cracks of the destroyed mirror. His eyes trailed the path of blood down the wall and across the floorboards until they landed on Blaise and Theo.

They were struggling on the floor; Blaise desperately trying to keep a hold of Theo's hands and distribute his weight to gain some balance. Draco realised then that there was a wand a couple of feet away, and Theo was trying to drag himself over to it, hooking his nails into the splinters of the floor. There were shards of mirror-glass embedded in Theo's skin, glinting in the morning sun, and Draco cringed when one of Theo's fingernails split and ripped away from his cuticle, and he let out a pathetic whimper. He didn't stop reaching for his wand though.

"Draco, bloody help me!" Blaise demanded. "Grab his arms!"

He blinked to clear his head before he did as instructed, grasping Theo's elbows and giving them a firm tug so they were behind his back. Draco noticed the sweat gathering between Theo's shoulder-blades and dribbling down his temple as Blaise altered his stance and helped to keep Theo's arms locked in place.

"GET THE FUCK OFF ME!" he screamed. "BLAISE, I SWEAR I WILL CRUCIO YOU WHEN I GET FREE-

"Where is your wand?" Blaise asked Draco.

"Downstairs."

"Shit, mine too-

"I AM WARNING YOU, BLAISE!" Theo threatened furiously. "LET ME GO!"

"Theo, breathe," said Blaise steadily. "Come on, mate-

"FUCK YOU-

"Easy, Theo," Blaise tried. "Just breathe in, and then out. Come on. Just try it."

Draco heard him swallow a huge gulp of air, and Theo was shaking so violently, that his limbs contorted in disturbing shapes and angles. Then he started to retch and gag, and Draco hesitantly patted Theo's back as he heaved up his stomach contents, and the acidic stench of bile invaded the room.

"Easy, mate," Blaise mumbled quietly. "There you go."

"Fu-fuck them," Theo choked between heaves. "I-I hate them."

"It will be alright," Blaise soothed. "It will be alright."

But Draco didn't believe him.

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Not a week. Just the hours of daylight.

Hermione flicked her wand to awaken the dying fire. It was her turn to keep watch tonight, and she had ventured a good distance away from their camp to escape the repetitive drone of Ron's snoring, mindful to stay within the Wards. She tilted her head and looked back up to the cloudless sky; a deep blue canvas speckled with blinking stars, and she decided it was all too calm. Too beautiful.

They'd listened to the 'Potterwatch' broadcast earlier and Hermione's heart had sank for Tonks. If her calculations were correct, Tonks was only a few days away from her due-date, and she couldn't begin to comprehend how her friend would be feeling under the circumstances. And Annabelle Snowbloom...

Yes, she'd only met the woman for a fleeting moment in time, but sometimes the briefest of encounters can leave the boldest of imprints on your memory.

Hermione simply found it all so bizarre that there were wizards and witches being slaughtered amongst the flames of war, and here she was; studying constellations with a book in her lap and only the snapping sounds of embers to disturb the peace.

For the hundredth time, she caught herself staring at the fourteen stars that outlined the constellation in the shape of a dragon, and she closed her eyes to savour a daydream of Draco sighing against her neck.

Her eyes snapped open and she straightened her spine when a second set of breaths accompanied hers.

Her conscience was itching again.

"You should be resting, Harry," she mumbled guiltily as he neared her. "You kept watch last night, so you must be tired."

"I can't sleep," he replied, dropping to the ground to sit beside her. "I thought I'd come keep you company, and I wanted to talk to you-

"Are you going to ask me why I've been avoiding Ron?" she questioned before she lost her nerve, and she frowned when Harry's eyebrows lifted with bewilderment. "I heard you two talking about it several nights ago-

"Hermione, we didn't mean anything by it-

"I know, I know," she hushed him. "I'm not upset or anything. I mean, Ron was right, I have been acting...differently around him, and you are entitled to explanation, but I just...I am uncertain how to explain this."

"You know you can tell me anything," said Harry softly. "It's okay-

"I'm not sure if I...", she trailed off, but she shook her head firmly. "No. No, I need to tell you-

"Hermione-

"Ron was right," she rushed out. "I, um...I don't feel anything romantic towards him like I used to, and there is...someone else."

Harry tilted his head, and she could see a flicker of disappointment behind his glasses. "We thought that might be the case," he confessed. "Well...that's okay-

"It's not that part I'm worried about," she moaned, and she had to avert her eyes. The dance of the flames captivated her for a moment. "I just...I need to figure out how to tell you this."

"Hermione-

"Right," she said with conviction. Hell, she had started now. "Remember what I told you about Snape? Well, he came back to Hogwarts to ask McGonagall a favour...And I was there, and, um...the favour was to hide..." she hesitated before she said his name. "...Draco from You-Know-Who, because he failed his mission and-

"Malfoy?" Harry asked in a stunned tone. "Malfoy was at Hogwarts? We thought he was dead."

"No," she whispered. "He's very much alive. Anyway, McGonagall asked me to...keep an eye on him, I guess, and he was staying in my dorm, and we lived together for a few months-

"I don't understand," Harry interrupted, looking completely lost. "What does Malfoy have to do with this?"

"Everything," Hermione blurted, and she met her best friend's confused stare because she had to. Her heart went wild in ribcage. This was it. "Harry, it's him...it's Draco."

She felt her chest constrict when her best friend physically recoiled at her words.

"What...what are you-

"Now just...just listen to me," she stuttered. "When he was living in my dorm, I got to know him and we just...I developed feelings for him and it just sort of happened-

"You're actually serious," he murmured incredulously, getting to his feet and backing away from her. "Hermione, are you-

"He's not what you think he is," she rambled desperately, following him as he moved away.

"He's not, I swear-

"He's a bloody Death Eater!" Harry exclaimed. "How could you even think that-

"He's not really one of them!" she argued quickly. "You know he's not! You said yourself that he wouldn't have actually killed Dumbledore-

"And that excuses everything else?"

"No, of course not!" she tried, and she felt the tears begin to burn. "But he's not like that now! Harry, I swear, if you could just speak to him, you would see-

"I would see the same evil prat who did everything he could to make our lives hell!"

"No, no you wouldn't," she disputed adamantly. "He's different now. Think about Regulus, Harry! And Snape! It's not always so black and white. People can change. People do change-

"Not him!"

"Harry, just listen-

"You betrayed us!"

"He's not one on their side-

"He's not on our side though-

"Harry, please trust my judgement on this," she implored, grabbing his arm and forcing him to face her. "You are...you are best friend, practically my brother and I need you to try and understand."

A pained expression crossed his features. "Hermione, I don't think I can-

"Harry, you know me," she continued. "If I...if I thought there was any way that he would still be associated with the Death Eaters, then I wouldn't-

"I just can't-

"I'm sorry for lying to you," she said sincerely. "I really am-

"But not for getting involved with him?"

"I...no," she stammered. "No, I don't regret what happened-

"Do you love him?" asked Harry suddenly.

"What?"

"Do you love him?"

Hermione swallowed back the lump in her throat. "Yes, I do."

He grimaced and pulled away from her, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands. She could see the conflict etched in every muscle of his face as he began to pace for some lingering minutes, glancing back at her and shaking his head. She wanted to continue defending Draco, but she doubted it would help the matter, and as the silence stretched out between them, she could see the horror slowly leaving Harry, until he released a heavy breath and paused his steps.

"I'm not going to pretend I understand," he said finally. "I don't think I ever could-

"Harry-

"But you are my best friend," he carried on, looking completely defeated. "I love you like a sister, Hermione, and I...I'm thinking about the people who were killed today and...You know, the likelihood that we will all survive this War is not looking brilliant-

"You don't know that. We can win this-

"But we might not," he stopped her. "And I would never want you and I to end on bad terms after everything we have been through. You have stood by me through all the...insane decisions I have made with no questions asked, and perhaps I can...return that favour...I think."

"Harry-

"I'm not saying I'm happy about it," he told her. "Far from it. I think you are...completely wrong about Malfoy, and I don't think that opinion will ever change, but it's not like he's here and I have to see it, so I will...tolerate it, I guess."

"Okay," Hermione accepted his response with a weary frown. "Well...thank you. Now, I just need to figure out how to tell Ron-

"You can't tell him," Harry interjected swiftly. "No way-

"What do you mean?" she asked. "He needs to know. I feel like I'm leading him on, and it's cruel-

"Hermione, it would devastate him if he knew about Malfoy," he reasoned. "And he's got enough to think about. Didn't you see him today when they were announcing who had been murdered? All his family are involved in this War-

"I can't keep lying to him, Harry-

"He loves you, you know," he stated as though it was obvious. "He hasn't said it, but I can tell he does-

"Harry," she groaned. "That's all the more reason-

"You can't tell him," he said firmly, brushing past her. "I'm going to bed. Tomorrow we act like this conversation never happened, okay?"

Hermione sighed, looking back at the withering fire as she numbly nodded her head with assent. She could hear Harry's footsteps getting distant as he returned to the tent, and she was alone again. Retaking her seat on the ground, her eyes went back to the sky and sought out the constellation that stirred memories, and it was as if nothing had changed.

The lies and secrets remained, and her conscience felt just as bruised as before.

Chapter End Notes

Okie doke. Sorry about the wait, guys! I just want to say a huge thanks to the girls who have offered to translate this fic into Chinese, Spanish, Italian and Russian! I mean...wow...thank you so much. There's a link on my profile for the Spanish translation, and I'll out links for the others soon! Also had some new fanart! Links are in my profile!

Ummm okay...here's the hard part. So, the final Harry Potter film is just a few days away and I think we're all going to be a little...heartbroken to say the least. I mean, did anyone see the premier with Emma and JK crying? I was bawling...I guess what I'm trying to say is good luck, and I think we're lucky to have such a beautiful fandom,

which consists of people who are so supportive with each other, so I shall my raise my glass of wine to all the potterheads.

I hope the chapter was okay...ummm...yeah...let me know! Read and Review and all that jazz! Thanks for your amazing responses so far!

Bex-chan.

Taboo

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Song suggestion for this chapter are Dance on our Graves by Paper Route and I go to Sleep by Sia. Let me know if they work!

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

Hermione blinked away the blurry fog of sleep and tried to focus. She felt it before she saw it, something in her hand that didn't belong, and her brow wrinkled with a puzzled frown when she noticed the extra set of fingers tangled with hers. The light in the tent was faint - a small teal flame withering in a lantern in the corner - but she instantly knew whose hand was holding hers, and she followed the arm up to Ron's sleeping face.

She snatched back her hand so quickly, her elbow collided with her hip. The temptation to shake Ron awake and lecture him about the decency of keeping his hands to himself came to mind, but the thought passed and she was suddenly very alert and fidgety. She abandoned the idea of trying to fall back to sleep and eased herself out of her camping cot, tip-toeing out of the tent and deciding to find Harry, who she knew was on watch tonight.

She spotted him several metres from their camp, leaning against the crumbling trunk of a lifeless oak tree, and when the moon glinted in his glasses, she knew he'd seen her. He'd been determinedly avoiding her since her confession about Draco and she thought he might stand and leave, but his shoulders sagged and he huffed out a breath that turned to cold mist as she neared him. There were things that needed to be said; a cracked friendship that needed to be mended.

"Hi," she offered meekly, sinking to the ground opposite him.

"Hi," he echoed, and the awkwardness between them made her cringe. "Hermione-

"I want to ask you-

"I have some questions too," he interrupted, looking almost nervous. "I, um, I want to apologise first for being distant with you for the last week. "

Relief warmed her. "It's okay."

"I just...it was just a big shock...well, it's still a big shock, and I-

"I know," she nodded. "I understand-

"Well, that's my problem," said Harry. "I have been thinking about it, and I still don't understand, and I think I need you...yes, I need you to explain it to me."

"You want me to tell you what happened? Between Draco and I?"

"I want to hear your reasoning," he muttered. "You're the smartest person I know, so maybe if you explain, it might make some sense to me."

She chewed her lip. "I...I'm not sure how to-

"How long?" he prompted. "How long have you...had feelings for him?"

She cast her memory back to the first kiss she had shared with Draco; that odd day with the bee sting when he had saved her life, and she had touched his face so unabashedly, and then it had happened. That had been the catalyst that had sucked her into Draco's life. That insane moment of impulse had changed everything.

"November," she mumbled distantly, remembering the winds. "It started in November."

"Okay," he said. "And how?"

She went back in time again, thinking of all the little events that had built up to that fateful moment; from their lingering stares, to late nights on the sofas with hot chocolate. From him reading her Muggle books, to her cooking him meals. From him panicking when she didn't return, to her stabbing their hands and mixing their blood. From every prolonged glance to every inquisitive touch.

From tolerance, to curiosity, to lust, and then love.

Life is nothing more than a series of flimsy incidents that build up to something beautiful or tragic. Sometimes both.

"You know, it's true what they say," she whispered before she even realised the words had left her. "You never really know someone until you live with them. In a way, we were both lost and out of our comfort zones. I didn't have you and Ron, and he didn't have his friends or family...we didn't really have anything, and when all that was stripped away, there was nothing to hide behind."

"But-

"And we both just...crumbled in front of each other," she went on. "You-Know-Who wanted him dead and he was completely overwhelmed by his circumstances, and after I Obliviated my parents, I was so...devastated. But it made us...human, I think. We were...we were real because we were broken."

Harry's brow furrowed. "I don't understand."

"I mean it was just...us," she tried to explain. "Our personalities, our...souls, I guess. Just emotions and instincts, and we just...matched. Connected, almost."

"Because you were both alone?"

"No," she shook her head. "No, there were other people I could have found company with if it had simply been loneliness. It was more than that."

She could see the uncertainty behind the glare of his spectacles. "So he just...stopped caring? About you being a Muggle-born?"

"Oh, Merlin no. It took a while for him to even be civil to me, but that's just how he was raised. Perhaps I'm being optimistic, but I think he'd been questioning his ideas about blood prejudices before anything happened between us. Maybe even before he let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts."

"What do you mean?"

"You saw him last year, Harry," she sighed. "How tormented he looked. Surely if he'd been that certain that everything he'd been taught about Muggles and Muggle-borns was right, he would have actually gone through with it."

"Hermione, he was still-

"He was never evil, Harry," she defended her absent lover hastily. "He just...made the wrong choices. I think the doubt was always there, and I simply...gave it a push in the right direction-

"But that doesn't-

"Why do you love Ginny, Harry?"

"I...what do you-

"I mean, it's not exactly convenient," she carried on. "She's your best friend's sister. Why do you love her?"

"I um...", he stuttered clumsily. "I don't know why...I just do."

Her lips twitched at the corners with a sad smile. "Exactly."

Harry seemed to consider her for a silent moment before he shook his head and pushed his glasses further up his nose, a habit she knew he did when he felt uneasy. He stared at the tips of his shoes and exhaled through his nostrils.

"What did you want to ask me, Hermione?"

She dropped her eyes, sensing that he was done with their conversation about her relationship with Draco, and she couldn't tell if his opinion had softened or not. From the agitated drumming of his fingernails against his kneecaps, she doubted it.

"I wanted to know what you told Ron."

"Nothing," he mumbled. "I knew if I said you liked someone else, he would want to know who and ask a lot of questions. I just told him I hadn't spoken to you because I didn't know

what to say."

She swallowed down an itch in her throat. "He was holding my hand when I woke up," she said. "Harry, I need to tell him-

"No."

"But it's not fair on him-

"Not yet, Hermione."

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His lids had begun to feel so heavy, like his lashes were made of lead.

Exhaustion had hit Draco hard in the last fortnight days, sinking deep into his muscles until they throbbed, and a permanent headache had settled right between his eyes. In the fistful of days following the news of Ted's death, all those little patterns and routines that had kept everything running had diminished. There had been no languid games of Wizard's Chess, no communal breakfasts, and no midnight meetings with Andromeda over cold cups of coffee. Everything had fallen into a dreary and disorganised bedlam, and nobody could quite muster the effort to give a shit.

Except perhaps Blaise.

Andromeda had been sleeping in Tracy's room, because she couldn't bring herself to return to the home she had shared with her husband and confront all the memories that would inevitably be scattered everywhere amongst the dust. She barely surfaced from Tracy's room, and Blaise had done his best to keep some sort of order in their safe-house, assigning various chores to the Slytherins and adopting Andromeda's role as the head of the home, although Draco wondered if Blaise might be doing it to distract himself from his lonely nights without Lovegood, who had been missing for almost a week now.

It was...difficult.

Draco couldn't recall a time when he'd been surrounded by people coping with death in such a delicate manner, and he had no idea how to act amongst his mourning companions. He hadn't known Ted well by any stretch, but evidently his affinal uncle had had a huge impact on the others' lives before he'd arrived; a pseudo-father to Theo and Millicent it seemed, and melancholy is contagious when it's trapped in a confined space.

As expected, Theo's reaction had been the most severe, and for the first two days he had done nothing but vomit, scream, and try to demolish anything in his sight. But, much like life and everything else, the anger and energy had slowly bled out of Theo, and for the last four days he had mirrored Andromeda's corpse-like appearance and sluggish movements.

The two of them did nothing more than existed, trapped in a catatonic-like trance of bereavement that resisted any sort of purpose.

Blaise had concealed Theo's wand somewhere, and had also decided that he was to be monitored, and they all took turns to stay in his room at night, although Draco had offered to take the later shifts several times. He slept less than everybody else, so it made sense.

But it was all catching up to him now, and he had actually retired to bed at a reasonable hour for a change, so he was more than irritated when a disturbing dream about Dark Marks and Granger's cries woke him too soon.

Jolting up in bed with a harsh intake of air, there was cold sweat in his eyes and shivers scraping down his spine as the echoes of Hermione's screams rang in his ears. He dropped his face into his clammy palms and tried to steady his breathing, and he shot the clock a scowl when he realised it was half three in the morning.

He was contemplating whether or not it was worth trying to fall back to sleep when he heard it; the faintest murmur of voices from downstairs.

He knew it was most likely nothing, probably Miles and Tracy getting a drink, but a dubious sensation tugged at his gut. Pulling a t-shirt over his head and smoothing it down his sweat-dampened chest, he grabbed his wand and carefully left his room with silent footsteps.

"Lumos," he whispered as he moved across the landing.

The voices grew louder, but he couldn't identify who they belonged to or distinguish what was being said, so he followed them down the stairs and along the corridor until he was standing outside the kitchen door.

There were two voices, both female. He recognised Andromeda's gentle tone, but he couldn't place the second voice. He extinguished the glow of his wand and pressed his ear against the door as curiosity got the better of him.

"...and everything. I would have come sooner but it's so dangerous sending owls now, and I wasn't sure if your Wards would let me Apparate here, and I didn't want to use one of the Portkeys when my due date is so close-

"It's okay," Draco heard his aunt mumble. "I know you've had a lot on-

"No, I should've been here with you-

"Nymphadora, it's okay," Andromeda interrupted, and Draco's face screwed up on the other side of the door when he recognised his cousin's name. The cousin he didn't know.

"No, it's not," she said, and there was bang of flesh against wood, he assumed her fist and the table. He could hear the strain in her voice, that low tone of a person trapped between grief and raw fury. "I'm sorry, Mum, I-

"Stop apologising, Nymphadora. It's really fine. It's just...it's good to see you, sweetheart. I'm glad you're here."

"You know," his cousin said after a moment. "Remus and I were talking, and we decided that we're going to name the baby after Dad if it's a boy." `

There was a hollow pause, and Draco remained as still as his muscles would allow.

"I think that's perfect," sighed Andromeda, her voice fragile with emotion. "Your Dad would've loved that. Really."

"Well, I guess we'll never know, will we?"

"You sound so angry-

"Of course I'm bloody angry!" she barked. "They killed my Dad! They're killing people everyday, and then there's that bloody Muggle-born Registration Commission! Have you seen the propaganda they're making about Muggle-borns?"

Draco felt his chest tighten.

Muggle-born Registration Commission. Muggle-born. Granger.

"Yes," his aunt replied. "I saw something about it in The Prophet and there were some leaflets delivered to the house. It's awful-

"It's disgusting," Tonks spat. "I can't believe some people are actually believing all that crap. You know, when Hermione was staying with me, I...

Draco didn't hear the rest of that sentence. All his blood rushed to his ears and momentarily deafened him, until all he could hear was the rapid beat of his pulse as his vision went misty at the edges. It smacked into him so hard, a shaft of untainted rage that made even his fingernails burn, and then suddenly he was all adrenaline and heat, ramming his body into the door and bursting into the kitchen with his wand out and aimed. The two witches jerked with surprise, and Tonks was up on her feet, her wand centred on him, and her body carefully angled to protect her baby bump.

Tonks glowered at him with disgust. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Where the fuck is she?" Draco hissed at his cousin, and he barely recognised the sinister quality to his voice.

"Draco," Andromeda said warily. "Calm down-

"WHERE IS SHE?"

"Mum, what the hell is he doing here with-

"It's okay, Nymphadora-

"But, he's one of them," she argued stiffly. "He took the Mark, and he let the Death Eaters-

"He's defected," Andromeda explained quickly, rising from her seat. "Draco, please just lower your wand-

"Don't you come within an inch of me, bitch," he growled, slanting his eyes over to her. "You lied to me-

"No, I didn't-

"YOU SAID YOU DIDN'T KNOW WHERE SHE WAS!" he shouted, his voice quickly getting hoarse and his chest heaving. "YOU KNEW, AND YOU JUST LET ME THINK THAT SHE WAS-

"Draco, please just put down your wand-

"YOU HAVE SEEN HOW FUCKED UP I HAVE BEEN THESE LAST FEW WEEKS, AND YOU DID NOTHING!"

He was panting, eyes darting from his cousin to his aunt, and then back again. The betrayal left a bitter taste in his mouth as he absently wondered when exactly he had started to trust Andromeda, before he was silently scolding himself for relaxing his guard. He really should have learned by now.

"Draco, I swear I didn't know. Nymphadora only told me tonight-

"JUST TELL ME WHERE SHE IS!" he snarled fiercely. "NOW!"

"Who?" Tonks cut in.

"GRANGER!" he yelled, his hot glare back on his cousin. "I swear to Salazar, if you don't-

Andromeda groaned and swiped away a distressed tear. "Draco, just stop it. Please."

"Not until you tell me where Granger is," he said resolutely. "You will tell me-

"You mean Hermione?" Tonks asked, looking suitably baffled. "What does she have to with you?"

"SHE'S EVERYTHING TO DO WITH ME!" he fired back, his wand still trained on her and irately vibrating in his grip. "You tell me now!"

"Wait," his cousin mumbled, her eyes widening as she seemed to reach for a memory. "You? You're the...you're the boy she was talking about? Who she fell for at Hogwarts? You and her were-

"YES, ME!" he blurted, too incensed and impatient to care. "I AM THE ONE! I AM HERS! AND SHE-

"No way," Tonks shook her head doubtfully. "Hermione wouldn't-

"Nymphadora," said Andromeda, fixing her daughter with a meaningful look. "He's not lying."

Tonks' lips twitched, but her wand remained steady, and so did Draco's. There was movement behind him, but he held the eye contact with his cousin, ignoring the two sets of footsteps that entered the room and stopped a few feet away from his side. Intuition told him it was Blaise and Theo, but he was too focussed and driven by his wild temper, scratching like static beneath his skin, to glance in their direction.

"Malfoy," said Blaise, his tone sharp. "What in Merlin's name-

"Leave me be," he growled. "Don't get involved in this, just piss off-

"Draco, she's bloody pregnant-

"I don't give a shit!" he spat. "She knows where Granger is!"

"Granger?" Theo repeated quietly, evidently confused. "As in...Hermione Granger? Why would-

"I don't know where Hermione is!" Tonks yelled over him. "None of us-

"YOU SAID SHE'S STAYING WITH YOU!" Draco shouted. "I HEARD YOU, SO DON'T YOU FUCKING BULLSHIT ME-

"I said she was staying with me," she told him, her voice calmer and clipped. "Past tense, Malfoy. I have no idea where Hermione is now."

He faltered, and he suddenly felt very lethargic. "You're lying-

"No," she stopped him, as if she'd expected his response. "She was staying with me, but she left over a month ago-

"Where?"

"I don't know," she said slowly, relaxing her defensive stance. "She took off in the night. I assume she went to meet Harry and Ron-

"Oh, the death-trap twins!" he exclaimed, grinding his teeth when his voice cracked. "Fucking brilliant!"

"She will be fine," Tonks muttered. "Hermione is the brightest witch of her age-

"You stupid bitch," he sneered at his cousin, but he was starting to lose the fire to fight. He could feel the energy leaking out of his pores as the damaging wave of disappointment sank

into him. "You let Granger, a known Muggle-born, just leave when there are Snatchers-

"Hermione knows to be careful-

"What, like your father did?" he replied, and a peculiar flash of satisfaction settled in his bones when he heard both his aunt and his cousin gasp at his cruel comment.

"Malfoy," hissed Blaise at his side. "You are done-

"Would you be so bloody calm if it was your witch?" he snapped at Blaise.

"My witch is missing too," his friend said, and Draco felt a hand applying pressure to his outstretched arm. "That's enough."

Draco didn't resist and lowered his wand, his eyes falling to the floor and clenched muscles flexing in his forearms. He had wanted just a little piece of information about Granger; just an assurance that she was safe, but that fleeting glimmer of something close to hope had been so quickly extinguished, and it felt like the air had been beaten out of him. He cradled his head in his free hand as the dull thuds of an inevitable migraine started banging against his sinuses. He could physically feel the eyes of the others measuring him, and he loathed them all in that moment for witnessing him lose control.

"Fuck this," he breathed, turning to leave.

"Hang on," Theo stepped into his path. "Have I gone insane, or am I hearing this right? You and Granger? Together?"

Draco didn't respond, but he squared his shoulders and lifted his chin, daring Theo to make a derogatory comment or a mocking jeer. Instead, an odd expression stole his features, and Draco saw a flash of the mischievous and sarcastic man he'd known before Ted's death.

"Well," said Theo, a smirk trying to tug at his lips. "That's an interesting plot twist."

The urge to jam his fist into Theo's jaw turned his knuckles white, but he simply brushed past him and returned to his room, craving solitude and a shower where he might imagine Granger's reflection in the tiles.

The confirmation that she was roaming the war-ravaged country with Potter and Weasley injected a fresh and powerful dose of insomnia into his veins, and he did not sleep for four days solid.

He pointedly avoided the others, particularly Theo, Blaise and Andromeda, until the latter sought him out on a rather dreary Tuesday in April. He remembered eyeing the new leaves and pink blossom outside his window, magnified by the layer of drizzle streaming down the pane. She came into his room without a knock, a genuine smile on her face that looked crooked, like she had forgotten how to.

She told him that she'd just received a letter, and that Tonks had given birth to a baby boy, Teddy Lupin.

He wondered why she thought he would care, and then wondered if he did.

He had mumbled a reluctant "congratulations," and she had left to visit her first grandchild.

The clot in Draco's chest had felt a little lighter, but he'd spent the rest of the day envying that baby for being oblivious to the dark and dying world he'd been born into.

Innocence and ignorance are one in the same; both blissful.

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Hermione traced her fingers over the intricate pattern of swirls and loops of the sword's hilt, marvelling at how something so beautiful could be so deadly. Harry had given her the Sword of Gryffindor (and everything else for that matter), to store in her Charmed bag, insisting that she was the best person to keep their belongings safe. She'd had the sudden urge to study the artefact, fascinated by the history that she could practically feel beating in its blade.

It was warm beneath her touch. Warmer than her.

She slipped it back into her bag and returned to her book, underling anything that could be significant and jotting down a note here and there to come back to later. She was completely engrossed in her usual routine of reading and rereading words she had memorised weeks ago, trying to shake off thoughts of Draco that always managed to seep into her concentration. So when a friendly hand touched her shoulder and grazed the curls by her ear, she shot up to her feet with a startled gasp and her wand at the ready.

"Ron," she exhaled, lowering her wand from his Adam's apple. "You made me jump-

"Sorry," he mumbled quickly. "I did try calling your name."

"I was-

"Reading," he finished for her. "Yes, I know."

Hermione could tell he was nervous; it was so blatant in the way he shifted his feet and scrunched up his freckled features with uncertainty. She knew what was coming, and she nervously tucked the stubborn strands of hair he had touched behind her ear.

"Where's Harry?"

"He's making some food by the tent," he said. "Look, Hermione-

"I should go check if he needs a hand-

"Have I done something?" blurted Ron, and Hermione cringed. "I mean, have I...have I upset you, or something?"

She drew in a long breath. "No. No, you haven't upset me, Ron-

"Well...then I don't get it," he tried clumsily. "It's just...I thought you and I were...you know."

"Ron, I think-

"I mean, after what happened at the wedding and everything," he rambled on. "I know we never really talked about it, but I...do you regret it?"

"No, I don't regret it," she replied sincerely. "It's just that we-

"Because I thought that it meant we were together now, but it's...obvious that you don't feel that way."

The guilt was welling up in her chest so quickly. She was going to tell him. She could feel the words forming. "You're my best friend-

"But that's it?" he questioned dejectedly. "Just friends? That's all you see me as?"

"Ron," she started slowly. "You know I liked you, but...our opportunity to be more than friends just...came and went."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean we took too long," she explained. "It was there for us to take, and we just...didn't, and it's because neither of us wanted it enough-

"That's not why-

"I'm sorry, but it is. It would have been...convenient for us-

"Convenient?" he repeated, and he looked wounded as he spoke. "What does that even mean?"

"I just mean that we spent so much time together, and it would have made sense, but...but convenience isn't a good enough reason to start a relationship. In fact, it's an awful reason-

"Hermione-

"Don't you think that if either of us really wanted it that much, it would have just happened?" she reasoned. "It wasn't like there was ever anything stopping us, except ourselves. Hell, our friends and family practically encouraged it-

"Are you still annoyed about what happened between me and Lavender?" he asked suddenly.

"No, of course not-

"Because it was just a mistake," he rushed out. He reached for her hand but she pulled away before he could graze her fingertips. "Hermione-

"Ron, I promise it has absolutely nothing to do with that-

"Then do you like someone else?"

There it was; the question she'd been dreading because the answer would destroy him. She wanted so badly to tell him, for only truth to exist between them no matter how hard it would be for him to hear it, but Harry's voice was whispering to her at the back of her brain. She watched Ron's anxious eyes flicker with disappointment, and she realised she'd been silent too long, and silence is simply a coward's confirmation.

"I-

"I knew it," he nodded, oddly calm. "I knew, but Harry said I was wrong-

"Ron, that's not the reason things didn't work-

"It's okay," he said with a painfully forced smile. "It's okay. I understand. We didn't see you for...what was it, five months?"

"Six," she corrected. "But I-

"Hermione, do you like someone else?" he asked again. "It's a simple yes or no question."

She shut her eyes. "Yes."

"That's...that's fine," he stumbled over his words. "I just wish you'd have told me-

"It's Draco Malfoy."

There was another silence, but this was the kind when even the birds and the winds seem to die in time, until nothingness is just screaming in your ears like a scorned banshee. She slowly peeled open her eyes and found Ron closer than she'd expected, his face frozen and blank, but then she saw his lips were stretching up his cheeks. And then he was laughing; that soft chuckle that made his shoulders bounce, quickly building in volume until it was heartily boisterous and causing his whole body to shake.

"That-that is hilarious!" he choked out between blasts of laughter. "Oh Merlin, Hermione, you do come out with some mental stuff-

She chewed her bottom lip. "It's not a joke, Ron."

He scoffed and rolled his eyes. "Of course it is-

"Ron, look at my face," she said, bracing herself for the turn. "I'm not joking. It's Draco."

His chuckles weakened with every breath he sucked in, and his expression gradually twisted into a look of utter bafflement. His jaw sagged, and his baby-blue eyes narrowed into thin, curious slits that inspected every detail of her face like he'd never met her before. He cleared his throat, and she found herself oddly transfixed on a thick vein that twitched in his neck.

"Hermione," he frowned. "It's not funny any more-

"It's not meant to be funny," she told him. "It's the truth-

"Don't be ridiculous," he snorted. "No...no, it's impossible."

She groaned into her palm. "Ron, I know this a shock-

"I don't believe you-

"Ron," she sighed. "I swear on my life that Draco-

"Stop saying that name!" he barked, his eyes going wide and . "You've gone bloody mad!"

"We were together at Hogwarts," she murmured. "And I fell-

"Don't you dare say it!"

"If you just...if you just let me explain-

"Hermione, stop it!" he yelled, turning away from her and balling his fists in his hair. "Stop it now!"

"You might understand," she pleaded, trying to grab his arm. "You might-

"DON'T TOUCH ME!" he bellowed, loud enough that a flock of birds in a nearby tree scattered. "I love you! Did you know that?"

"Ron, please-

"Did you know that when Harry and I found the locket, it showed me my biggest fear?" he told her, and the tears in his eyes made her breath hitch. "And did you know it showed me you? You and Harry! And now you're telling that it's you and Malfoy! "

"I-I'm sorry!" she sputtered, and she was crying too. "Ron, I really am. I just needed to tell you-

"How the fuck could you do this to me?"

She flinched. She'd only heard him use the harsher swear words a couple of times and they sounded so out of place on his tongue. "Ron, I never meant to hurt you-

"SHUT UP!" he roared, clenching his eyes shut like he was in physical pain. "Shut. Up! Just stop it!"

"Hey!" Harry's voice came from behind her, and she spun around to find him jogging towards them. "I heard shouting-

"She's lost it, Harry!" Ron shouted, pointing a trembling finger at Hermione. "She's completely bloody lost it! She said that her and Malfoy were at Hogwarts and-

"You told him about Malfoy?" Harry snapped his eyes to her. "I told you not to tell him!"

"I'm sorry," Hermione sniffed. "I needed to-

"Wait. You knew?" Ron accused, and he looked completely betrayed as he regarded Harry. "You knew, and you didn't say anything?"

"Ron, mate," said Harry steadily. "I'm sorry-

"You lying tosser!"

"Mate, calm down-

"DON'T TELL ME TO CALM DOWN!" he seethed. "Both of you stay the hell away from me-

"Please, Ron," Hermione tried desperately. "If you just give me a moment I could...Draco's not like he was-

"He's a bloody Death Eater, Hermione! A. DEATH. EATER!"

"No, he's not!"

"Yes, he fucking is!" he spat. "He tried to kill Dumbledore! He let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts! He's got the Mark and everything, you idiot! He follows Voldemort, and-

"RON, NO!" she cried frantically. "THE TABOO!"

But it was too late. The wind changed, and she could hear them coming.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! Can I just say a HUGE FUCKING THANK YOU to the people who nominated me for the Dramione Awards? I mean...if you're ever in the UK, I will snog you! But seriously...thank you so much! I am bloody blown away and so grateful.

Also, to everyone who has reviewed, favourited, alerted, recommended and read Iso, thank you so much. You really have been so lovely, and I'm not sure how to thank you. I'm actually in London next week, so chapter might take a little while, but I'll post it asap and keep you updated on tumblr, facebook etc. Read and Review!

Oh and ummmm...yeah...sorry about the cliffy...don't shout at me please.

Bex-chan

Blood

Chapter Notes

If I may recommend some songs again please? I think Muse - Apocalypse Please, Red - Take it all Away, and Sia - I'm in here. (This one especially...for Hermione).

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

She didn't even remember shouting, "RUN!" to Harry and Ron.

She was racing away before her voice reached her ears, surging her body forward and snaking around trees with everything she had. The ground seemed to quake with the fast and thunderous footsteps of the Snatchers, and the sound of it rumbled all around her. Patches of mud and hidden bumps rocked her balance, but she tried to keep her focus amongst the adrenaline storm.

Harry was to her right — about twenty feet away — sprinting through the forest with two Snatchers on his tail. She couldn't see Ron, but she could hear him calling out to them, maybe another twenty feet or so from Harry, and she prayed he had the sense not to blurt any of their names. If they could just get some distance and reach each other to Apparate. If they could just get somewhere safe. If they could...

The Snatcher behind her was getting closer.

She could feel his shadow against her back; the chill of it on her neck. She hurled a spell over her shoulder, and the sparks of it singed her cheeks. She heard a thud and hoped she had successfully managed to hinder his chase, but she could already feel another one catching up to her.

The wind of a hex rushed past her ear, and she raised her arm to shield her eyes when it struck a tree and launched a spatter of splinters towards her. She fired another spell behind her and somehow managed to find some more speed, trying to veer towards Harry and Ron. If she could just get to them...

She heard a change in Ron's shouts and knew that they'd caught him.

That was it then. There was no way they'd leave him behind. They were in trouble.

She made a decision and kept running until she was close enough to Harry, and the Stinging Hex was the first spell that popped into her head. She hit her mark; Harry's face, and she watched him stumble as the inevitable pain began to register, and his features began to inflate and swell. She hoped it would be enough to alter his appearance. To make him unrecognisable.

Ron was struggling persistently against the two Snatchers who dragged him over to their group, but it was futile. There were Snatchers surrounding them from all sides now, slithering around the trees and circling them. Two of them took hold of her arms, but it was only when Fenir Greyback marched towards them that Hermione realised just how terrified she was, and the lingering look of hunger he directed towards her made her feel sick. He looked just as she remembered; feral and unkempt, and her eyes fell to the smudges of dried blood under his fingernails.

"Running is never a good idea," he said in his scratchy tone, his calculating glare shifting to Harry. "What the fuck happened to your face, ugly?"

"Al-allergies," he stuttered.

Greyback cocked a too-bushy eyebrow. "Names. Now."

"Dudley. Vernon Dudley."

"And you, ginger?"

"Stan Shunpike-

Fenir backhanded his cheek, and Ron grunted at the impact. "Your real name."

Ron swallowed hard. "Barny Weasley."

"A Weasley?" Fenir repeated. "You're a Blood Traitor then. The Order of the Phoenix ring any bells? There are a few Weasleys in there."

Ron shook his head, and Hermione averted her gaze when Fenir turned back to her with that same perverted stare. "And you, girly?"

"Penelope Clearwater," she said with more conviction than she felt.

"Pretty name for a pretty thing," he said, licking his jagged teeth and reaching out to stroke her cheek with a yellow and sharp fingernail. Hermione shuddered and tried hard not to retch. "I bet you taste sweet-

"Don't touch her!" Ron snapped. "Leave her the hell alone!"

"How touching," he snarled, glancing over to one of the Snatchers. "Check the list. We'll be taking you to the Ministry. If you are who you say you are, you'll have nothing to worry about-

"Hey, wait," one of the Snatchers interrupted, and Hermione's noticed the crumpled copy of The Daily Prophet in his hand. He gestured to a page. "Look at this, Greyback."

Hermione felt dread drop in her stomach when Fenir's eyes flicked from her to the newspaper, and then back to her. She exchanged a troubled look with Harry and tried to keep her composure, but she knew what was coming.

"This picture looks a lot like you, girly," he growled. "And it says here, known to be travelling with Harry Potter." He turned to Harry. "Well, well, well. This is interesting."

Harry tensed. "That's not-

"Shut it," he spat, moving over to Harry and squinting at the taut scar on his forehead. "It is you! We've got Potter!"

A roar of cheers erupted from the herd of Snatchers, and even the effects of the Stinging Hex couldn't hide Harry's alarm. "Come on!" one of the Snatchers shouted. "Let's take him to the Ministry-

"No!" Fenir called back. "They'll take the credit for it. We'll take them straight to the Dark Lord."

Hermione's heart was wedged in her throat.

Oh God no...

"We'll take them to Malfoy Manor."

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A sudden wave of nausea washed over Draco as he descended the stairs, and he clutched the banister to steady himself as the dizziness subsided. It passed and he shook his head, absently blaming the odd turn on a lack of a sleep.

The quiet hum of voices grasped his attention — Theo, Blaise and Andromeda by the sound of it — and he rolled his shoulders as he approached the kitchen.

He had successfully managed to steer clear of Theo and Blaise since his outburst over a week ago, knowing that Theo was likely to make some comments that would bait his anger, but he didn't give a shit anymore. He'd grown sick of the sight of his bedroom walls and the sound of silence, and he could really care less if Theo decided to be a snarky idiot about the situation, especially when he had broken down about Ted's death.

Shoving open the door, Theo, Blaise and Andromeda paused their conversation and regarded him with a mixture of caution of curiosity. Draco studied Blaise first, and instantly concluded from his dishevelled appearance and bloodshot eyes that Lovegood was still missing. He was unshaven, exhausted, and blatantly anxious, his brow creased with worry-lines and body rigid with strain, like he was ready snap.

Andromeda was preparing food, and while she still looked every bit the grieving widow, there was a small spark in her eyes, which he credited to the recent birth of her grandson. Yes, she definitely looked better, like her spirit was mending slowly, and that was... good. Perhaps he had come to accept that she was indeed his aunt, or maybe it was the resemblance she bore to his mother, but seeing her so depressed had made him feel uncomfortable.

And then there was Theo...

"Well, good afternoon, stranger," he smirked, and Draco rolled his eyes. "How nice of you to finally grace us with your presence-

"Theo," warned Andromeda. "Don't start-

"I was beginning to forget what your face looked like," Theo went on. "In hindsight, that was probably a blessing in disguise-

"Fuck off," Draco scoffed, dropping into a free chair. "I'm not on the mood for you today, Nott-

"I'm just trying to lighten the mood-

"Theo, that's enough," said Andromeda firmly. "You know, nobody gave you any hassle when you were upset-

"Oh, come on!" he exclaimed. "That was completely different! Am I seriously the only one who thinks the irony of Draco's situation is hilarious? It's Granger-

"Theo," hissed Draco. "Carry on, and I fucking swear-

"Look, I'm not going to take the piss because she's a Muggle-born or anything, but you hated the girl because of her blood status, and she's Potter's best friend-

"Theo-

"And look at you now," he continued. "Defected with a Muggle-born girlfriend who just happens to be Gryffindor's little golden princess, and one of the Pheonix lot."

Draco growled behind his teeth. "Theo, I will-

"Fuck, I would pay so much money to see the look on your parents' faces if they found out," he grinned with genuine amusement. "I mean, wouldn't it have just been easier to shit directly onto your family crest or your father's fortune?"

"Alright, Theo! That's enough!" Andromeda shouted. "You have said your piece-

"I'm only having a laugh-

"Well, it's not funny."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake," he snorted. "You all need to get a sense of humour. It's not like I'm having a dig. You know, I think all my shock was used up when Blaise started fancying Lovegood. You know, you two could start a club, or maybe write a book. How to get Laid and Piss off your Parents in One Easy Move, by Draco Malfoy and Blaise Zabini-

"Theo, shut the fuck up," Blaise hissed slowly, but there was an eerie calmness to his posture as he leaned back in his seat and tapped his finger against his mug of tepid coffee. "If you so much as breathe in an irritating way, I will deck the shit out of you, alright?"

Theo faltered but clicked his tongue haughtily. "Fucking cheerful bunch, aren't you?"

Blaise sprung up from his chair and looked just about ready to throttle Theo. "You never bloody learn to shut your gob-

"Blaise, calm down!" Andromeda yelled, rushing over to interject. "Theo, you can go and help Miles do the laundry."

"What? I did it yesterday-

"I don't care. You're riling everyone up, and I won't have it-

"Why should I have to walk around on eggshells just because these two are whining about their missing girlfriends?"

"Just go!" she demanded. "Now!"

"Fuck's sake," he grumbled, shaking his head as he left the room.

He slammed the door behind him, and Blaise eased back into his chair with a long and weary breath. Draco considered him carefully, so familiar with all the tell-tale signs of stress and apprehension.

"I take Lovegood's still missing then?" he asked, unsure what he expected to gain from the question.

Blaise lifted his guarded eyes to him and hesitated before he nodded his head once. "Almost two weeks."

"They'll turn up soon," Andromeda offered reassuringly, but it was such a flimsy promise.

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The Manor reeked of death and Dark Magic, and Hermione tried not to inhale the stench.

Instead, she analysed her surroundings carefully, racking her brain for any method of escape, but she knew it was impossible. They had no wands, they were outnumbered, and the Manor would inevitably have anti-Apparition Wards. They needed a miracle. A fast one.

Fenir's horrid breath was in Hermione's hair, and she tried to jerk her head away. He and his henchmen dragged her, Harry and Ron to a large room, and when Hermione realised who was waiting for them, she felt her insides scrunch up with fright.

There was something about Bellatrix that would forever haunt Hermione.

Perhaps it was the unhinged and sadistic glint in her eyes, or the disturbing twitch to her vile grin, but the witch was just...inhuman to Hermione, like her insanity had picked away at her brain until all of the familiar emotion and instinct had been eroded. She was a creature; an evil and psychotic tool that was designed for nothing except torture and murder. And she relished it, like some sick hobby to pass the day. Completely deranged, and deadly because of it.

There was movement behind Bellatrix, and Hermione barely stifled a gasp.

They seemed so different to the last time she'd seen them; Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy. All of that loud and aristocratic arrogance had diminished, as had that attention-demanding confidence of a married couple in power, and Hermione was transfixed on them. Narcissa looked like she hadn't eaten in weeks, frail and distraught, while Lucius bore all the signs of a man who had been relentlessly tortured for months, until his pride had abandoned him and his spirit had been subdued.

Hermione accidentally met Narcissa's eyes and saw nothing but sorrow, and she remembered then that she hadn't seen Draco in almost a year, no doubt assumed he was dead, and Hermione momentarily forgot the cruel woman she'd always thought Narcissa to be, and saw a vulnerable mother who had lost her son. She was weary, vulnerable, and seemed almost...reluctant to participate as Bellatrix and Peter Pettigrew eagerly rushed to meet them.

"We caught Potter!" bellowed Fenir. "Summon the Dark Lord-

"Just a moment," said Bellatrix. "How are you so sure? The boy's face is-

"The girl's a Mudblood," he replied, shoving Hermione towards Bellatrix. "Her picture was in The Prophet and it says she's travelling with Potter-

"A Mudblood?" she echoed with interest, snapping her wicked eyes to Hermione. She look like she might lick her lips with anticipation. "You do look very familiar. Cissy! You've met this thing a few times, haven't you? What's her name? Didn't you say you saw her Madam Malkins' not long ago?"

Narcissa barely lifted her head. "I can't recall-

"Granger! The Mudblood's name is Granger. Draco mentioned her years ago," said Lucius, and Hermione didn't miss the twinge of pain that stole Narcissa's features at the sound of her son's name. She felt I too. "Yes, she was always with Potter! It is him!"

"I told you!" Fenir boasted. "And you can see the scar-

"Let me see it!" she demanded, striding over to Harry and grabbing his face. "It is him! I will-

"I'll summon him!" Lucius interrupted, reaching for his sleeve. "Let me be the one-

"Now is not the time for your desperate need for his approval, Lucius!"

"Don't talk to him like that!" Narcissa barked at her sister, and Hermione was too distracted to notice the Snatcher tugging at her bag.

"Oh, don't be so sensitive, Cissy! It's not my fault you decided to marry such a pathetic...

Bellatrix trailed off, her eyes narrowing with outrage.

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Draco flinched and looked down at his forearm.

His Mark was itching, almost painfully so, and he grudgingly peeled back his sleeve to scowl at the ugly smudge on his snowy-white skin. He hadn't really examined it in a while, had practically refused to acknowledge it since that night in Astronomy Tower and more so when he and Granger had started sharing a bed. It looked just as it always had, but the irritating prickle began to worsen, and he smothered a groan behind his teeth.

"Draco?" Andromeda mumbled, eyeing his Mark cautiously. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know," he mumbled. "It just randomly started...burning."

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It all happened too quickly.

One of Fenir's men had seized Hermione's bag and extracted Gryffindor's Sword, and then Bellatrix had erupted with action, screaming questions about the sword and firing hexes at the Snatchers who were foolish enough to respond with cocky retorts. Hermione held her breath until the hot sparks jetting out of Bellatrix's wand stopped, eyeing the still bodies of the stunned men, who were scattered across the floor like dirty confetti.

"Pettigrew!" Bellatrix growled, gesturing to the injured Snatchers. "Get rid of them. Take them to the courtyard, and I'll deal with them later-

"Bu-but, Bellatrix," stammered Lucius. "The Dark Lord-

"If you summon the Dark Lord now, he'll have our heads, you senseless idiot!" She turned to Fenir. "Put these in the dungeons with the others, except for...except for the Mudblood," Bellatrix said, coming close enough to Hermione that she could feel the wet of her breath. "We're going to have a little chat-

"No, wait!" Ron yelled frantically. "Not her! Me, you can take me!"

"You'll be next, Blood Traitor-

"Not her-

Fenir released Hermione and rammed his fist into Ron's face, silencing his protests before grabbing him and Harry, and dragging them out of the room. Hermione watched them go, her heart sinking to her stomach when they disappeared from her sight and their voices drifted out of earshot.

"Aw," cooed Bellatrix, tutting her tongue. "So sad."

Hermione could feel herself shaking, and her breathing began to accelerate, but she willed her body not to betray her fear. She'd be damned if she gave Bellatrix the satisfaction of seeing her crack. The dark witch was staring at her with an ominous expression of excitement, tapping her wand mockingly against her hip, and Hermione needed to look away, her eyes wandering over to Narcissa again, but she was frowning at the floor.

"Where did you get that sword, Mudblood?" Bellatrix snarled, right next to ear.

"We-we found it. It's just a fake. A copy-

"Lies," she hissed, baring her chipped and grey teeth. "Not that it makes a difference. I was going to torture you anyway. Let's get started, shall we?"

Hermione locked her limbs and braced herself for the inevitable, tilting her chin defiantly for dignity's sake and telling herself she wouldn't scream.

The first blast of the Cruciatus Curse made her fall to her knees. It felt like her bones, blood, veins, and everything beneath her skin was fizzling with fire, or being stabbed at with blunt and rusty knives. Her whole body tensed and spasmed at unnatural angles, and she clamped

down hard on her tongue to stop the cry that was dying to be released, whining at the back of her mouth.

Oh Merlin, it hurt...like nothing she had ever experienced.

And then it stopped.

"How did you break into my vault?" Bellatrix demanded, standing over her.

"We-we didn't-

"Crucio!"

The second round was so much worse; somehow more concentrated and deeper, and Hermione dropped completely to the floor, writhing as the brutal tremors took control of her. She thought that the scream that ricocheted around the room didn't sound like her at all, but she felt her lungs strain, and she understood how this torture drove people mad.

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Draco pulled his sleeve back down to cover his Mark.

It was still itching a little, but it was bearable, and he didn't like the way Andromeda and Blaise had studied it with such awkwardness. They were silent now; Blaise gliding his finger across the rim of his mug, and his aunt absentmindedly sorting through the kitchen supplies, so when the sudden crack of Apparition sounded outside, the three of them flinched with surprise.

Tonks came barrelling into the room through the back door, clutching a blanket-wrapped bundle in her arms and rushing over to her mother, completely oblivious to the two Slytherins sat at the table. Although he could only see the back of her, Draco could tell from the tension in her shoulders that she was flustered and haste-driven, and he shared a puzzled look with Blaise.

"Mum, I need you to look after Teddy for a bit," she said quickly. "I don't know how long it'll be for-

"What is it, Nymphadora?" asked Andromeda. "What's wrong?"

"We just received word from Aberforth," she explained, carefully handing over Teddy. "The Snatchers must've caught them, and he said that there are others too-

"Sweetheart, just slow down. Who are you talking-

"Harry, Ron and Hermione. They were-

"What?" breathed Draco, his voice barely a whisper of shock. He got to his feet as Tonks whipped around with a gasp. "What did you-

"You shouldn't have heard that-

"You said Granger-

"Look, just wait a minute-

"You said Granger," he repeated in a forebodingly low tone. "Is she...is she alright?"

He had literally needed to choke out that question, and he didn't even want to know the answer. He'd never felt anything close to this; emotion wedged in his throat, his heart drumming behind his eyes with a heavy beat, and the structure of his body taut, prepared for the breakdown. This was what he'd been dreading...his witch...Hermione...but it was all too real.

Tonks sighed. "As far as we know-

"What the fuck does that mean?" he spat, taking some steps forward and positioning himself in the way of the door so his cousin couldn't attempt to leave. "Is she alive, or is she not?"

"We don't know, but we think-

"You said there were others," Blaise spoke up. "Luna. Is Luna one of the others?"

"It's...it's likely, but we don't know-

"Then what the hell do you know?" Draco asked impatiently.

"We know where they are," said Tonks, fixing him with an unsettling look. "They're at your house. They're at Malfoy Manor."

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"We didn't take anything," Hermione whimpered, her voice failing. "It-it's just a fake."

She felt herself being magically levitated again, rising almost six feet in the air before Bellatrix slammed her body hard back down to the cold, stone floor. Her head landed with

such an impact that it bounced, and the back of her head became very wet and warm. Just as the bitter scent of blood registered, Hermione realised Bellatrix was crouching next to her, gripping her arm and tearing away the material of her sleeve.

"Repulsive Mudblood," she sneered, her menacing face hovering above Hermione. "You should all be branded a birth."

Bellatrix muttered an unfamiliar incantation, producing a small globe of green light at the tip of her wand, and Hermione's eyes went wide with horror as she swiftly stabbed it into her arm. She slashed, sliced and hacked away at her skin, and Hermione was screaming again, thrashing around and trying to get free as Bellatrix carved the letters for what felt like hours.

When Bellatrix had finished disfiguring her arm, she fired another Cruciatus Curse directly to Hermione's chest, and her cries of pain became scratchy, weakening to cracked and pathetic noises that sounded like a dying bird. Her voice had given up on her, but the need to scream remained as Bellatrix continued to torture her within an inch of insanity.

Again, it stopped, but the residue of the Curse felt like poison crawling around her insides, and, Oh Godric, she felt so dizzy. She battled unconsciousness, knowing that blacking out with her head injury was unwise, but it was so tempting to surrender to the darkness that loomed at the edge of her vision...

"Bring me the Goblin, Pettigrew," instructed Bellatrix. "He'll tell us if the sword is indeed a fake."

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Teddy had started to sniffle in Andromeda's arms, but Draco barely noticed.

"My house?" he repeated quietly. "Why would-

"You-Know-Who's been using it as his base," Tonks told him bluntly. "We don't know what's happening, but we know that's where they are-

"Well, then you need to take me there! I know the Manor! I can-

"There are anti-Apparition Wards surrounding the grounds, and they would have been changed since you went missing-

"I still might be able to get in-

"Draco, look-

"NO! You fucking look!" he roared, striding up to his cousin with rage-fuelled steps. "I need to get in there! I need to-

"There is nothing that you could do," she interrupted calmly. "Letting you just waltz into the Death Eaters' headquarters would not only be dangerous for you, but for everyone else who's trapped there-

"THEN WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?" he demanded, slamming his balled fist into the wall. "You're just going to leave Granger there? They will kill her, you stupid fucking-

"Help has been sent," said Tonks. "If all goes to plan, they'll be out of there soon."

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Mudblood.

The word was engraved into her arm in an ugly smear, weeping perfect, little droplets of blood that dribbled out of her like tears. She concluded the wound at the back of her head was worse than she had initially thought. The blurriness of her vision was getting worse, and while she could hear the distant sounds of Bellatrix questioning Griphook, it sounded so far away. Her bloody hair was damp and sticky against her neck, matted in thick clumps, and her head felt numb and hollow, almost detached from the rest of her aching and battered body.

She guessed that a few of her ribs had been broken, perhaps her arm too, but it was difficult to focus on one area of the pain. There was a pretty ribbon of blood trickling out of the corner of her mouth, but she couldn't decide if she had simply torn her vocal chords with all her screaming, or if she'd suffered some internal damage.

It didn't matter...

Hermione had accepted that she was going to die here; terrified and alone on this ice-cold floor, and that her death would be dealt to her by a relative of the man she loved. It was almost poetic, but then the tragic love-stories always are.

Unconsciousness was creeping up on her, and she knew that she wouldn't wake up. There was nobody coming. Nobody could come. Logically, death was the inevitable fate for her, as it is for everyone, but hers would be early. Too early. Too prolonged and excruciating.

She thought of her parents, how they would probably never know that the daughter she'd made them forget had been killed, but then maybe that was for the best...

She thought of Harry and Ron, wondered what would become of them, and prayed that they might get free, or at least have an easier time than she'd had.

She thought of Draco, remembering their relationship that had barely been given a chance to begin. So brief. So heartbreaking. So...beautiful in all the wrong ways.

She hadn't meant to murmur his name aloud; hell, she didn't think her voice would allow her another syllable, but she had definitely heard it. She didn't even consider the possibility that her fractured voice had reached someone else's ears, until the swishing hem of a robe suddenly came into her line of sight. Using what little strength she had left, she managed to tilt her chin and lock eyes with Narcissa Malfoy.

The older witch's face was stretched with a mixture of surprise and confusion as she cast a wary glance around the room — presumably to check no one was watching — before she knelt down at Hermione's side.

"You said Draco's name," she whispered. "Why would you...do you know what happened to him?"

Hermione tried to respond, but all she could manage was strangled noise that had no meaning. Narcissa scanned the room again and then slowly removed her wand from her pocket, aiming it at Hermione with her features hardening with concentration.

"Legilimens."

There was no way she could resist the spell. Hermione clenched her eyes shut as a rush of heat shot up her spine and into her skull. Memories flashed against the backs of her lids in rapid succession, images of those first awful weeks when Draco had been forced to stay in her dorm. She saw herself stabbing his palm with her wand and then fastening their hands together. She saw Draco leaning over her after the bee-sting, and their fleeting first kiss. She saw herself returning to her room after her stay with Tonks, and him rushing towards her and grabbing her face. She saw them on the sofas, on the window-seat, on the ice, and all those kisses in between. And then she saw them in the Forbidden Forest; rain hammering against them as Draco just stood there, frozen in place, and she told him she loved him, and pressed the Portkey into his hand.

And then she was back in the Manor, staring at Narcissa's stunned expression, and almost wanting to express her gratitude to the witch for allowing her to relive those memories. She felt weaker now; her lids like rocks and her whole system soft and pulsating. She was disorientated, bordering on delusional as her body and mind started to shut down.

"...help you," Narcissa's hushed voice brought her back. "If you swear to tell me where Draco is, I will get you out of here. I promise. Please, just tell me what happened to my son."

Hermione tried to speak, but it was futile, barely managing a stuttering gargled sound that was lost to the unexpected racket of a commotion behind her.

She thought she might...yes, she could hear Harry and Ron, and then Lucius, Fenir, and Bellatrix, all of them shouting manically. Narcissa disappeared, and Hermione could do

nothing but listen to the buzzing sounds of clashing spells, wondering if it would be too hopelessly optimistic of her to think that they might have a chance, that they might get out of here alive. If not her, then at least the boys...

There were rough fingers yanking at her shoulders and hair, hauling her up to stand, and then the freezing edge of a blade was licking at the taut vein in her throat.

"Drop the wands, or she dies!" Bellatrix ordered. "DO IT NOW!"

"Alright!" said Harry.

"Good! The Dark Lord is coming, Harry Potter! Your death approaches! Greyback, would you like to take care of Miss Mudblood? I am sure the Dark Lord will not begrudge you the girl, after what you have done tonight."

Before Harry and Ron could surrender the wands they must've obtained in the fray, Hermione let her head fall back and noticed the subtle swing of the chandelier, its beautiful jewels chiming quietly with the movement. And another noise; metal scraping against metal. Creaking. Splitting...Everyone in the room had stilled to listen to it, and then there was a final telling snap, and the chandelier came crashing down.

Merlin knew how, but Hermione summoned enough energy to tear herself out of Bellatrix's hold, managing to stagger a few steps forward and into the safety of Ron's ready arms, and that was when she blacked out.

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"I've wasted too much time," said Tonks. "I need to get back...they will need help-

"Then take us with you!" Blaise pleaded desperately. "We can help."

"Absolutely not-

"That could be my girlfriend! I need to see if she's there!"

Draco was breathing heavily, trying to keep his temper subdued. "Just...just let us come with you."

"I will not-

"You heartless bitch!" he yelled. "I need to see Hermione! I fucking need to, do you not get that?"

"No!" Tonks argued firmly. "Look at how angry the pair of you are! Your presence would do more harm than good-

"Please, cousin," he forced the words out, hating that this situation had reduced him to begging. "Let me see her."

"Draco-

"Take them with you, Nymphadora," said Andromeda steadily, trying to calm her grandson's cries.

Tonks arched an eyebrow at her. "But, Mum-

"If it was Remus, you'd be acting in the same way as them," she went on. "Just take them with you. Give them something...give them hope."

Draco observed his conflicted cousin intently as she seemed to weigh up her options, eyes flicking between Andromeda, Blaise, and himself. Letting go of an exasperated sigh, she rubbed her eyes and shot Draco a warning glare.

"If you put one foot out of line," she said slowly. "I swear, I will bloody-

"I won't," he assured her. "I won't."

"Fine then," she agreed stiffly. "Mum, where are the Porkeys I sent you? We need to be quick."

"Here," Andromeda replied, rummaging in a drawer and tossing Tonks a decorative eggcup wrapped in cloth. "Be safe. All of you."

Draco offered his aunt a curt nod of gratitude as Tonks carefully unwrapped the small trinket, laying it flat in her palm, cushioned by the cloth until they were all ready. His gut was twisting with everything; apprehension, concern, anticipation...

He was going to see Granger again, assuming this 'plan' his cousin had mentioned had gone well...assuming she'd managed to get out....assuming she was still alive...

Too many uncertain factors with so much room for error...He felt sick again.

"Right, come on. We need to move," said Tonks, her tone urgent. "On the count of three. One, two, three."

Chapter End Notes

...I'm definitely going to get shouted at for that...Sorry, but it needed to end there! Don't hate me...Anyway, I just want to thank you guys SO MUCH for pushing me to over 3000 reviews! I screamed, had a glass of champagne, and then screamed again. I have

no idea how to thank you! Also, a huge thanks to the lovely people who have made some Trailers for Isolation, and also for the new FanArt that people have sent me. All the links are on my profile page, and you should really have a look and let the wonderful people know how talented they are.

I'm sure you've noticed I've borrowed a few of things that happened in the films but not in the books...like the chase at the beginning and when Bella writes 'Mudblood' on Hermione's arm. I just quite liked these ideas and decided to do my own spin on them, so hopefully they work okay...There will probably be some more of that in later chapters etc.

Ummmm...that's all I need to say, really. The next chapter should be up earlier than usual...some of it's already done so I will crack on with that and get it posted soon! Again, thank you all so much for reading Iso! I have been overwhelmed by the response! Read and Review!

Bex-chan.

Pulse

Chapter Notes

If I may recommend some songs again please? Barcelona - Please Don't Go reminds me of this chapter, but particularly Ryan Star - Losing Your Memory. (this song is just the perfect for this chapter, I think!) Let me know how they work!

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

Draco managed to keep his balance when they landed, and as the dizzying effects of the Portkey wore off, he found himself in an overgrown garden, facing the back of unfamiliar and secluded house that was blanketed with ivy. It looked far too serene, too innocuous, and he began to question whether Tonks had muddled up her Portkeys, but then he heard the shouting.

Several raised voices were picked up by the wind, the words and intent stifled by the thick walls of the house, but the panic in those voices was loud and clear.

Tonks shot ahead like a bullet and it jerked him into action, his toes practically nipping at her ankles, and Blaise was close behind him as they raced to the house. They barged inside, following the cries for help and the heavy thumps of hasty footsteps to a kitchen-come-dining-room, and Draco froze.

The room was in chaos.

His ears instantly began to ache from all the yelling, until all the voices seemed to blur into a piercing roar of noise. There was too much going on in such a small space, and his eyes darted from one screaming person to the next, trying to make sense of it. He recognised Ollivander first, the elderly wizard trembling and feebly dabbing his fingers against a nasty wound on his forehead. That Thomas lad from Gryffindor...was it Dean?...was trying to help Ollivander, calling out for assistance while trying to nurse his own wounds; an oozing gash on his shoulder, and a broken arm, judging by the abnormal bend of his elbow. Next to them was a Goblin with blood trickling down from his hairline but little else to indicate any distress, and Draco recognised him to be Griphook from Gringotts.

He noticed Lovegood next, looking more dazed than usual with a split lip and a spray of purple-black bruises across her face, chest and arms. Blaise stormed past him to get to her, grasping her elbows and examining her closely, gently tilting her chin and mumbling questions about the severity of her injuries. Lovegood simply smiled a dreamy smile and touched his face.

His attention shifted to Potter, a crumpled and stuttering heap on the floor, half sobbing and half in shock as he hunched over a bleeding House-elf who was dead in the eyes. He was

pleading for help, and that Lupin bloke was crouching at his side, trying to calm him and pry the lifeless House-elf from his hands. Potter stubbornly resisted, clutching the small creature and shaking his head like madman as he pleaded with Lupin to try and revive it.

And then his eyes landed on a mess of matted curls drenched with blood, once brown but now a sickly, burgundy colour, and he forgot to breathe.

Completely paralysed.

Hoping he was mistaken, he sought her face and his legs went a little weak. All her familiar features were there, but they were so, so different. Her skin was eerily pale, ashen like an antique china doll, and her lips were blue except for the thin trail of blood sliding down to her jaw. And her arm...dear fuck, her arm. It looked like it had been mauled; deep slices that were practically spitting blood, and her skin was red-raw where it was split into...letters? Mudblood?

There was bile at the back of his throat and he choked.

He realised then that Weasley was cradling her, repeatedly mumbling something that sounded like, "my fault," with tears on his cheeks. At any other time, he would have been infuriated just thinking about Weasley touching her, but he didn't react...barely acknowledged him, too overwhelmed and stunned. He focussed solely on her, searching for any indication of life. A breath. A groan. A flutter of eyelashes. Just any sign of anything.

She really did look dead.

He had to look away. He lost his balance and stumbled back a few paces until he collided with a table, and he grasped it to steady himself, his breaths leaving him in sharp bursts. He closed his eyes when they started to burn and his heartbeat was beating painfully in his sockets and eardrums.

She couldn't be.

Absolutely not.

He opened his eyes and his vision was misty, but that didn't matter because Tonks was kneeling next to Ron and blocking his view of Granger. If he'd had the voice, he would've screamed at her to move, but instead he tilted his chin and watched as she searched for a pulse, drowning out the racket in the room and focussing on his cousin's voice.

"...need to calm down, Ron," she mumbled steadily, but he could hear the alarm in her voice. "Just hold her still...I need to-

"I'm sorry," blurted Weasley. "I didn't mean to-

"Calm down."

"No, but it was my fault, and I-

"I have it!" Tonks gasped with relief. "I have it, I have a pulse! Give her to me, Ron. Let her go."

Draco let go of a strangled sigh and felt some strength return to his limbs. He watched as Tonks practically slapped away Weasley's hands and hauled Hermione into her arms, manoeuvring with a little difficulty as she moved towards the table Draco was leaning against. She laid Hermione down with care and studied her intently, assessing the damage and mumbling behind her clenched teeth.

Draco just kept staring at Hermione, eyes narrowed to stop them stinging and his muscles rigid to hide his trembling. He moved slowly around the table on unsteady feet, pausing at Hermione's side and blocking out his cousin's muttered Healing Spells and everything else in the room.

"Wake up," he whispered, barely loud enough to hear himself.

Being this close to her again made his fingertips itch, but his mind just couldn't make sense of seeing her in this state, and it made him hesitate. His Granger had always been so full of energy, be it a spark in her eyes, a blush warming her cheeks, or a subtle smile on her lips, even in sleep. This Granger looked like she'd been carved from dead stone and then splashed with red paint for morbid effect.

"Shit," murmured Tonks, breaking his trance. "Remus! Where's the Dittany? And I need the Wound-cleaning Potion! And-

"Top cupboard!"

Draco zoned out again as Tonks tore open a cabinet and returned with a handful of small vials. In the corner of his eye, he was convinced one of Granger's fingers twitch, and he thought it might be okay to touch her now. He stretched out his hand to reach for hers, but the moment his thumb grazed the soft but cold skin of her palm, someone was clamping down on his shoulder and hauling him backwards. He was pulled back several paces away from Granger, and he whipped around to confront Weasley, flushed and seething with hot rage.

"You stay away from her!" he spat. "You have NO right-

"Get the fuck out of my way, Weasley!" yelled Draco. "You don't have a clue-

"Yes, I do! She told me about you!"

Draco cocked an eyebrow with surprise. "Then you should know it's a good idea to stand aside-

"YOU WILL NOT GO NEAR HER!"

"WEASLEY, I WILL FUCKING DRAG YOU IF I HAVE TO-

"SHUT UP!" Tonks shouted over them, and it all went very quiet. "Ron, you need to tell me what happened to her so I can help her!"

Weasley faltered. "I don't...I'm not-

"Come on, Ron!" she pushed. "The Cruciatus Curse? Poison? Something else-

"The Cruciatus Curse."

Draco's eyes went wide and back to Granger, and he ached to touch her again. He'd never been subjected to the curse himself, but he knew the possible destructive effects of it well; internal bleeding, seizures, paralysis, organ damage, memory loss or insanity...He winced.

"For how long?" Tonks asked Weasley. "How many times?"

"I don't know," Ron groaned. "We weren't...we weren't there when it was happening-

"Remus!" she called. "Remus, I need your help here! I need more potions!"

Draco tracked his old professor as he offered an apology to Potter, who was still rocking back and forth with the dead House-elf in his lap.

"There's more in the back bedroom," said Remus as he came to his wife's aid, quickly but carefully gathering Hermione in his arms. "We'll take her upstairs."

Draco made to follow as Lupin left the room, but Tonks blocked his path and planted a firm hand against his chest. "Move out of my way," he growled. "I need to be with her-

"No," she shook her head. "You are staying here-

"I want to help her! Just-

"If you want to help, you stay out of the way!" she ordered, also regarding Weasley. "That goes for you too, Ron. Both of you will stay down here!"

An enraged snarl rumbled at the back of his throat as his cousin disappeared out the room, and he was once again without Granger. The frustration, the fury, the resentment, and the angst all boiled and bubbled within his chest, and at the core of it was this devastating craving to just know Granger was alright. But no. She'd been ripped away from him again, and he felt the walls of his control crack, and Weasley might as well have been wearing a target.

"You said it was your fault," he hissed in a forebodingly low tone, locking his dark eyes on Weasley. "What the hell did you mean by that?"

"Piss off, Malfoy."

Draco's fist lunged for Ron's face of its own accord, clipping his jaw and sending him staggering backwards a few strides. "You mind your fucking mouth, Weasel!"

"Don't you dare touch me, you slimy twat!" Ron barked.

"I asked you a question!"

"YOUR FAMILY DID THAT TO HER!" he screamed. "YOUR psycho aunt! YOUR parents in YOUR home!"

Draco hesitated, open-mouthed and so incredibly lost about how to respond to that. He hated Bellatrix at that moment, could feel himself physically vibrating with all the loathing he felt for his aunt. And his parents...he didn't know...he couldn't even contemplate the idea of his mother inflicting torture on another human, Muggle-born or not. His father...fuck, he didn't know. His brain was throbbing. And Granger...Hermione...he'd never be able to get that image of her out his head; so broken and yet somehow still beautiful.

He shouldn't have let his mind wander. Weasley punched him hard in the face, snapping his head to the side with an audible clap. He grunted and spat, staring at the tinge of red to his saliva as his cheek started to pound. His temper soared and he felt his magic course through his veins, that prickling sort of static heat that was untamed and hazardous. It felt volatile, and so did he.

"Bad move, wanker," he growled, looking up from the floor to find the tip of Weasley's wand aimed at him. He reached into his pocket to withdraw his own wand, but then Lovegood calmly stepped between them, facing Weasley, and he scowled at the back of the girl's head.

"Luna," Ron frowned. "What are you doing?"

"Enough damage has been caused by hostile magic today," she said softly. "Don't you think?"

"This has nothing to do with you, Luna."

"Lovegood," sneered Draco. "Get the fuck out of the-

"Hey," said Blaise, cautiously edging closer to his friend's side. "Come on, mate. You need to compose yourself. You're not thinking straight-

"Don't even bother, Zabini-

"It's not the time or the place. You are out of control-

"SHUT UP, BLAISE!"

"Do you think Tonks is going to let you see Granger if you put a hole in Weasley's chest?" he questioned quietly, so only they would hear. "Look, you can beat the living shit out of him any other day, but you know Tonks will send you straight back to Andromeda's if you do it now, and you will have gained nothing."

Draco despised the reason in his friend's words, but the grip on his wand slackened anyway. There were too many eyes on him; Thomas, Ollivander, and even Potter had stopped what they were doing, and he felt far too exposed. He glared at Weasley over Lovegood's shoulder as she continued to speak to him in soothing tones, his thoughts shifting back to Hermione, and all his fury was consumed by concern for his witch.

"You know, Harry looks like he needs your support right now," he heard Lovegood mumble, and Weasley glanced at his inconsolable friend. "You should go and help him, Ron."

With a resigned sigh, he reluctantly lowered his wand and met Draco's aggressive stare.
"Keep him out of my face-

"Be grateful it's still intact, Weasel," Draco snarled as Ron headed over to Potter, and it was only then that he tucked his wand back into his pocket.

"Right," breathed Lovegood, turning to face he and Blaise. "I think I'll make some tea."

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Draco rubbed his sore and swollen eyes and wondered if he'd cried today, but been completely oblivious to it.

He guessed he'd been sat in this spot for about six hours, leaning against the wall beside the only door that hadn't responded to an Alohomora and had been charmed with a Silencing Spell. The room Granger was in.

In the hour or so before that, everything had carried on around him in a distant haze. Weasley and Lovegood had managed to convince Potter to relinquish his hold on the House-elf — a House-elf Draco had remembered had worked for his family some years ago — and they'd wrapped the dead creature up in a white sheet, and laid him out on the sofa in the sitting room. After Weasley had fixed his broken arm, Thomas had helped Ollivander to a bedroom and healed his injuries, insisting it was wise for him stay in the same room to keep an eye on the frail Wandmaker. The Goblin, Griphook, had also been given a room, and he retreated upstairs without so much as a thankful dip of his head or any inclination that he cared about the state of the injured.

And then Lovegood had done what she'd said she would. She'd made tea, and she'd spiked it with Sleeping Draught. Had he not been so distracted by his anxiety for Hermione's condition, and the fact that Lovegood annoyed him to the core, he might have mentally commended the witch for the smart move. She and Blaise had used magic to levitate Potter and Weasley to bed, and Draco had instantly set about finding the room Granger would be in.

And he had not moved from his position since.

It was evening now, and the house was getting dark as the final rays of sun simmered and gave way to night. He felt physically drained and his body had gone numb with the need for rest, but his brain was alert, stubbornly refusing to yield to sleep until he knew that Granger was awake and well, and he would demand to see it for himself.

A troubled and lonely mind drifts between self-destructive thoughts when there is nothing but hollow hours and silence for company.

He'd thought constantly about the side-effects of the Cruciatus Curse, reciting them again to himself.

Internal bleeding, seizures, paralysis, organ damage, memory loss or insanity.

Memory loss or insanity.

It was those last two that disturbed him the most. The idea of Granger being unable to remember what had happened between them in her room did damaging things to his psyche, and he had revisited those memories and tried to recall every detail...just in case...in case he needed to remind her. Fuck, that would ruin him.

And insanity...the thought of Granger without that brilliant mind of hers...he couldn't even begin to comprehend how he would deal with that.

And then he'd thought of his family and the part they'd played in his lover's torture. He'd never really held any sort of regard for Bellatrix as she'd been locked up in Azkaban for the majority of his life, and her psychotic mindset had made it impossible for him to ever perceive her as a real member of his family, but his parents...Bloody hell, his parents. The fact that they were still working for Voldemort after he had put a price on his head was disconcerting, but what if they'd been forced? What if Weasley was mistaken? Or what if they had indeed contributed to Hermione's brutal ordeal?

He groaned into his palms as a pulsating headache made his eyes water.

He'd been without her for weeks, and now there was only a wall separating them, but she might be so much further than that if her mind had been effected by the curse. Why was fate and circumstance so hell-bent on sabotaging them?

He'd have risked insanity and isolation to be back in her room again; just the pair of them locked away without Tonks, Weasley and every-fucker-else determined to throw daggers at their relationship.

"I thought you might be here," Lovegood's voice made him start. "I brought you some tea."

He tilted his chin to regard her coldly. "Do I look thick? I'm not having anything you give me."

"There's no Sleeping Draught in it. Just a tiny hint of Lavender to ease your stress."

"I don't want your sodding tea, Lovegood," he snapped. "Just bugger off."

She didn't move, but then he hadn't really expected her to. "You're an odd person, Draco."

"Excuse me?" he scoffed. "I'm odd?"

"You're so determined to distance yourself from those who are trying to help you-

"I never asked for anybody's help. I definitely haven't asked for yours-

"Friends shouldn't have to ask-

"And I am certainly not your friend," he bit out, his tone rough and gritty with distaste. "Do you have any concept of how irritating you are? And you're completely gone in the head. You just sit there talk absolute bollocks and it's infuriating. How Blaise puts up with you, I'll never know."

"He loves me," she shrugged casually. "You know, like you love Hermione, and she loves-

"What?" he hissed quietly. "Get the hell out of my face-

"Oh, I see," she murmured, innocently cocking her head to the side. "You're still pretending you don't love her?"

"How bloody dare you presume you know anything about my relationship with her!"

"Your actions speak for themselves," she said with a slight grin. "See, I told you you're odd. There really is no logical explanation for why you should continue to deny it-

"And you're the queen of logic, are you?" he remarked, rolling his eyes. "You don't know the first thing about how I feel towards Granger, so don't-

"Or maybe I do understand, and it makes you uncomfortable," she interrupted. "You're right though, it's your business and not mine, but...perhaps you should make it Hermione's business-

"That's enough!" he barked furiously. "I won't tell you again, Lovegood; leave me the fuck alone."

With a small bob of her head, she bent down and placed the mug by his feet before she tuned to leave. "I hope you like the tea," she said over her shoulder.

Draco's heavy and incensed glare pierced Lovegood's back as she retreated down the corridor and disappeared down the stairs. He grabbed the mug she'd left behind and hurled it at the adjacent wall, watching the jagged shards of porcelain explode with a loud smash as the tea splattered across the floorboards. He'd deny it until his deathbed, but Lovegood had touched a nerve.

He'd be lying if he said the exasperating topic of love hadn't slipped into his mind in the last few hours, despite his self-conserving attempts to ignore the subject.

He knew what Lovegood was thinking; that he rejected the mere mention of love because he considered it a weakness, but that was a ridiculous notion that always seemed to arise in repetitive romance stories featuring a surly antihero with a maturity complex.

He didn't think love was weakness. His parents were very much in love, openly so, and he'd never thought them to be weak for it. The fact of the matter was, loving Granger would be completely inconvenient. Loving her would mean there was no going back. To admit that he had fallen in love with her would be to slice the final fragile thread that connected him to everything he had lived by before; his prejudices, his wealth, his parents...all of it.

But then, maybe he already had. Maybe convenience had failed to be a factor for some time now.

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Blaise eyed the satisfied smile on his girlfriend's pretty lips as she strolled back into the kitchen. "That took you a while," he commented, leaving his seat to approach her. "Dare I ask why?"

"I just spoke to him about a few things," replied Luna flippantly. "You know, I think Tonks may have some nargles in her garden. I'm sure I put my charm on the countertop."

"It's in my pocket," he said. "What did you say to him?"

"What was necessary."

"Care to elaborate?"

"Possibly tomorrow."

Blaise trailed his fingers down her spine and shook his head. "You're wasting your time there, Luna. He's too stubborn. Even by a Slytherin's standards."

"As I recall, you were also very stubborn," she reminded him. "But yes, he's worse than you were. Maybe even worse than Theo."

"Then why bother trying?"

She exhaled a brief and delicate laugh. "Always the pessimist."

"I refute that. I would consider myself a realist," he said, coiling a loose lock of her hair around his finger. "You, on the other hand, are very much an optimist."

"Perhaps someone needs to be an optimist at the moment," she mumbled, turning her head to place a chaste kiss against his palm. "You know, all great victories come from small ones. Maybe today won't be so dark if Draco sees the light."

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The early hours of tomorrow morning came slowly; one o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock, they dragged by at such a taunting pace. He raked his fingernails through his hair for the fiftieth time and rolled his shoulders to click away some of the tension in his muscles and bones. For over twelve hours, he had done nothing but wait with the same clawing thoughts bouncing around in his skull. He was tired and edgy, his backside numb and his limbs like cardboard after countless bouts of pins and needles, but he'd wait another twelve hours if he had to.

He heard the handle of the door creak before he saw it twist, and he climbed to his feet too quickly, all the blood rushing to his head and making him sway. Lupin stepped out the room first, closely followed by Tonks, and they turned their heads to acknowledge Draco with weary eyes and sweat on their upper-lips, evidently fatigued after twelve hours of Merlin knew how many Healing Spells. His breath hitched in his throat when Tonks shut the door behind her and massaged the bridge of her nose, but he kept his expression tight and stoic, fighting the urge to shove them aside and force his way into the room.

"You can go ahead to bed, Remus," she said. "I'm just going to have a quick word with him."

Lupin faltered for a moment, observing Draco with deliberate suspicion before he did as his wife had requested and left them alone. Tonks had placed herself between Draco and the door, and he looked past her at the handle, his tolerance fleeting quickly as his cousin gave no indication that she intended to move.

"Tenacious little bugger, aren't you?" she quipped. "I thought I told you very clearly to stay downstairs-

"Merlin's grave," he growled to himself. "Let me inside that fucking room or tell me-

"I wanted to apologise to you," she interrupted him, and it threw him off guard. "I think I...I underestimated your relationship with Hermione-

"It's not your place to judge mine and Granger's relationship at all."

"I'm just trying to let you know that I understand now," she continued. "And I will give you a break-

"I don't give a shit about your opinion of me!" he blurted. "You want to do me a favour? Then you tell me-

"She's alright," said Tonks finally. "Considering what happened, she is better than expected. Her wounds are healed, except for that...thing on her arm. Physically, she is going to be fine."

"And mentally?"

"We're not sure yet," she sighed. "She suffered a bad blow to her head, and with the Cruciatus Curse...she's very muddled up, drifting in and out consciousness and just mumbling incoherently. As far as we can tell, she's fine, but we won't really know until she wakes up properly."

Draco swallowed down the clot of nerves in his windpipe. "And her memory?"

"Again, we won't know until she wakes up, but perhaps-

"Are you going to let me fucking room, or not?" he snapped impatiently. Why was he here listening to this clueless witch when she apparently had no clue how Hermione was doing?

"Or do I have to-

"Alright," she stopped him. "You can go in, Draco."

He surged past her and barged into the room, pausing once he had crossed the threshold to allow his eyes to adjust to the dim lighting. There was a lone candle in the corner, coaxing flickering shadows to dance across the walls, but he instantly focussed on the silhouette of a figure on the bed. Hermione. He slammed the door shut behind him, adamant that there would be no more interruptions, and then he slowly made his way towards the silhouette, transfixed on the comforting rises and falls of her chest.

All the haste left him, and now that he was only a few feet away from her, he suddenly felt wary and tentative, like he might break her if he got too close. She made a sleepy little sound and he quicken his steps, his heart racing in his ribcage and his pulse banging against his eardrums with anxiety, anticipation, adrenaline...he didn't even know anymore.

He reached the bed and concentrated on the sound of her breathing before he eased himself down and sat at her side. All he could make out was her shadow and a brandy-coloured halo from where her hair caught the candlelight. It wasn't enough. He removed his wand from his pocket and waved it over the flame to give it some life, and finally, he could see her.

And she looked...normal.

She was so different to the haunting version of her he'd seen earlier; all bloodied and battered with frosty skin and a dead expression.

She looked like Granger now, clean and relaxed with some pink in her cheeks and a slight frown scrunching her brow. The only indication of her nightmare were some half-healed, yellow bruises by her temple and the neat bandage wrapped around her arm from her wrist to her elbow, and he glared and the red stain already beginning to seep through the dressing.

He ached to touch her, but it took him a minute or so to actually do so, and he softly grazed the backs of his fingers along her jaw and down to her chin. His thumb absently traced the outline of her lips, but he froze when she stirred and moaned in her sleep. She shifted a little, and then her eyes slowly peeled open with a few long blinks and a delicate fluttering of her eyelashes.

She gazed straight at him with those hazel eyes he had missed, and he stayed completely still, knowing this was the moment when he'd know if her memory had been dented. Her stare was glassy and vacant, and he prepared himself for the worse.

But then she smiled and reached up to cup his face.

"Hello, Draco."

Her voice was hoarse and fragile, but at least it was there. His lids fell shut and he leaned into her palm, exhaling loudly with relief as she tenderly stroked her finger across his cheekbone. She remembered him.

"You're not bleeding this time."

His eyes snapped open and stared down at her with a wide and uneasy look. "Why would I be bleeding?"

"You're always bleeding in my dreams," she murmured, and he grimaced at the eerie innocence to her tone.

"Granger, you're not-

"Dreaming," she finished for him. "You always say that."

"But-

"Will you stay with me?" she asked, her lids drooping and her hand falling back to her side as she struggled to remain conscious. "Will you stay until I need to wake up?"

As Tonks had warned him, she was evidently confused and disorientated, and the disappointment stabbed at his gut. It was not uncommon for those who suffered memory loss from the Cruciatus Curse to recall things subconsciously; sometimes in dreams, and sometimes in old rituals that were never quite erased from the brain. The positive reaction to him was promising, but it wasn't a definite assurance that her psyche had survived Bellatrix's torture, and that vehement fury that he felt towards his aunt started to infect him again.

"Draco?" she mumbled drowsily, severing his train of thought. "Will you stay?"

The anger dissipated, and he kicked off his shoes. "Yes, Granger."

Her lips twitched with another smile, and he didn't bother to undress as he slipped under the covers and pulled her to him, nestling his nose in her hair. She melted into him as she always had done, like it was instinct; her back against his chest and their legs tangled together.

A content hum left Hermione. "I love you."

And because she thought she was dreaming, and inconvenience is inevitable, he sighed and whispered those words back to her, unable to decide if it was a blessing or a curse that she probably wouldn't remember his reluctant confession come morning.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! Sorry about the wait...again...I feel bad...I wanted to post this asap, so I know there are probably a few grammar and spelling errors. I shall reread tomorrow and correct them, so my sincere apologies for that.

So, HUGE thanks are in order! To whoever voted in the Dramione Awards and helped Iso to get two awards, I love you, and I shall have your children! I mean really...I can't even begin to thank you. Round of wine on me! Also, there's some more FanArt and a new trailer from lovely, talented people (links of profile page) so thank you so much for doing them! Hope the chapter was okay! Read and Review!

Bex

Marks

Chapter Notes

If I may recommend some songs again please? Keane - Atlantic (especially the end of the song) and Angus and Julia Stone - The Devil's Tears (This song, for me, is the ultimate Dramione song. The lyrics, the tone...it's just perfect).

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

Tap, tap, tap.

Draco tried to cling to sleep and nestled his face a little deeper into the pillow of velvet-soft curls under his cheek. He was warm and comfortable, trying to return to a dream he didn't remember, and he tightened his grip on Granger.

Tap, tap, tap.

"Sod off," he grumbled tiredly.

But then he remembered that they weren't back in Hogwarts in Granger's dorm, despite the familiarity of having her in his arms again. All the mayhem of yesterday came back to him like a bolt of lightening, jolting him awake and sending a pounding headache to the back of his brain. He propped himself up and immediately checked Granger, watching her for a moment as her chest expanded with deep, sleepy breaths. She looked as she would on any other morning; peaceful and well, save the yellow remains of a few bruises, and her still pallid complexion.

Tap, tap, tap.

He shot a frustrated look at the door and decided to ignore it. It couldn't have been before six in the morning judging by the dim, blue light in the room, which meant he'd barely managed two hours sleep. He was exhausted and furious that someone would dare to disturb him after he and Granger and barely been reunited, especially when it was probably bloody Weasley coming back for round two.

"Draco," Tonks' hushed voice filtered through the door. "Draco, are you awake? I'm coming in-

"No, don't," he grouched. "What the hell do you want?"

"Just open the bloody door."

"No."

"Do it, or I'm coming in."

His lip curled with irritation as he carefully untangled his legs from Granger's and left the bed with some colourful profanities on the tip of his tongue. He grabbed his wand and crossed the room, pulling the door open just a crack and narrowing a glare at his cousin through the small gap.

"You'd better have a good reason for-

"How's she doing?" asked Tonks. "Is she awake?"

"No."

"Then you should come and get some breakfast."

"What are you on about?" he frowned. "It's what, six in the morning?"

"Half six actually," she corrected. "The others will be waking soon, and I thought it would be best for you to get some food now. Harry and Ron will want to see her, and I won't be able to delay them for long if you want to have some privacy with her."

Draco scrutinised her warily and considered her suggestion, a little thrown by her offer to help. "I'm not hungry."

"When was the last time you ate?"

"That's irrelevant-

"You need to have some food," she pressed. "Wouldn't you rather get it now when everyone is still in bed? Come on, and then you can stay in here with her, and I will do what I can to make sure you can have some more time alone."

"For Salazar's sake," he growled, glancing at Granger over his shoulder before he left the room. "Fine, let's go then."

"Not really a morning person, are you?"

"Not when my girlfriend's unconscious and I have bloody cousin who won't piss off, no," he said stiffly, noticing her amused grin as they headed downstairs. "What?"

"You called Hermione your girlfriend."

"What are you, fucking twelve?"

"It was simply an observation-

"A pointless one," he grumbled. "Do you honestly think I would be here if I just considered her a casual acquaintance? Bloody moron."

"And lose the mood or you're not having any bacon with your full English."

Draco rolled his eyes as they entered the kitchen and dining area; the room that had been so hectic and frenzied just yesterday now completely clean and organised. No overturned furniture, no scattered ornaments, and no blood stains. He swore he could still smell it though, the panic and the gore, and his eyes studied that table Granger had been on as his stomach twitched with discomfort.

"Do we have to eat in here?"

"Where else would we eat?" asked Tonks, shrugging her shoulders.

"The sitting room?"

"Dobby's body is in the sitting room," she told him. "This room has been Scourgified multiple times. I assure you it's clean."

Draco hesitantly sat himself at the table as Tonks began to recite a few incantations for the breakfast to make itself, and he jerked in his seat when he felt something brush up against his calf. Looking down, he met with a pair of wide, orange eyes, and then there was a tatty mass of ginger fur hopping onto his lap.

"I'd wondered where he'd gotten to," said Tonks. "That's Hermione's cat, Cr-

"Crookshanks," he finished for her, lifting an eyebrow when Granger's pet nuzzled his nose against his hand. "Yes, I know. Merlin forbid she pick an attractive cat."

"Clever thing, though," she remarked, pausing to give him a knowing look. "Good judge of character."

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Hermione bolted upright in bed with a gasp that might have been a scream if her throat hadn't felt like sandpaper.

Her head was fuzzy and her muscles tired, but her defensive instincts were immediate as she fumbled around for her wand or her bag, alarmed when she could find neither. Her wild eyes scanned the room, and while she thought she might recognise it, she couldn't figure out why and she was wary to relax, knowing how easily someone could have altered the space with a few shrewd spells.

She tried to think back, remembering the Manor and that first blast of the Cruciatus Curse in Bellatrix's screeching voice, but that was all she could recall. It was all very misty and fractured after that...just a lot of screaming. So then where was she?

She placed her hand flat against the mattress, finding it warm. Merlin knew how, but she just knew someone had laid beside her in the bed, and it made her unbearably nervous.

"Harry?" she called, her voice low and rough, unrecognisable. "Ron?"

She hadn't really expected a response, but she'd hoped for one. The pain registered then and she thought she might vomit; the aftershocks of Bellatrix's merciless torture making her body throb in time with her heartbeats. Everywhere was tender and sore, but her arm in particular stung like a fresh burn, and she eyed the red and damp bandage with uncertainty. For a second, she considered removing the dressing, but decided that it was probably wise to resist until she knew where she was and exactly who had applied it.

She ran her hand up and down the mattress and tested the remains of body heat against her fingertips. Whoever had shared this bed with her hadn't long left. She scanned the room again, searching for anything suspicious or any indication of another person, but the contents were minimal; the bed, a dresser, and a wardrobe.

She debated with herself for a minute whether leaving the room was the best idea but, as always, curiosity gave her a firm shove towards a decision, even if it was the wrong one. Shedding the covers, she winced as she shifted her body to the edge of the bed and planted her feet on the floor, but the moment she rested her weight on them she went tumbling down. She groaned as the impact sent a sharp wave of pain around her already aching body, and she tried to stand, but it was futile.

Her legs were unstable and weak, almost numb, and she instantly hated the predicament she was in. She didn't do fragile or helpless, and the idea of being unable to get to her feet frustrated her, especially when she already felt vulnerable in this disconcerting situation. She thought about crawling to the door but knew it wasn't a safe idea, so she put all her strength in her arms and tried to pull herself back up on the bed.

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"No, finish your food, Draco," said Tonks. "And stop shovelling it down like that or you'll choke."

He glowered at his cousin. "I'm sorry, I must've missed the announcement about you being my minder."

"Sarcasm is the lowest form of wit, you know."

"Whoever said that was just pissed off that he couldn't do it properly," he replied, pushing away his plate and leaving his chair. "Right, I'm done."

"Maybe you should take Crookshanks up with you," she suggested before he could leave.
"Hermione must've missed him, and he's been pining for her-

"Not yet. I don't want there to be any distractions when she wakes up if she's going to have trouble as it is, and that cat's a bloody attention-seeking thing-

"Have trouble?" repeated Tonks with a frown. "What do you mean?"

He slanted his eyes away from her. "It doesn't matter-

"No, wait a moment. What are you anxious about? Are her injuries not healing-

"Look, I'm not thick," he cut in. "I know what the Cruciatus Curse can do to people's minds."

Tonks' lips pursed with understanding. "You're worried she won't remember you," she mumbled, watching Draco as he flexed his fists with anxiety. "You needn't be concerned with that. The victim will usually have been subjected to days of the Curse before it has any effect on their memory or-

"You're underestimating Bellatrix's power-

"I'm not, Draco-

"Yes, you are!" he shouted. "I don't know what it is with you sodding people, but not everything will turn out all fucking brilliant with a side order of rainbows and stardust!"

"I was just trying to-

"Sometimes, things are just shit, and that is the end of it! Your ability to be optimistic about everything would almost be impressive if it wasn't laughable!"

Tonks frowned. "You're mocking me for having hope?"

"No, I pity you for relying on it."

"You pity me for hoping that my father didn't die in vain, and that my son will grow up in free world?" she said with a terse tone. "I don't rely on hope, Draco, it just helps to get me through the day sometimes, and it will help us win this war."

"Well, that's your deluded opinion-

"And I don't believe you would be here if you didn't have the smallest dose of hope that Hermione will remember you, and that you might have a life after this, with her-

"Enough," he breathed through his gritted teeth. "You keep your word and make sure Potter and Weasley stay out of my way."

He left the kitchen without waiting for a response, walking with an agitated gait and swallowing hard to shift the uncomfortable heat under his collar. Tonks' words about a life after the war had left him anxious as he'd purposely avoided considering his future if

Voldemort was defeated. The issue of his parents and their inevitable disapproval of Granger meant he would need to make more choices that would ultimately alter his life dramatically, if they all made it out alive.

It hardly seemed worth mapping out his future when there were so many cracks in the present.

At the moment, all Draco could think to do was to return to Granger's side and savour her company when she woke up. If she remembered him, and that if was his sole priority right now. The others could wait at the back of his skull. He climbed the stairs and went back the bedroom, expecting to find Hermione where he'd left her, and having every intention of joining her under the covers until she roused.

He pushed open the door, took a few strides into the room, and the first thing he saw was a flash of those familiar auburn curls whipping to the side, and then he was staring at those wide, brown eyes that he'd missed, and they stared straight back at him. He froze where he stood with his breath trapped in his throat, no more than four feet away from her, and they simply looked at each other in silence for the longest minute of his life.

She was half-on-half-off the bed, awkwardly resting her weight on her arms and upper body, craning her head over her shoulder to see him. Her lips were parted with surprise and her features were completely still in a stunned expression, and he searched every inch of her for any hint of recognition, but all she did was hold his gaze like she was challenging him to disappear.

But then she blinked, and the small gesture seemed to make the clocks tick again.

He wasn't sure if the strength in her arms gave or if she'd tried to hurl herself towards him, but she swivelled her body around, and a protective instinct pulled him towards her to break her fall. She knocked his balance and they sank to the floor, her movements clumsy with desperation as she practically clawed at him, clambering up his chest until her arms were latched around his neck and her body was tight against his. She clutched him like it had been years and not months; her fingernails digging into his shoulder-blades almost painfully, not that he cared.

He snaked an arm around her waist and his other hand grabbed her hair, moving it to her other shoulder so he could rest his mouth just below her ear and feel her heartbeat against his lips. Not a kiss, just contact; skin touching skin.

She was holding him so tight she trembled, embracing him with everything she had, and her breath was in his hair, leaving her in shallow, little gasps. And they just sat there on the floor in a tangled bundle of limbs; locked around each other, simply inhaling and exhaling.

"You remember me."

He hadn't meant to say it aloud, and if he hadn't been so close to her ear, she'd have never heard it.

"Impossible to forget," she mumbled back. "You are...carved into me."

He clenched his eyes shut. Her voice sounded so different; scratchy and coarse, but it was a relief to hear it nonetheless. She felt so warm and so real, like she might dissolve into him, and he completely lost himself. Never had he felt so broken down and exposed, but he was too absorbed by her to pay it any heed.

How long had it even been? Two months? It felt so much longer, but then sleepless nights drag on with no reflection of time. And their parting back at Hogwarts had been so rushed and destructive, and then yesterday when he had just powerlessly watched her bleed...fuck, it had all been so intense, but now everything was calm and...it was easier to breathe again.

Hermione couldn't suppress the need to simply touch him, scraping her fingernails across the grooves of his back, the nape of his neck, and grazing his hairline. His scent was how it had always been; musky and wonderful, and she buried her face into the sway of his shoulder until it was all she could smell. Her heart was hammering in her chest so fast and heavy with excitement, shock, awe, and her chest was swelling just to keep the emotions contained. Feathering a few chaste kisses against his skin, she closed her eyes and felt some inevitable tears slip down her cheeks.

Draco pushed her back so their noses were inches apart, and she was momentarily stuck breathless by how close he was. She could see him properly now, all of him; the tell-tale lines and shadows of insomnia cresting his eyes, and the permanent frown on his lips. He broke the eye contact to track the slow path of one of her tears, and she felt him loosen his grip as his brow wrinkled with worry.

"Did I hurt you?"

"No, no, no, of course not," she assured him quickly. "I'm just...I'm just happy to see you. Wasn't sure I would again, to be honest." She'd choked a little with that last part, but she covered it well and brushed her thumb along the ridge of his cheekbone. "I missed you."

He wondered how she could do that; wear her heart, and mind, and soul on her sleeve with such ease. There were hundreds of things he wanted to say, but he knew he wouldn't, and not because he thought confessing them would make him weak in her eyes, but because actions had more gravity where he was concerned.

So he leaned in and kissed her.

Not hard and not particularly soft, just firm enough that she could feel something from him that was sincere and strong enough to communicate how it felt to have her here. There were no fiery undertones to the gesture, no intentions borrowed by lust. It was just a simple, pure kiss.

His hand cupped her face so his fingers were entwined with her curls, and her sigh tingled his chin before he pressed his lips to hers. He pulled away and then kissed her again, and then again, and again, pushing more pressure each time. He pinched at her mouth with small tugs and nips, until their parted and damp lips were simply touching, and their elevated breaths were clashing between them.

Hermione dropped her forehead against his and made a small sound of contentment, and they just stayed like that for a few minutes with Draco rubbing the pad of his thumb in absent circles against her cheek. But it all ended too soon.

Hermione reared back with an alarmed expression. "The boys," she said. "The boys, Harry and Ron, are they-

"They're fine," he told her, resisting the temptation to make a snide comment or roll his eyes. "Everyone is fine, they're all here-

"Everyone? There were others?"

"Lovegood, Thomas, and Ollivander," he listed. "They're all okay. Fuck, I think Lovegood is already skipping around an imaginary maypole after sniffing too much Valerian-

"Draco-

"You had the worst injuries, Granger," he said, his tone sombre. "Trust me, everyone else is fine."

"Good, that's good," she mumbled absently. "But then how-

"Granger, if you're going to start hounding me with questions like the Swedish Wizards' Inquisition of 1512, then we should get off the floor."

"The Swedish Wizards' Inquisition was in 1496."

He couldn't help but smirk at her correction; so typical of her, regardless of the circumstances, and the familiarity of her bookish character was instantly appeasing. "You're wrong, but we can discuss it on the bed if you really-

"Wait. I need...I can't," she stuttered clumsily, and Draco thought she looked embarrassed. "I can't feel my legs properly. The curses must've affected my nerves...perhaps Neurapraxia or something. Can you...can you help me up?"

He knew her well enough to recognise she begrudged having to ask for help, so he nodded his head and refrained from making a comment about it, and made a mental note to mention it to Tonks later. He altered his footing and picked her up, one hand under her knees and the other supporting her back as he carefully placed her on the bed, seating himself behind her and drawing her to his chest.

Again, so familiar. Almost nostalgic. All that was missing was one of her silly Muggle books and her pesky cat purring at their feet, and it would be just like it had been before. She melted into him like it was the most natural thing in their world, and his arms folded around her just like they always had done, relaxing across her abdomen while his chin settled against her shoulder.

"This feels like home," she whispered delicately, like the comment was for her benefit alone. "Draco, where are we?"

"Tonks' house."

"I thought I recognised it a little. This room's quite similar to the one I stayed in when I was here." She paused. "But how come you're here?"

"Tonks brought Blaise and I from Andromeda's house."

"You've been staying with Andromeda? That's where the Portkey took you?" she asked. "That was...actually a very wise decision on McGonagall's part-

"You say wise, I say fucking mental."

"You don't get on well?" she asked, tilting her head to give him a doubtful look. "You called her 'Aunt 'Dromeda' easily enough."

Draco hesitated and licked his teeth. "It's better than it was, I guess."

"You said Tonks brought you and Blaise? As in Blaise Zabini?"

"Yes, there was a few of us staying at Andromeda's," he said. "Blaise, Theo, Bulstrode, Davis, Bletchley, and myself. Andromeda's basically running a secret safehouse for Slytherins who don't want to follow You-Know-Who, and have pissed off their parents in doing so."

"Wow," breathed Hermione, after a slight pause. "You know, I'd actually wondered what had happened to some of the people in your House. Andromeda must be very brave. I heard about Ted, and to deal with that while caring for a group of people she hardly knows...I can't imagine."

"She's fine."

"So why did Tonks only bring you and Blaise here?"

"Well, at the risk of sounding like one of those gossiping Prat-il twins-

"Patil."

"That's not what we called them in the Slytherin common room," he muttered. "Anyway, Blaise came because he and Lovegood are an item of sorts."

Hermione blinked. "Luna? Luna and Blaise?"

"Apparently her father assisted Aunt 'Dromeda with the safehouse, and Lovegood visited quite often," he told her flippantly. "Often enough that she and Blaise started their little... thing."

"That's why she kept disappearing at Hogwarts," she mumbled to herself. "That's...certainly an interesting development."

"I think 'fucking bizarre' is a more appropriate description."

"Who are we to judge?" she replied quickly. "Our relationship would hardly be considered conventional by most of the people we know."

He arched an eyebrow with reluctant agreement and kissed her throat. "Any more questions?"

"Hundreds," she sighed. "I would like to ask a bit more about Blaise and Luna, and some other things, but I think I'm done for a moment."

Draco clenched his eyes shut. "I have some questions."

He felt her stiffen in his arms, and he knew she was preparing herself for it, for the inevitable discussion about his family and their involvement with her ordeal at his old home. It hung in the air between them; heavy and foreboding, and he regretted having to broach the topic, but he needed to know.

"Okay," she said warily. "What do you want to know?"

He held her a little tighter and wondered where to start. "What happened to you, Granger?"

"The Snatchers found us and took us to the Manor," she began, her tone rather distant. "They wanted to summon You-Know-Who, but we had the Sword of Gryffindor, and your aunt Bellatrix-

"Don't call her my aunt," he interrupted suddenly, his voice low and abrasive. "Go on."

"Um, well, Harry and Ron were taken away," Hermione continued, swallowing hard. "And Bellatrix started to question me about how we got the sword, and she tortured me." She felt the muscles in his arms strengthen around her. "I...I remember her using the Cruciatus Curse on me, but I can't remember much after that. It's all a little fuzzy."

Draco sucked in a deep breath. "Were my parents there?"

"Your parents," she echoed quietly. "Uh...yes, they were there. Your father looked...quite fragile actually, like he'd been tortured."

"And my mother?"

"Your mother," she murmured, clutching at a flimsy memory. And then hit her, and she gasped. "Oh my God, your mother."

"What? Did she hurt you?"

"No, no. Merlin, I remember now. She knows."

"She knows what?" he pushed, trying to keep his patience. "What the hell are you-

"She knows about us," she told him. "Sh-she used Legilimency on me, and she saw us. She saw us together. I could feel her searching for you in my head, and I know she found my memories of you."

Draco's eyes went wider. "What did she do?"

"She...", Hermione trailed off, pausing for a moment. "She wanted to know where you were and she...offered to help me."

"What?" he asked, completely baffled by the concept. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, positive. That's a good thing, isn't it? "

His brow creased with thought. "I'm not sure," he admitted. "I think so."

They both went quiet, and Draco contemplated Hermione's significant and surprising account of his mother's actions at the Manor. In hindsight, he realised he had mentally prepared himself for the worst case scenario, practically expecting a damning version of the story, in which his parents had contributed to Granger's nightmare ordeal. He imagined he should feel relieved, perhaps grateful, but all that registered was bewilderment and uncertainty.

"You know," said Hermione, after the silence between them had lingered too long. "My mother used to say that the parents who really love their children are the most dangerous people in the world because they will kill, die, and everything in between for them. Your mother loves you, Draco. I think she was just willing to do anything to find you."

"Hm," he frowned, uncertain what he could say. "Did you tell her where I was?"

"No, I couldn't. I was too injured, I think. And then something happened, and I remember the Chandelier...but that's all I remember. How did we manage to escape?"

"I don't know."

"And you're certain everyone got out okay?"

"Yes, everyone's fine," he nodded. "Just a few bumps and scrapes. As I said, you were the worst."

"I remember how I got this now," she murmured, and Draco glanced down to see her fiddling with the bandage wrapped around her arm.

"Don't look at that, Granger."

Of course, she didn't listen to him, and he cringed as she slowly peeled away the sticky, stained dressing and stared at the horrid scar scrawled into her skin. She took in a shuddering breath. "Ugly, isn't it?"

Draco wasn't sure if she meant the mark itself or the word, 'Mudblood,' but he moved his hand and placed it over the wound, careful not to touch it lest it still be tender and sore.

"It doesn't mean anything," he whispered against her ear.

She didn't respond but reached with her free hand to tug at his other arm, pulling it forward so his Dark Mark was bared. She mimicked his actions, veiling it with her palm and tickling

her fingers against his wrist with soothing strokes.

"And yours doesn't mean anything either."

They stayed still for a while, almost engraved in time, with only the rhythmic and synchronised rises and falls of their chests to indicate any life. Hermione was the first to break it, sighing and then twisting her neck so she could kiss the corner of his mouth.

"I should probably let the others know I'm alright," she said softly. "Will you help me-

"Granger, wait," he cut in, his face scrunching up as he struggled to find the words he wanted to say. "It's been months. Just...just allow some undisturbed hours before the sodding Calvary insist on suffocating you."

She made a faint sound of amusement. "Okay," she agreed. "But you do know you can have as many hours as you want, Draco? Days, months...as long as you want."

He rested his lips against her neck again, and smothered the itch in his throat to say 'years.' Partially because the response would be too sickly on his tongue, and partly because he wasn't sure they had years.

He thought about his words to Tonks earlier and realised he didn't pity her for having hope.

He envied her for it.

Chapter End Notes

Hey, sorry about the wait! Family crisis and blah blah blag. Hope you liked the reunion and the chapter as a whole! Let me know what you thought, and thanks so much for the feedback so far! You people are deliriously brilliant!

I just want to thank Ashley for making a youtube trailer for Iso, and it is gorgeous! (Link is on profile page!) and also to the Dramione Team for making those lovely certificates for the Dramione awards that Iso won (Link on profile page for the photo albums if you want to see!) Again, thanks so much if you voted, you have no clue how loud I screamed. Oh, and can we all just wish Tom Felton Happy Birthday and congratulate him on his perfect face. Yes? Brilliant.

Thanks for reading and being so lovely! Read and Review!

Bex.

Amity

Chapter Notes

Just the usual song recs for the chapter! Joshua Radin & Maria Taylor - When you Find Me and Hurts - Illuminated. Hope they work well! Feel free to send suggestions!

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

Draco guessed it had been about four hours since Granger had woken up, and they had passed the time with little spells of conversation, broken up with long stretches of comfortable silences. He'd told her about his stay at Andromeda's, about the news of Ted's death, which had made her frown, and then about Teddy being born, which had made her smile. In turn, she had told him many things; from Potter's reaction to the news of their unconventional relationship, to the progress with the Horcruxes, and she had done so with such trust and ease, like any lingering doubts about his loyalties were completely gone.

Like he was one of them.

He'd noticed that she'd refrained from mentioning Weasley, which suited him just fine for the time being. Bringing up her ex-lover would only irritate him, and he was reluctant to break the relaxed and content mood when he'd only just had her back, and that was also why he'd resisted confronting her about the stunt she'd pulled back at Hogwarts. It might have felt like they'd been separated for a lifetime, but the cruel way she'd Petrified him and slapped a Portkey against his hand felt like yesterday, and all the resentment and questions that came with it were raw and unanswered.

But it could wait if it ensured this temporary moment of peace would be prolonged.

"Draco."

"Hm."

"You're not...Um, I'm not quite sure how to put this. What I mean is...you're not-

"Spit it out, Granger," he sighed. "Don't you think we're a little past being reserved with each other?"

"You're not uncomfortable with our relationship any more," said Hermione, her tone anxious. "You're not...fighting it."

"Seemed like a pointless exercise," he shrugged.

"But why have you stopped? What changed?"

He paused and released a long breath. "Nothing changed, and that was the problem," he said, deciding she deserved honesty despite the protests of his pride. "The distance didn't alter anything, Granger; you were still under my skin. To resist you now would be senseless and... self-destructive."

She hummed behind her lips, and he thought she might be smiling. "I missed you too, Draco."

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Hermione fell asleep a little while after that, wrapped up in his arms and body heat, and breathing softly against his chest. Judging by the mood of the sky, Draco guessed it was mid-afternoon, and the hours rolled by quite quickly considering he didn't move. He'd tried to fall asleep with her, but his mind was too busy with the usual thoughts; his parents, the war, her, and his place amongst it all. The only conclusion he could reach was that he was in love with Granger, to the point that it blotted out the other factors and made them blurry and irrelevant.

Yes, he loved her, and realised he had done for longer than he cared to admit.

To feel so vulnerable and empowered at the same time, and when the mind is somewhere between serenity and insanity, it means love's to blame.

There was little point in deluding himself any further and denying it to himself. After all, he'd told her himself; muttered it to her last night as she'd slept, and the fact that she was unconscious at the time did little to dent the confession. He knew that words always seemed so brittle and gauche when he struggled to express himself, and he hoped his actions would be sufficient, and that was best thing about Granger; he knew she would never ask him to say it.

She must've been sleeping for around four hours when there was a knock at the door, and a growl rumbled in Draco's throat. He ignored it, knowing it was probably Potter or Weasley who had inevitably come to shatter their peace, and he would delay them as long as possible.

"Draco," Tonks' hushed voice came from the other side. "Draco, it's me. Come to the door."

"Fuck's sake," he hissed, shifting his body with care to ensure Granger would lie comfortably on the bed as he left her side. He opened the door a crack and fixed his cousin with a furious glare. "Is there no sodding break from you, woman?"

"You know, it's polite to answer the door-

"Do I strike you as a polite person?" he retorted. "Anyway, I thought you might be Potter or Weasley."

"Well, I think Luna may have slipped Ron and Harry a little too much Sleeping Draught," said Tonks. "They're both still out cold."

"As long as they're not in my face, I don't really care."

"How's Hermione doing?" she asked, ignoring his comment. "Did she wake up yet?"

"She woke up, and now she's asleep again."

"Well, I didn't hear any screaming, and you're still in one piece," she remarked with a small grin. "I assume she remembered you then?"

"Her memory seems fine."

"See, I was right. I told you she'd have no trouble with her memory-

"Congratulations," said Draco derisively. "I'll get to work on that medal for you."

"Oh, shut up. So, she's healing well? She's feeling okay?"

He lowered his eyes and frowned at the floor. "She's having difficulty with her legs. She said she couldn't feel them properly. She did use a word, but I can't really remember it. Neura... Neura-pracks, or something."

"Neurapraxia?"

"I think that's what she said."

"That's the Muggle term for it," she explained. "You probably know it better as Limb-block. It's quite a common side effect of the Cruciatus Curse."

"Yes, that sounds familiar," he nodded. "So it's no concern?"

"I have a potion for it, and she'll be able to walk just fine in a week or two, probably the latter considering her injuries, but she'll need help getting around until then-

"Wouldn't it be better for her to just stay in bed?"

"No, it's better to be active; helps the potion to circulate," she said. "Hermione wouldn't want to be confined to the bed anyway, it would drive her mental."

Draco made a small sound of agreement. "Where's the potion then?"

"It's in your room, in the cupboard. I'll need to check her and make sure she has Limb-block, and not something more serious-

"More serious?" he repeated. "What are you on about?"

"I'll need to ensure it's not a more severe condition, like paralysis," she told him. "I'm sure it won't be, but I need to check before I give her anything. Why don't you go and get some food? There's someone downstairs who wants to see you anyway-

"No, I want to-

"Draco?" called Hermione's voice from the bedroom. "Why are you outside? And did I hear Tonks?"

Huffing with aggravation and shooting a pointed look at his cousin, he grabbed the doorknob and went back inside with Tonks practically shoving her way past him to get to Hermione. He paused his steps half-way into the room, awkwardly watching the two witches hug and feeling a little out of place. This was a moment he'd been dreading; the moment when people would begin to filter back into her life, and it made him anxious.

These people were regulars in her world, and he was on the outskirts of their little clan, mainly by choice, but partially because he hadn't shared in their experiences, and trust was an obvious issue. He and Granger had never been around people since the beginning of their relationship, always lost in their own little web of secrets back in Hogwarts, and he wondered if she might be influenced by their return into her life.

Would she be swayed by their opinions of him? Would their negative perceptions and comments put strain on them? Would she realise that she was too...pure for him?

As if she could read his thoughts, she met his eyes over Tonks' shoulder to offer him an adoring smile, to which he responded with a stiff nod, and thought perhaps he owed her more credit than that. She hardly had a fickle character, did she? She was headstrong, stubborn, and evidently as much on his side as she could be. The doubts continued to niggle at him though.

"How are you feeling, Hermione?" asked Tonks.

"I'm fine."

"Honestly?"

"Honestly," she sighed. "I'm a bit sore, but it's bearable and I know it will pass-

"Granger, tell her," Draco cut in. "You can't walk."

She frowned, like she begrudged admitting it was a problem. "Yes...my legs are rather numb. I think I might have a bit of nerve damage or something."

"Limb-block, you think, yes? I'll need to check you over," she murmured, before she turned her head to address him. "Draco, why don't you go and get something eat-

"I'm fine here," he snapped, his tone harsher than he'd intended. "I don't see why I should leave-

"I need to concentrate, and it will be easier without you here," she reasoned. "Anyway, I told you there's someone downstairs-

"I don't give a fuck-

"Draco, it's okay," Hermione breathed softly, and her tone was instantly soothing. "I'm hungry, so I'll come down in a bit to get some food anyway. We won't be long."

Her mouth was a bit bent and puckered in a half-frown, her eyes reassuring, almost pleading for him to listen, and it was for that reason alone that he relented. His lips twitched with frustration, and he fired a sharp scowl at Tonks before he turned and left the room.

In truth, he didn't mind his cousin so much. She might irritate him at times, but he had a feeling that she was one of the few who wouldn't be vocally critical about his presence in Granger's life, and he reluctantly acknowledged that a few allies might benefit him in the circumstances. Merlin knew why, but she appeared to have warmed to him, and he intended to take advantage of that.

It was the way Tonks had insisted he leave the room that had irked him. He'd barely had a day reunited with Granger, and already he was being shoved to the side. Potter, Weasley, Lovegood, and every other insufferable idiot would want time with her, and he didn't relish the idea of having to compete for moments of her company. Clenching his jaw and deciding that he could consider it more later on, he headed for the kitchen and rolled his eyes when he caught sight of the familiar face at the table, sat at Blaise's side.

"For fuck's sake-

"There he is," Theo grinned. "How are you feeling, sunshine? You look like shit-

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Tonks came back to Andromeda's to get the baby, and she brought me back with her," he explained. "You know, you and Blaise are something else. I was barely gone ten minutes to do some washing, and apparently everything kicked off-

"It was hardly amusing, Theo," mumbled Blaise, his tone weary.

"Maybe not, but it was the most entertainment we've had in that bloody house for a while," he replied. "I'm scared to take a piss in case I miss something interesting-

"Merlin, you're such a tosser-

"So, I've been told."

Blaise shook his head and regarded Draco carefully. "Granger alright?"

"Do you really give a shit?"

"You obviously do," he countered. "I saw how injured she was, and I was simply asking."

Draco clenched his jaw and took a seat at the table, warily scrutinising his two companions before he spoke. "She can't walk properly," he said slowly, keeping his expression steady and

stoic. "She reckons she might have Limb-block, so it might just be temporary, but Tonks is checking her now."

Blaise rubbed his chin. "It could have been worse, mate-

"It could've been fucking avoided," he barked fiercely. "I want to know why the hell Weasley was saying it was his fault."

"Ah, yes, the Weasel," Theo remarked. "The plot thickens. I've already booked my front-row seat for that inevitable confrontation."

"Good, you can hold him down for me."

"Sounds like fun," quipped Theo, and Draco couldn't help a brief smirk. "A little weasel-beating sounds therapeutic."

"Didn't Granger and Weasley have little thing going on?" asked Blaise.

"Did," Draco emphasised. "It's of no consequence any more."

"Perhaps not to you and Granger, but judging by Weasley's behaviour yesterday when he pulled you away from her, he might still believe-

"He can believe whatever he likes," he growled. "I know where I stand, and I will be more than happy to make it clear to Weasley where he stands."

Their heads shot up when the door opened, and Draco couldn't suppress the urge to roll his eyes as Luna ambled into the room with that usual oblivious expression of hers, hindered slightly by a healing gash on her lip and few bruises smeared across her face. She took the seat by Blaise and innocently pecked his cheek, seemingly ignorant to Draco and Theo until she leaned back in her chair and gave them blank looks.

"Where've you been?" asked Blaise.

"I went to see if Harry and Ron were awake, but they're both still asleep."

"Bloody hell, Lovegood," said Theo. "You must've given them enough Sleeping Draught to knock out a few Mountain Trolls."

"I may have misjudged the measurements slightly," she shrugged, shifting her eyes to Draco. "How is Hermione?"

"Awake," he replied. "She said she'd come down for some food in a bit."

"So, Granger's going to eat with us?" asked Theo, cocking an intrigued eyebrow. "That's going to be interesting."

A snarl thundered behind Draco's teeth. "If you say one thing out of line, Nott, I'll fucking-

"Easy, blondie," he interrupted with a corrupt smile. "I won't be a prick to your girlfriend. I'm just wondering how's she's going to react to being around us. Last time I remember seeing Granger, I was taking the piss out of her in Potions. With you, now I think about it."

"I don't think you're intimidating," said Luna. "I didn't feel uncomfortable when I first met you and the others at Andromeda's house."

"To be fair, Lovegood, we could shove you in a room with every breed of Dragon, a herd of Centaurs, and twenty pissed off Veelas, and you'd probably still try to befriend them all with cupcakes and pumpkin juice-

"Watch it, Theo," Blaise snapped, not that Luna seemed at all affected by the remark.

"Look, I'm just saying it's going to be weird," he mumbled. "And it'll be bloody worse when Potter and Weasley wake up. I can still be a bastard to the Death-trap Duo, right? Millicent's not shagging Potter on the sly or anything?"

"For Merlin's sake," Blaise groused. "Was that necessary?"

"I gave you a disturbing mental image, didn't I?"

"I don't give a fuck what you say to Potter and Weasley," Draco said, offering Theo a knowing smirk. "Knock yourself out. Just don't-

"Be a dick to Granger," he finished. "Yes, yes. Got that."

"You know, you could just try to be pleasant towards Harry and Ron," Luna suggested softly, and three sets of cynical eyes landed on her. "Or at least not provoke them."

"I'm sorry," Theo scoffed haughtily. "I have no idea what you just said. There were words, but they made no sense."

"I hate to agree with Theo, but you are being too hopeful with this, Luna," murmured Blaise. "There is way too much history there, and an altercation is unavoidable."

"And it's not like Potter and Weasley are going to be pleasant to us," Draco frowned. "Hell, I bet Weasley's already been scribbling down insults in case he forgets them."

"I just think it would be nice for everyone to get along," she breathed with a delicate voice, fixing Draco with a significant look. "I think Hermione would like everyone to get along too."

Theo snorted. "And I'd like a naughty weekend with the Patil twins, but that isn't going to happen either."

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Hermione gagged on the sickly and lumpy potion as it crawled down her throat and landed in her stomach like a lump of wet cement.

"That's awful," she choked, handing the empty vial back to Tonks. "It tastes like mouldy porridge."

"That means it's the right one," Tonks shrugged, laughing lightly at Hermione's grimace. "We'll give it a minute to take effect, and we'll see if you can rest some weight on your legs, okay?"

"Okay," she agreed. "So I need to drink this everyday?"

"Until your legs are working fine again, yes. Each dose should bring a little more feeling back. In a couple of weeks, you should be fine."

"A couple of weeks? Is there no way to speed it up, or-

"Hermione, I know you want to be active, but you need some rest," said Tonks slowly. "It might only be a week if you're lucky, but your body went through hell-

"But I feel better already-

"Just because Wizard healing methods are faster than Muggle methods, does not mean you're completely well. Just take some time to recuperate."

Slumping her shoulders in defeat, Hermione sighed and reluctantly bobbed her head. "Fine, but do you know where my bag is? I could at least do some more research."

"Your bag and the clothes you were wearing are in the bottom drawer," she explained, gesturing to the dresser in the corner of the room. "Actually, I'll wash those clothes for you."

"Let me have look at them first. I'm sure I had some things in my pockets that I need to sort through."

"Alright."

"So," breathed Hermione, her lips swaying into a delighted smile. "Congratulations. What's it like being a mum?"

"Wonderful," Tonks replied without hesitation. "I mean, I haven't slept since he was born, but I don't care. He's perfect. We named him after dad; Teddy."

"Where is he now? Can I see him?"

"Remus has him. I think they're both having a nap, but you can see him when he wakes up. I want Harry to see him too. We decided that Harry should be his Godfather. He's sleeping, so I

haven't had a chance to tell him yet."

"Oh, I bet Harry will be so touched. And there's no issue with the Werewolf blood?"

"No, he's inherited my Metamorphmagi ability. His hair started changing colour about an hour after he was born. Remus was so relieved."

"I'm so happy for you," Hermione said sincerely, beaming at her friend. "When Draco told me I was...it was just so nice to hear some good news."

Tonks rubbed her lips together with contemplation. "Why didn't you tell me about Draco?"

The abruptness of the question struck Hermione speechless for a moment. "Well...because you'd have called me insane and then tried to have me committed."

"Hermione-

"Alright, that may be a slight exaggeration, but you'd have certainly thought I'd gone a little mad."

Tonks chuckled. "I think most of us have gone a little mad. But okay, I see your point."

"You know, I did think about it. When I visited you in Hogsmeade I almost told you then, but there were other factors I needed to consider."

"Such as?"

"Well, I don't think I can tell you how Draco came to be at Hogwarts," said Hermione thoughtfully. "It might endanger somebody else."

"That's fine," Tonks nodded. "Mum said he was vague about it anyway, so we figured there was another party involved who wants to remain unknown. The specifics aren't really important."

"So...you don't think I'm mad? I mean, for my relationship with Draco?"

"Well, I didn't believe it to begin with, but my mum explained a few things about what he'd been like living with her, and I witnessed a few things for myself."

"What do you mean?"

"Like yesterday, when he saw you injured," she elaborated. "And when I told him you were at the Manor. His reactions were so telling, and I don't doubt for a minute that he loves you."

Hermione bowed her head and smiled shyly to herself, enjoying the sensation of a comforting warmth swelling in her chest. "Thank you," she mumbled. "For understanding."

"Don't get me wrong, I am still wary of him," said Tonks carefully. "But it takes some balls to do what he has done. He's gone against his family and You-Know-Who, and that is reason enough for me to give him a chance. It must be hard as hell to make that decision to defect; to

leave behind everything you know and put your trust in people who were your enemy at one time."

"I'm hoping Harry and Ron will see it that way," she admitted. "Draco mentioned that Blaise Zabini is here?"

"And Theo Nott too, yes. They defected with some other Slytherins, and they were staying with my mum. We call them 'The Enlightened,' but only a few of the Order know about them. The Lovegoods, Remus, myself, McGonagall, and that's it really. It was safer to keep them as secret as possible."

"And how did Harry and Ron respond to them being here?"

"Luna gave them some Sleeping Draught and they haven't woken up yet," she explained. "But when they do, they will have to learn to be civil to each other, and I've told Theo and Blaise that. I won't put up with any stupid fights in my house."

"That's understandable," Hermione agreed, humming with thought. "You know, I find it quite...comforting in a way. That some of the Slytherins defected."

"They're still a bit rough around the edges," Tonks grinned. "Theo in particular, but they're not bad people. Just a little misunderstood and born into the wrong environment. You can see for yourself when you meet them."

Hermione felt an odd twinge in her stomach; a stab of nerves and apprehension as she considered meeting Blaise and Theo. It had not been that long ago that she and the two aforementioned Slytherins would've passed each other in a Hogwarts corridor with a sour glance and a mumbled slur, but things were different now, weren't they?

"Okay," she said, pushing the blankets off her. "Let's see if my legs are working any better."

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Draco drummed his fingertips against the table and shifted in his seat; half-agitated and half-anxious as his eyes returned to the door for the thirteenth time in twenty minutes. Huffing out an impatient breath that stirred his fringe, he decided he would give it another five minutes before he went to see what was taking Granger and Tonks so bloody long and carry her down here if he had to.

"Draco," called Luna.

"What?" he snapped irately, not that she seemed phased.

"Would you like some tea?"

"No."

"Are you sure?" she asked, rising from her seat. "Perhaps some herbal tea might make you less..."

"Bitchy," supplied Theo. "Is it that time of the month, mate?"

Whatever retort Draco had intended to spit back withered on his tongue when the door opened, and Granger limped into the room, her steps unstable and her arm slung across Tonks' shoulders for balance. She was evidently struggling, her breathing slightly laboured and her cheeks a little flushed with the effort, but predictably refusing to appear defeated. He shot up to stand just as Hermione spotted Lovegood, and she tore herself away from Tonks to practically pounce on the blonde witch with a frantically uncoordinated hug that almost knocked Lovegood off her feet.

"Luna," Hermione exhaled. "Oh God, it's so good to see you."

"Hello, Hermione," she replied breezily. "It's nice to see you too."

"I heard you were at the Manor, are you okay?"

"I'm very well, thank you, but I'm not sure I can hold you up for much longer."

Draco beat Tonks to Granger's side, grabbing her elbow and belting his arm around her waist, pulling her into his frame until her weight was resting on him alone. He manoeuvred them back towards the table, tightening his grip on her when she stumbled and allowing her to lace her fingers with his despite being very aware that the others in the room were watching them intently.

"You alright?" he asked, his tone low so nobody else would hear.

"I'm fine," she answered stubbornly.

He eased her down into a free chair and sat beside her, studying her closely with hooded eyes and trying to determine her mindset as she cautiously glanced at Blaise and Theo. He could see she was uneasy, but she had that defiant pucker to her lips that told him she would deal with the situation, but he gave her knee a secret and subtle squeeze under the table anyway.

Hermione broke the accidental eye contact she'd made with Blaise, dropping her attention to her lap and stretching her arms out on the table to nervously clasp her hands together. She both felt and heard the tense silence in the room thicken, and when she lifted her chin to establish why, every pair of eyes seemed to be fixated on something, and she followed their stares to the ugly scar of scrawled letters etched into her forearm.

Mudblood.

She self-consciously tugged down the sleeve of her jumper to hide the mark, but the word lingered in the air above them, and even Luna's expression appeared to turn solemn under the

weight of it. Despite the nerve damage in her legs, she could feel the clench of Draco's fingernails denting the skin of her thigh through her jeans, and it was oddly comforting.

"Sorry," she mumbled, feeling the need to crack the unbearable silence.

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Hermione," said Tonks sternly. "Certainly not for that."

"Bloody hell, Tonks," Theo commented. "You must've done a crap job with your Healing Charms-

"Healing Charms won't work on that," Blaise interjected, looking directly at Hermione. "I recognise that Curse, and it will only fade once the person who cast it is dead."

"Oh," she muttered, for lack of anything appropriate to say. "Well, um...thank you. I wasn't familiar with it, so...yes, thank you. At least I can research it now."

He responded with a slight nod of his head, and everyone was unsettlingly quiet again for a short while until Theo cleared his throat.

"So...", he drawled slowly. "The weather's been nice recently..."

Blaise scoffed. "'The weather's been nice recently?'" he echoed derisively. "What the hell-

"Well at least I fucking said something."

"And you thought the weather would be a sufficient topic?"

"Hey, I'm doing better than when we met Lovegood at 'Dromeda's," he defended.

"That's true," agreed Luna. "I would have happily discussed the weather with you, Theo."

"See, Lovegood agrees with me. What would you have preferred? 'Hi, Granger. Remember me? I hated you in Hogwarts, but let's start over because you're shagging my mate.'"

Draco sneered. "I fucking warned you, Nott-

"It's okay, Draco," Hermione cut him off. "They shouldn't have to tread on eggshells around me. I'd rather they were honest."

"Granger-

"No, Draco," she insisted, giving him a stern look. "I'm aware that things have been... difficult in the past, and it would be easier if it was all just out in the open-

"So you're encouraging them to behave like twats?" he frowned at her. "Yes, that's a brilliant idea-

"I'm not encouraging them to do anything, I'd just rather we didn't tip-toe around the matter and pretend to be interested in the bloody weather-

"I never said we should discuss the sodding weather!" he seethed, oblivious to the others in the room now and the awkward glances being exchanged.

"Well, then let them just say what they want, and I will deal with it!" she huffed. "For Godric's sake, Draco, I'm a big girl-

"Well, forgive me for trying to save you from getting offended-

"They're hardly likely to say something I haven't heard before! And you probably called me more names in Hogwarts than Theo and Blaise combined!"

"That's irrelevant-

"It's completely relevant!"

"Bullshit-

"And we didn't overcome it by discussing the weather-

"Would you stop mentioning the bloody weather!"

"We overcame it by being candid and forthright-

"The circumstances are entirely different!" he shouted. "Salazar's soul, even when you're ill you're an argumentative pain in the arse-

"And you're an incorrigible prat!"

Their dispute might've continued had Luna not dragged a chair away from the table, and the sharp, scraping sound of it against the floorboards snapped Hermione out of the heated moment, and again, she found there were too many sets of eyes on her. A warm blush crept into her cheeks and she tucked a stray curl behind her ear, watching Draco under her lashes as he rolled his shoulders and licked his teeth with agitation. But there was a barely-visible amused twitch to his lips, and she suppressed the urge to smile. She'd missed this the most; their harmless quarrels that always left her feeling somewhere between exhilarated and frustrated, but ultimately satisfied.

"Okay," blurted Theo, shattering yet another silence. "Is anybody else struggling to decide if they felt uncomfortable or turned on by that, or is it just me?"

"For Merlin's sake, Theo!" Tonks scolded. "What the hell is wrong with you? Do you have no concept of decency?"

"What? Granger said she wanted us to be honest!"

Draco was a heartbeat away from lunging across the table and clipping his friend's jaw, but a small noise to his side stopped him, and when he looked at Granger, her mouth was curved into a smile, her body vibrating slightly, and her nose was creased up with charming wrinkles as she began to laugh. He cocked a puzzled eyebrow in her direction, but he was smirking before he could catch himself, and the atmosphere felt a little lighter.

"I'm sorry," said Hermione as her giggles subsided. "I don't know why, but I found that funny."

"I'm not surprised," Theo shrugged smugly. "I am hilarious."

Blaise grunted and shook his head. "Your humour is an acquired taste."

"No, your face is an acquired taste."

Hermione's giggles returned, and she absently wondered when she had last laughed like this; when she had permitted herself a stolen sliver of time to simply be a teenage girl without the weight of a war balancing on her shoulders. She felt Draco's hand return to her knee, and she reached down to tangle their fingers, briefly meeting his eyes to indicate that she felt relaxed enough in the situation.

The rest of the evening passed with more strained silences than conversations, but she didn't mind so much. To expect an immediate sense of amity with Blaise and Theo would have been far too optimistic, but there'd been no malice or intentional efforts to cause her discomfort, and she considered that a good start to the end of the day.

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"Draco?"

"Hm."

"Are you asleep?"

"Evidently not."

She twisted her body around to face him in the bed. "Did you ever read *The Twisted Time Theory* by Virginia Fairhart?"

"Are you still going to talk about it if I say yes?"

"Yes."

He sighed and opened his eyes. "No, but I remember seeing it in the library. What about it?"

"Well, she theorised that because time can be altered and cheated with a time-turner that there are possible endless universes beyond the realms of the dimension we exist in, with varying

conditions that were limitless in their differences. The Muggles have a similar theory too called the Multiverse Theory-

"Granger, it's past midnight," he interrupted. "Do you have a point to this little lecture?"

Hermione hesitated. "Well...do you think it's possible that there's a universe somewhere where there is no war, and we still ended up together without all this...chaos happening?"

His brow lowered with bewilderment as he looked down at her, their foreheads grazing with the movement. "But that wouldn't be us," he said. "They would just be mirror images-

"But who's to say we aren't the mirror images?" she argued. "What if we aren't the real ones?"

Draco ran his fingers down her arm, along her waist, and then lingered at her hip to trace slow circles there. "Feels rather real though, doesn't it?"

She didn't reply; simply tilted her head to borrow his lips in a quick kiss before tucking herself a little tighter into his arms. "I wonder if there's a universe where you, Ron, and Harry get along well."

"Definitely not," he muttered. "I am confident that all possible versions of me would think that Potter and Weasley are wankers."

She tutted and murmured something incoherent against his chest, but he let it be. He could hear the exhaustion in her breathing, and her sighs grew heavy against his collarbone within minutes.

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He woke with a start; a cold sweat thinly spread across his brow and a gnawing chill at the base of his spine. His heart was riotous in his ribcage, and in a bizarre moment of paranoia, he checked that Granger was at his side. She was, of course. Her back was to him with her wayward curls sprawled across the pillow, sleeping soundly and groaning softly as he altered his position in the bed.

He couldn't be sure, but he had a hunch he'd dreamt about his mother, and he felt edgy as he sat up and dragged the damp tips of his hair away from his face. He tried to recall something tangible from his dream, feeling for some reason that it might be important, but it was a futile exercise. Dreams seldom linger when reality is so eager to resume.

He choked on the crispy dryness in his throat, trying to smother the noise against the back of his hand so as not to wake Granger, but she didn't stir. Deciding a glass of juice would clear

it, he left the bed with the same mindful awareness of his sleeping witch, and unravelled his body from hers and all the bedding trapped between them.

Grabbing his wand, he headed downstairs, casting a faint Lumos to guide his way and play with the shadows. He guessed it was around three or four in the morning, and the house was so still, with only the dull thuds of his own footsteps to echo in his ears.

So when he pushed open the kitchen door and the glow of his wand caught the outline of a figure and a flash of red hair, he jerked back with shock but forced himself to recover quickly when he realised who was sat at the table. He poured a little more magic into the Lumos so he could see the other wizard in the room properly, and he saw nothing but contempt in those blue eyes, and Draco matched it with a sneer and a cocky tilt of his chin.

"Oh, good, it's you," said Draco coldly. "You know, Weasley, people with faces like yours shouldn't hide in the shadows. It's a fucking health hazard."

Ron clenched his teeth and slowly rose from his seat, and Draco arched an eyebrow with amusement. Apparently, the night just took an interesting turn.

Chapter End Notes

Hey! Sorry about the wait, guys...I'm back in Uni now, so I don't have as much free time as I'd like, and chapters are going to take a little longer. All I can do is promise that Iso will be finished, but it's just going to take time...sorry! Sorry this chapter was a bit of a filler too, but it needs to be done, and I made it longer to make up for it, so hope that's okay...

Thanks to everyone on tumblr and facebook for being so lovely, and thanks for all the fanart and trailers! (links on profile page! They're gorgeous and you should go look!) And thank you so much for pushing me past 4000 reviews! That's insane! Read and Review!

All my Dramione love,

Bex

Water

Chapter Notes

Just some song suggestions for the chapter! I have a few for this one...Mute Math - You are Mine, Angus and Julia Stone - You're the One that I Want, and Florence and the Machine - What the Water gave Me.

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

Draco flicked his wand to ignite the candles and the bundle of logs in the fireplace until the kitchen was illuminated with the amber of the flames. He tucked his wand back into his pocket, careful to keep the base just above the seam in case the occasion called for a spell or two, and then shifted his attention back to Weasley. His long-time rival looked like shit, and that was being generous.

Weasley seemed almost distorted; deathly pale with blood-red cracks in the whites of his eyes, and more haggard than usual, even by the infamous Weasley standards. His eyes were alive though, staring somewhere past Draco's head while his nostrils flared and his knuckles turned white. There was something else too; something that was a little off. Draco couldn't decide if it was in his posture or in his expression, but Weasley looked slightly unhinged and precarious.

"Leave," he spat suddenly. "Just go, and leave us alone."

Draco couldn't help but scoff. "Why would I do that? This is my cousin's house and she invited me-

"You didn't even think of Tonks as your cousin until it bloody suited you!"

"That's irrelevant," he retorted, deciding it was time to broach the inevitable and watch Weasley squirm. "Besides, I think Granger wants me here."

Draco saw an instant change in Weasley's stance at the mention of Hermione; the muscles in his face tightened, his breathing elevated, and something dark flashed in his eyes. It was so amusing to watch, to see him struggle with his words and fidget with agitation. Granger or no Granger, watching a weasel in distress would forever leave an appeasing sense of satisfaction in the well of his Slytherin gut.

"Come on, Weasley," said Draco provokingly. "Let's hear your shite insults and comebacks, or if you want to have a little cry, I'll happily observe-

"YOU DON'T DESERVE HER!" he blurted furiously, slamming his balled fist down on the table. "YOU DON'T! YOU DON'T BLOODY DESERVE HER!"

Draco didn't flinch despite the element of truth he found in that comment. "Neither do you."

"I deserve her more than you!" shouted Ron. "If you actually cared about her, you would let her be with someone else! Someone who actually gives a damn about her-

"Oh please, Weasley," he rolled his eyes. "If you think I'm going to be some wet Hufflepuff and give her up because of some pathetic moral bullshit, then you may have just beaten Longbottom in the dumb fuck race-

"You know she shouldn't be with you!" Ron accused. "You must've...I don't know, you must've tricked her-

"For fuck's sake, Weasley, if you had a brain you'd be dangerous. Granger's a big girl, and she can make her own decisions," he said, pausing to smirk. "And she decided she wanted me. Not you."

Ron sucked in a harsh breath through his bared teeth. "I was her first!" he yelled. "We are more than you think! We-

"I know. She told me," Draco replied calmly, smothering the stab of jealousy and relishing the shock on Weasley's face. "Although the fact that it was you makes the prospect questionable. You can barely use your wand, so I doubt you can even locate your dick."

Rage ignited Ron's cheeks with a red-hot flush, and he flipped the table on its side, removing that physical barrier between them and then stalking close enough to Draco that he could feel his incensed panting against his face. Draco straightened his back and lifted his chin to give himself more height, lowering his hand until his fingers grazed his wand. Just in case.

"You are sick," seethed Ron. "The things you have done-

"Take a fucking step back, Weasel," he interrupted, his tone low and menacing. "Now."

"This is all just some twisted scheme of yours to hurt us-

"Yes, that's it," Draco sorted sarcastically. "Being a twat to Granger for six years was actually a secret ploy to get her into bed just to piss off you and Potter. Congratulations, Weasley, you just won the dumb fuck cup-

"STOP IT!" Ron barked, getting right in Draco's face. "STOP IT NOW-

"I won't tell you again, Weasley, step back!"

"SHE'S WRONG ABOUT YOU! YOU HAVN'T CHANGED AT ALL-

"Don't you fucking dare," warned Draco with a cold hiss. "Don't pretend you know a SODDING thing about me-

"YOU ARE USING HER!" Ron roared. "AND IT'S ALL JUST A BLOODY JOKE TO YOU!"

Draco snarled loudly, unexpectedly riled by Weasley's accusation, and feeling rather suffocated by their proximity. "GET THE FUCK OUT OF MY FA-

"AND I WON'T LET YOU HURT HER! I WOULD DIE FOR HERMIONE-

"SO WOULD I!"

Draco meant it, but even he was a little shocked at how easily the words had exploded past his lips, but the stunned look on Weasley's face was worth it. It was like the retort had physically clouted him with a crisp upper-cut to the chin, and he took a clumsy step backwards and almost tripped over the leg of the overturned table. Draco squared his shoulders as he watched Weasley apparently compose himself, and the clack of his tongue hitting the roof of his mouth seemed to kick Weasley back into the present.

"You're not capable of that," he said quietly, flicking his furious glare back to Malfoy. "You're not capable of being that selfless-

"Don't," Draco growled again. "The biggest mistake you will ever make is underestimating me, Weasley. Especially when it comes to Granger."

Ron scoffed. "So you think it's that easy? That you are one of us now?"

"I don't want anything to do with you-

"Well, that's tough shit! Hermione is something to do with me, and you don't know her if you think she will just toss me and Harry to the side for you-

"I wasn't finished," he scowled. "I can't stand you and Potter, but I know she would never discard you pair, no matter how much I detest you. There's nothing I can do about that-

"You're bloody right there isn't-

"Do you honestly think I haven't thought this through, Weasley?" he snapped, and he could feel a rant building in his mouth. The words were spewing out of him, but he didn't stop. "I know that you, Potter and Granger are practically joined at the hip, and I knew it when I somehow ended up here, in a safehouse for the defected, and I fucking knew it when I decided to put Granger before my family! If you think you and Potter are going to stop us, then you are fucking wrong! You might be an obstacle, but you are a small one in comparison to other shit Granger and I have dealt with."

Ron drew in a long breath and sucked in his cheeks. "And her blood status?"

Draco narrowed his eyes into serpentine slits. "Is evidently irrelevant to me-

"It didn't use to be!" yelled Ron.

"Fucking hell, Weasley, do I have to spell it out for you? Are you really that thick?" he spat coldly. "Granger. Is. Mine. Get used to it. The same way I'll learn to get used to your sodding presence-

"I will never accept you as one of us!" Ron interrupted indignantly, but Draco could hear the edge of defeat in his tone. "It won't last! You...you will screw up-

"Whatever helps you sleep at night," he shrugged. "Do you honestly think I would be here, probably disowned by my family and spending my time with you wankers, if it was all just for a laugh?" He took a step towards Ron and cocked his head so he could glare down at him. "And if you try to get in my way, you will see what I am fucking capable of."

With that, he gave Weasley a hard shove and stalked towards the door.

"Where the hell are you going?" Ron shouted after him.

"I'm bored of you," he replied over his shoulder. "And your face is starting offend my eyes-

"We are not finished!"

"I'm sure we're not, but you're pathetic tonight, even by your normal standards. It's too easy, and quite frankly, embarrassing to watch you stutter-

"I'M NOT-

"So why don't you go to bed, weep into your pillow, and memorise a few insults that I can laugh at next time-

"Malfoy-

"And besides," Draco went on, pausing at the door to fire a condescending smirk in Weasley's direction. "Granger's waiting for me in bed."

Every muscle in Ron's body went taut, and his features creased up with outrage. "You fucking-

"Goodnight, Weasel," he drawled seamlessly as he left the room, slamming the door behind him before another slur could be exchanged, but he almost collided with the person loitering in the corridor. "What the hell do you want?"

"I was just standing by in case someone needed to intervene," said Blaise. "You woke me up."

"Were you expecting an apology?"

"Hardly," he snorted, as they both began to ascend the stairs. "But perhaps some gratitude for placing silencing spells on the bedrooms."

Draco cocked his head. "Why didn't you just cast one on the kitchen?"

"And miss the entertainment? Not likely. Speaking of which, that comment about his dick was inspired, but I am rather surprised."

"What about?"

"I expected a far more...aggressive confrontation between you and Weasley."

"It seemed pointless when he could barely keep up with a verbal fight," replied Draco flippantly. "Don't get me wrong, I'm sure my fist and Weasley's face will meet again within the next few days, but there was no need for it tonight."

"Well then, I recommend that you cast a few silencing spells before your next argument, or you'll have Tonks battering your eardrums."

"Noted," he nodded stiffly, pausing his steps outside the bedroom door. "Anything else?"

Blaise exhaled. "You know, I am on your side, Malfoy."

"Are you?"

"Yes."

"Well," said Draco, skimming his tongue across his teeth. "When you figure out what side we are actually on, let me know."

Blaise looked like he might respond, but he simply gave Draco a parting dip of his head and walked away. "You'll figure it out, Malfoy. Goodnight."

Draco glowered at the back of Blaise's head for a moment before he slipped inside the bedroom, keeping his movements light to avoid waking Granger. Easing himself back into bed, she instantly angled her body towards him, like she was restless to share his warmth, and her lashes quivered between sleepy blinks.

"Where've you been?" she asked, her voice soft and muffled.

He draped an arm around her shoulders as she buried her face into the crook of his neck, her drowsy breaths tickling his collarbone, and her palm resting over his heart.

"I'll tell you in the morning."

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When Draco roused, he was momentarily blinded by a shaft of sunlight piercing the room through the window, and he buried his face into the pillow with a groggy groan. But when he realised he was alone amongst the bed sheets, he sat up a little too quickly for his morning brain to handle, and it took a few seconds for the bout of dizziness to clear. With a steady head

and adjusting eyes, he found Granger easily in their small room, but he frowned at what he saw.

She was on her feet with her back to him, her hands braced against a chest of drawers, apparently for stability, and her legs wobbling. He scooted down the bed until he could see the side of her face, and her features were fixed with concentration, her brow furrowed and her lips pursed.

"What the hell are you doing?"

Her body jerked with shock to the sound of his voice, almost costing her balance. "Bloody hell, Draco," she breathed. "You made me jump-

"I asked what you were doing," he said, leaving the bed. "You shouldn't-

"No, no, no, just give me a minute!" she said sharply. "I took the potion this morning, and my legs felt...I think I might be able to-

"Granger-

"Look!" she exclaimed proudly, carefully removing her hands from the dresser. "Look, see! I can stand!"

Her legs trembled and her posture rocked in the effort to keep her upright, but the delighted smile pulling at her mouth prevented him from immediately gripping her elbows and offering support.

"So you can stand in one spot," he remarked drolly. "That's handy."

"It's progress," she frowned, but then she lost her footing and toppled into his ready arms. "Bugger."

"Tonks said you need to take it slow-

"You distracted me," she accused. "I could've-

He hushed her with a firm press of his lips against hers, swallowing her protest down and down and down until she kissed him back. She latched her arms around his neck and he belted his around her waist, collecting her tightly against his chest and lifting her off the floor with ease. Settling her on the dresser, he caught her bottom lip between his teeth, and sunk his hips into the gap between her thighs. Her fingers were in his hair and brushing his ears, completely absorbed by him, with sweet, quiet sighs leaving her lungs between the tugs and sucks of his mouth. But then Draco broke the bliss, trailing a couple nips along her jaw before he pulled back to admire her flushed cheeks and the slow heaves of her chest.

"What was that for?" she asked quietly. Breathlessly.

"Partly to shut you up," he said with a cocky grin. "And the other reasons should be quite obvious."

Hermione hummed with thought. "I need a shower."

"A shower?" he repeated. "Surely a bath-

"Would be easier, yes. But I want to use my legs as much as possible, and I can stand up now."

"Granger, you barely managed ten seconds on your feet-

"Which is why you're going to be in the shower with me."

Draco's eyebrows shot up high on his forehead. He had memorised her body meticulously in his head, sometime during the last few days of their stay in Hogwarts; every freckle, every scar, and every feminine sway of her silhouette. He'd learned her so he could close his eyes and map her out on the backs of his lids, but despite that, he knew she was self-conscious about being completely bare in front of him. She had always gathered a sheet around her in the mornings or twisted herself away from the light, and even now he could see the bashful uncertainty in her eyes.

"Don't look at me like that," she said. "You have...you have seen me naked plenty of times. There's no logical reason why I should have an issue with it."

It really did sound like she was trying to convince herself rather than him. "Well, I believe that nudity was the one topic you failed to be logical about, but I'm not complaining about you changing your mind-

"You do know I only mean a shower?" she cut him off quickly. "I mean I...I can barely feel anything below my waist, and I want to...well, I want to-

"Be able to feel me," he finished for her, dipping his head until his fringe tangled with hers.

Hermione nodded nervously. "Well...yes. It's not like I don't want to...you know, but my legs...and I-

"Granger, it's fine," he said, with a hint of amusement in his tone. "I get it. Just a shower. You do realise I never even mentioned shagging you-

"It's called sex, Draco-

"Semantics," he smirked, pecking the corner of her half-smile. "I assume you're going to insist on walking, and say no to me carrying you?"

"Of course."

"Very well," he frowned, tugging her forward as she moved her grip to his forearms. "You ready?"

With a slight incline of her head, she rested her weight against him, and Draco slowly guided them across the room with patience he wouldn't have been capable of a few months ago. Hermione's steps were inevitably clumsy as they shuffled across the floor with knocking

ankles, and Draco hesitated when he opened the door, checking the hallway was quiet and empty. His actions were a bit hastier but still mindful as they crossed the corridor to the bathroom, keen to lock them inside before anyone could amble by and catch them. Once inside, Hermione released a brief and delicate laugh, and Draco studied her curiously.

"What's so funny?"

"I don't know, it just reminded me of Christmas," she mumbled warmly. "Sneaking around, and then you helping me keep my balance on the ice." She paused and her smile stretched a little. "I love that memory."

Draco didn't respond, preferring instead to watch the emotions play with her features. When the wistful daze left her eyes, he helped her perch on the toilet seat and began to undress, tugging down his boxer-shorts and removing his vest without a tinge of reserve, despite being very aware that Hermione's stare was roaming across every inch of him.

"You're exactly how I remember you," she whispered faintly, reaching out to graze her fingers over his stomach. Her hand must've been cold. She felt his sudden breath, and the dents of the muscles in his abdomen became more pronounced beneath her fingertips.

"Exactly how I remember."

His hand rested over hers for a moment and then slid down her arm to clutch her elbow, and when she lifted her eyes to his face, she thought his expression was set somewhere between strained and pensive. He pulled her up to stand and she felt the air rush out of her, momentarily mesmerized by the beauty of Draco stripped bare and close enough that she could feel his body heat through the flimsy fabric of her t-shirt. She rested her hands against his chest and splayed her fingers wide, her thumb stroking across the risen line of his Sectumsempra scar.

"Granger," said Draco, breaking her daze. "Grip my shoulders and balance yourself."

Waiting until she'd adjusted herself, he dropped his hands into the space between them and skimmed his knuckles down her stomach before looping the string of her pyjama bottoms around his finger, and tugging the knot undone. He could feel her holding her breath as he latched his thumbs under the hem of her knickers, and he pushed them and her bottoms past her hips, down to mid-thigh where they fell the rest of the way and pooled at her ankles. There was already a blush glowing in her cheeks when he looked back at her, and he kissed her temple as he wrapped one arm around her waist for support.

"Put your arms above your head."

She exhaled slowly through her nervously puckered lips and reached upwards, keeping her eyes lowered as Draco used his free hand to gather a fistful of her t-shirt. He yanked it over her head, and her hair tumbled around her shoulders, her curls bouncing like springs. She raised an arm to cover herself, but thought better of it and offered him a coy smile, returning her hands to his shoulders. Her breasts brushed against his naked chest and they both inhaled.

Draco wanted to take a step back and see her, to ensure that he had memorised her correctly and then reacquaint himself with the slopes and sweeps of her shape, but he resisted. Instead,

he picked her up without warning, partly because he assumed she would insist on being difficult, and partly because he was too impatient to feel the familiar softness of her body against his.

Cradling her against his chest and quietly surprised when she didn't protest, he stepped into the rather large bathtub and mumbled a quick incantation to start the shower fitment. He carefully dropped her legs and feet down, facing her away from him so she could lean back into his body for balance if she needed to, but she seemed to have found a stance that she could hold to comfortably stand. His hands remained on her anyway, grasping her sides as the water rained down on them and steam began to envelop them in a thick mist. He watched the water drag and stretch out her hair until it reached down to just above the dimples at the small of her back, clinging to her skin like thick toffee.

Hermione felt his arm snake around her waist and he pressed his palm flat against her stomach, and then his mouth was on her shoulder and dotting lazy kisses there. She closed her eyes and tilted her head so she could nuzzle her nose against his cheek, sighing when his lips trailed to the arc of her neck and he gathered her hair out of the way, draping it over her opposite shoulder. It was all so familiar and wonderful; the feeling of the hot water and him, and she knew if it weren't for her injuries and the numbness below her navel, that she would feel that lustful burn of anticipation between her hips.

It had been two months and she had missed the physical aspects of their relationship as much as she'd missed everything else about his presence. Evidently, Draco had the same sense of withdrawal because she could feel him growing hard behind her, until it was prodding her back, and impossible to ignore.

"Draco, you're-

"I can't help it," he mumbled between kisses. "It's been ages-

"I know, but-

"I know, no sex," he said. "Honestly, Granger, it's fine. Just ignore it. Say something about Weasley, that'll scare it off."

She barely heard the last part, too absorbed with the heavy tightening in her chest. It felt like determination, but it was more the overwhelming need to do something, to give something. Her mind was misted with memories of Christmas again, one in particular which involved a similar scene to where they were now; water-drops pounding down on their naked skin, and a private sanctuary of white tiles surrounding them. She remembered Draco trailing kisses down her torso, and then lower, and lower, until all sensation had followed his mouth there. And the memory bred a bold notion that made her anxious. But there was a brazen flicker of excitement in her too; that Gryffindor spark of tenacity.

"Draco," she breathed with a wavering voice. "Can you turn me to face you please?"

His lips left her shoulder as he slowly pivoted her around. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," she said, catching her bottom lip between her teeth. "Look, I...um-

"Bloody hell, Granger," he frowned. "If we're not having sex until you're better, then you're going to have to stop biting your lip. I thought the plan was to scare away my dick-

"Do you remember Christmas? When we showered together in the morning?"

"Yes," he replied hesitantly. "Why?"

"And do you...do you remember what you did?" she stuttered clumsily. "When you...when you were on your knees?"

"You mean when I-

"Drop me to my knees, Draco."

His eyebrows rose high on his forehead with shock. "Granger, I wasn't hinting that I wanted you to-

"I know, I know," she interrupted, running her fingers along the ridge of his collarbone. "I think that's partially why I want to; because you didn't ask-

"You don't need to-

"I want to-

"I can wait-

"You know, most guys would be just the slightest bit enthusiastic-

"Granger, I'm evidently enthusiastic," he smirked, gesturing to his erection, which was now rock-hard and nudging her hip. "But I know you, and-

"Then do you really want to argue and encourage me to change my mind?" she asked with a tentative smile, tilting her body into his frame and kissing his chin. "Let me do this, Draco."

She felt him coil a lock of her wet hair around his finger and sigh. "You're sure?"

"No," she laughed a little, perhaps more from nerves than humour. "But I want to try. Drop me to my knees, Draco."

He dropped his head to give her lips a quick tug with his, and then adjusted their stance a little, so his back was to the wall, and she would have more room to kneel. Locking her wrists in his grip, he helped her sink down to the base of the tub, his anticipation aching when she pressed a brief kiss by his ribs, and then another against his pelvic bone. When he was satisfied he could release her, he leaned back against the tiles, half-tempted to watch her but reasoning it probably wouldn't help her obvious nerves.

Instead, he stared straight ahead, unable to distinguish his animated heartbeats from the rhythm of the shower, and the next ten seconds of nothing felt like an hour.

The first thing he felt was her fingers gently stroking the inside of his thigh, and then they were firmly circling the base of his length. His gut spasmed when she pulled the O of her fingers up and down him a few times. Slowly. Inquisitively. And then there was this blissful, wet warmth enveloping him, and he dropped his head back, a guttural grunt vibrating in his windpipe as she began to move. He could feel the pad of her tongue licking his tip, like damp silk, and the grope of her lips dragging over him. All his blood seemed to rush down to his groin, until all he could focus on was the moist and soft feel of her drowning him.

Her ministrations were by no means confident or skilled, but he would swear it was more her inexperience that made it so intense. Every lick of her tongue and every pull of her mouth felt delicate and smooth, like it was more the kiss of her breath folded around his erection than actual physical contact. When she did something between a swallow and suck, he gritted his teeth and clenched his eyes tight shut.

"Fuck," he hissed, releasing a shuddering breath.

Merlin knew if it was because he'd been deprived of a sexual release for two months, or because she simply felt so marvellous with the muscles of her throat clenching around him, but he could already feel the building burn of lust inside of him, swelling up like a bubble ready to pop. The combination of her hot mouth and the water's pulse was hitting all his nerves in the right places with the perfect pressure, and his chest began to rise and fall with shallow breaths. And then his bones began to tremble.

"Granger, stop," he blurted, glancing down as she pulled away and stared up at him with wide and confused eyes. "Give me your hands."

She did, and he hastily yanked her to her feet, spinning them around and pinning her up against the tiles. He kissed her swollen lips so hard they would surely bruise, and then bit them desperately, grabbing her hand and pushing it against his length, encouraging her to touch him and drive him to the end. He silently thanked Salazar when she got the message and began to pump her fist around him, and he had to break their kiss to let go of a loud groan, burying his face into the crook of her shoulder. She was kissing the receptive stretch of skin between his ear and Adam's apple, and with a few final tight tugs, he was done. His limbs shook with no control and he groaned it all out, his breath leaving him in sharp gasps as every inch of him tingled and quivered.

"D-don't trust my hold," he said shakily. "Rest against the wall."

His body was throbbing. It was taking all of his strength to remain standing and keep her balanced on her unreliable legs, but he strained and flexed his muscles, waiting until he felt her bodyweight shift before he allowed himself to slide down to his knees. He rested his cheek against the flat of her stomach as the haziness and tremors subsided, lulled into a calming state by Hermione's fingers combing through his hair and tickling the nape of his neck.

"Oh God," she said suddenly. "We didn't cast a Muffliato or anything."

Draco released a short bark of laughter. "I couldn't give a shit."

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Hermione's fingers were fidgeting in her lap as she watched Draco; wondering if she should ask the question that had been pestering her for minutes. After their shower, Draco had helped her into a fresh pair of jeans and a jumper, mumbling some comment about how he preferred removing her clothes to putting them on, and he was now dressing himself. Normally, she would have studied him with reluctant fascination, admiring his finesse and that ability to always appear immaculate, despite being stripped of all the tokens wealth that had graced his youth, but the question was distracting her.

"Granger, I can hear your brain ticking from here," said Draco, his eyes shrewd and enquiring. "What is it?"

She hesitated. "I actually wanted to ask you...and you can say no if you want. I wanted to ask if I could use your wand to dry my hair?"

"That's it?"

"Well, sharing wands is considered rather intimate by some-

"More intimate than sharing bodily fluids?" he interrupted, removing his wand from his pocket and passing it to her. "Go ahead."

"Thank you," she smiled. Mumbling a quick incantation, she felt the wand resist her a little, but it did the job, and when she looked back at Draco, the corner of his mouth was bent with amusement. "What are you grinning at?"

"Apparently I forgot that your hair looks like a nest for a family of blind owls."

"You're hilarious-

"And charming."

Hermione snorted, but it faltered when Draco stalked towards her, leaning forward with his head bent to steal a kiss, but a knock at the door broke the moment before it could begin, and they both sighed.

"Is there no fucking peace in this house?" Draco muttered, turning back for the door.

Expecting it to be Tonks or perhaps Lovegood, he was caught off-guard when he was confronted with his own reflection, doubled in a pair of familiar glasses, and he straightened his spine when he realised they belonged to Potter. The other wizard looked sleep-deprived

and tormented, and there was only a hint of that resentment and animosity Draco was so accustomed to finding in his expression. Potter simply appeared exhausted and deflated, eyeing Draco with little more than uncertainty as he cleared his throat and tried to peer into the room.

"Malfoy," he nodded stiffly, his voice strained.

"Potter."

"I want to see Hermione-

"Harry?" she called. "Harry, come in."

Draco contemplated being difficult, but he was in a significantly better mood today after the morning shower and everything that it had entailed. He knew Potter's relationship with Granger was far less problematic than Weasley's, and his demeanour seemed harmless enough, so he stepped aside, watching Granger's features twist into a half-frown-come-half-smile as her gaze followed her friend. And then her eyes shifted to him, connecting with his and hosting the inevitable request that he'd anticipated since Potter had walked into the room.

"Draco, could you leave Harry and I alone?"

Despite expecting her question, he clenched his jaw and shot a cold glance in Potter's direction — more for the sake of dignity and familiarity than anything else — and then turned to leave. Purposely knocking shoulders with Potter as he went, he was oblivious to the annoyed scowl Granger was firing at the back of his head as he slammed the door behind him, and left them to it.

"How can you stand him?" asked Harry.

"I don't want to argue about Draco with you today, Harry," said Hermione firmly. "Where's Ron?"

"I tried to see him earlier, but he doesn't want to talk to either of us."

She cringed. "Maybe if we tried together-

"You know what he's like, Hermione," he said, his voice weary. "He won't talk until he's ready."

"I guess," she agreed grudgingly, her gaze roaming his solemn face. "How are you feeling, Harry?"

He sighed and seated himself on the bed; eyes downcast and rimmed with stress. "I feel... guilty. Tonks told me about your legs-

"It's only temporary, Harry. At least everyone got out okay."

"Everyone got out okay?" he repeated with a confused tone, but then his features tensed. "They didn't tell you."

"Tell me what?" she asked. And then she noticed his hands; noticed that his cuticles were bleeding and his fingernails were shredded. "Harry, what happened to your hands?"

"Bellatrix killed Dobby," he told her. "I dug his grave this morning."

"Oh my God," she gasped. "Harry, I...I am so sorry-

"Everything I touch breaks, Hermione," he mumbled dejectedly, hunching forward and rubbing his face with his palms. "It's like my curse is contagious. Everyone I love dies-

"It's not your fault-

"Isn't it?"

She shook her head and grabbed his hand. "No, Harry, it's not-

"And when I thought I'd lost you-

"Harry, take a breath," she sighed, tightening her grip around his fingers. "Tell me what happened at the Manor, and then we'll go to Dobby's grave together, okay?"

There were tears locked in his disturbed, green eyes as he filled his lungs with air, and began to recount the details.

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"I just think it's odd," remarked Theo. "It's not even your bloody name anymore. We should all be calling you Lupin, really."

"No, it would get confusing with all the people who call Remus that," said Tonks. "Besides, Tonks has been my nickname for years-

"Only because it was your surname, but it's not anymore."

Tonks, Theo, Bliase and Lovegood had already been sat at the table and engrossed in a rather dull discussion about breakfast when Draco had wandered into the kitchen around fifteen minutes ago. That discussion had somehow drifted to the current one about his cousin's name, and Draco rolled his eyes as he finished his glass of juice, wondering exactly how long it would take Potter and Granger to finish their little heart-to-heart. Leaving his seat to prepare a mug of coffee, he perched himself on the countertop and listened without absorbing as Tonks and Theo continued to bicker between mouthfuls of toast and Lovegood's idle humming.

"I like being called Tonks, so that's what I ask people to call me. End of."

"But it doesn't make any sense," Theo argued. "Don't you have a middle name or something? Even that would make more sense if you're so intent on avoiding your first name."

"Actually, I have three middle names," she nodded slowly. "But my mother ensured all of them were ridiculous too. Nymphadora Gwendoline Taura Hyacinth Tonks."

"Bloody hell," murmured Blaise. "That's a mouthful."

"Taura's a pretty name," said Luna thoughtfully. "I like that."

"It's the best out of a bad bunch, I guess," replied Tonks. "For some reason, mum wanted to keep the Black tradition with constellations and it's the feminine name of Taurus."

"Then why didn't you let people call you that?" Theo pressed.

"Because I like the name Tonks, okay?"

"Doesn't make any sense to me," he muttered, turning to Draco. "Malfoy, do you recon you'll always call Granger by her last name?"

"Probably," he shrugged.

"How is Hermione?" asked Tonks.

Draco cast his mind back to the shower and barely stifled a smirk. "Better. She can almost stand up and rest her weight on her legs."

"Good, at least the potion is working. Why didn't you help her down here for some breakfast?"

"Potter's talking to her."

"Oh good," sighed Luna suddenly. "Harry needs her right now. He looked so sad this morning."

"Potter always looks sad," Theo commented, and Draco nodded his head with agreement.

"Don't be nasty," warned Tonks. "He's been through a lot-

"We've all been through a lot," Theo snapped. "Some of us just don't feel the need to fucking moan about all the time-

"Theo, that's enough. I'm not undermining anyone else's problems, but Harry has a lot on his shoulders."

Draco slackened his jaw to comment, but he was cut off as Lupin entered the kitchen with Teddy in his arms. "Good morning," said Remus, passing the baby to Tonks. "I just checked

on Ollivander, and he's feeling better. And I saw Hermione with Harry. Looks like she's doing better too."

Tonks tilted her head. "You went to her room to check on her?"

"No, I just saw them outside."

Draco shot up to his feet and marched out of the room, ignoring Tonks' calls for him to wait. Still unfamiliar with the layout of the house, he ended up at the back door and grabbed the handle, but when he peered through the window and caught sight of Granger and Potter, something about the melancholic image of them made him hesitate.

Just a few yards past the garden fence was a delicate stream, and leaning over it, from its seat on the bank, was a weeping willow with brawny branches and flecks of blossom-buds. Between the gaps in the veil of leaves, he could see the two of them, both kneeling down beside what looked like a gravestone; their heads bowed with Hermione rubbing Potter's back in comforting circles.

"You didn't tell her about the House-elf," Blaise's voice made him start. "Did you?"

"I didn't think it was important," he replied bluntly. "It's just a bloody House-elf."

"A House-elf that saved her life."

Draco chewed his tongue but remained silent, frowning as he watched Hermione brush aside the sprinkling of tears on her cheeks and rest her temple against Potter's shoulder. The sensation in his gut was neither jealousy nor suspicion, but perhaps discomfort, because he simply couldn't fathom how she could be upset about the death of something so insignificant. But, again, he was conflicted.

"Draco," Blaise exhaled slowly. "I know it's easier said than done, but you really need to consider the possibility that if your parents were wrong about Muggle-borns, then they were probably wrong about other things too-

"Sod off, Blaise," he groaned. "I am still trying to understand how I ended up falling for Granger and then became involved with this bunch of suicidal idiots. I don't really have the patience to question everything about my upbringing."

"Suicidal idiots?" he echoed, his brow creased. "You don't think they'll win?"

"No," he said quickly, lifting his eyes back to stare at Granger through the glass. "But she does, and she has proved me wrong about everything so far."

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Hermione combed her fingers through her tousled curls and watched Draco undress from her spot on the bed. There was beam of moonlight stretching into the room through the gap in the curtains, and it hit his china-doll skin in a mesmerizing way that made her breath catch in her throat. Her craving for sleep was a heavy pull on her lashes and a persistent ache in her muscles, but it was inevitable after what she considered had been a rather vexing day. Between Harry explaining the events that had occurred in Malfoy Manor and then discovering Dobby had sacrificed himself for them, she was anxious to envelop herself in the blankets and in Draco's arms for some much-needed rest.

But she'd noticed her lover had been distant today, particularly since she and Harry had returned from Dobby's grave a little while after lunchtime. His odd mood had lasted all day, but she'd refrained from questioning him about it; mainly because they hadn't really been able to steal a moment alone. As she studied him now, his dusty, grey eyes were far away and preoccupied, but then they turned to her, and there was a glint of apprehension in his stare.

"Are you angry with me?" he rushed out. "For not telling you about the House-elf?"

The question threw her off kilter for a second or two. "No," she replied after a pause. "It wasn't something you did out of spite. You just...don't understand, I guess."

"It's a just a House-elf to me," he told her honestly. "And I know you bloody love the things with that SPIT thing you did-

"It's called S.P.E.W.-

"And it never even crossed my mind that its death was worth mentioning. It means nothing to me."

"I meant nothing to you once. Opinions change-

"Not overnight," he cut in. "It took time for my opinion of you to change-

"We have time," she said, a slight smile on her lips as she reached out to grasp his hand. "Come to bed, Draco."

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She adjusted the hood of her cloak to better hide her face, flinching as each clicks and clacks of her heels ricocheted around the empty corridors and bounced between the cold, stone walls. She knew the castle well; had instantly recalled the paths that she'd wandered in her

youth, but the ancient school's air felt so different now, unfriendly and abrasive. A cruel chill rushed down her spine as she rounded another corner, and she hurried her steps.

She'd been forewarned that the Death Eaters had ensured that disillusionment charms wouldn't work in here, or anything else that might aid a person to escape. There was no getting in and no getting out, unless you knew the right people, of course.

Finally spotting her desired door and the gargoyle guarding it, she mumbled the password she'd been told would work — *Agere Sequitur Credere* — and released a grateful sigh as the door yielded and permitted her access. Hurrying down the small passageway and into the Headmaster's office, her eyes darted around the large room, before they finally landed on the dark outline of a shadow near the window, and she pulled down her hood.

"How did you get in here, Narcissa?" asked Snape in that slow, thick tone, keeping his back to her.

"Let's just say Alecto owes me a favour."

"And why are you here?"

"You know why I'm here," she accused sharply. "You know exactly what I am doing here!"

"No, I don't."

"Yes, you do!" she spat loudly. "You lied to me, Severus! You told me my son was dead!"

He glanced over his shoulder to eye her curiously. "And what would make you think I'd lied? Draco was killed-

"No, he wasn't!" she shouted. "I know he wasn't killed!"

"What are you talking about, Narcissa?"

"That Mu...the Muggle-born girl, Potter's friend. When she was at the Manor, I searched her memories, and I saw Draco!"

"What exactly did you see?" he questioned, nearing her warily. "Perhaps you misread a memory-

"No, I know what I saw!" She clenched her eyes shut to delay the tears. "I am perfectly capable of reading memories, thank you very much. I saw my son alive. You told me he was dead."

Snape cocked his head to the side. "I made a vow to protect your son. I did what was necessary to keep that vow-

"I know you're working for them," she interrupted. "How else could he have ended up with a member of the Order? How could he have ended up in Hogwarts when McGonagall was Headmistress?"

"You are mistaken-

"Stop lying to me, Severus! When I was searching through that girl's memories of Draco, I could sense your presence! I could feel that you were somehow connected to Draco, and that she perceived you as an ally, so don't even try to lie to me again!"

His face scrunched up with distaste. "Are you here to blackmail me, Narcissa?"

"Don't tempt me, Severus-

"Then why-

"I want to help you," she blurted. "I want to help them."

Snape's eyebrows lifted with surprise but he remedied his expression back into a suspicious scowl. "Why would you want to help the Order?"

"Because Draco...because when I was in that girl's mind, I saw how happy my son was... happy with her; a Muggle-born. And I didn't care." She paused to swallow. "I could feel the girl's love for my son, and I saw it reciprocated in her memories of him. I just want my son back."

"You mean Draco and Miss Granger?" he mumbled, his disbelief too intense to mask. "You're certain?"

"Without a shadow of a doubt," she nodded. "You are working for the Order, aren't you? If you weren't, you would've summoned Him by now. And Draco is alive, isn't he?"

"And how do I know who you are working for?"

"Search my mind if you want, or use Veritaserum. I don't care. But look at me, Severus. You know me, and you know I am not lying."

Snape regarded her with a calculating stare and pursed his lips. "How are your skills in Occlumency, Narcissa?"

"Good enough. If He knew what I was thinking, I would be dead by now."

"And does Lucius know you're here?"

"Lucius..." she breathed. "Lucius is barely aware of anything. He has been tortured too much." She choked. "I don't have a husband anymore, I'm just haunted by a ghost that resembles him. I have lost both of my sisters, and I...I thought I'd lost Draco." She choked again. "He's all I have left, Severus, and I will do anything to get him back. Please help me get my son-

He scoffed. "Your family have had enough favours from me-

"Well then let me help you," she implored desperately. "Please, Severus, let me help."

"If you want to help, you will carry on pretending to serve the Dark Lord-

"But I could-

"It's the safest and wisest option," he continued, nodding his head towards the door. "You need to return to the Manor before someone becomes aware of your absence-

"But, Severus, I need-

"Can you get away tomorrow night?" he asked, waiting until she nodded. "I will contact you tomorrow then. It's too risky for you to be here right now. Amycus will be coming shortly. I will let you know of a more appropriate time and place to resume this discussion."

Narcissa released a relief-laden sigh. "Thank you."

"In the meantime," he said evenly. "I will continue to do what I have been doing, and you will continue to do what you have been doing. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she frowned, replacing the hood to conceal her face. "I understand, Severus."

"And keep your mind guarded," warned Snape, watching her through hooded eyes as she pivoted on her heel and left the office. He slowly turned his attention to the portrait on the opposite wall. "I suppose you approve of this revelation about Miss Granger and Draco?"

"Don't you?" the image of Dumbledore countered.

"No, I do not."

"History has a funny way of repeating itself when broken hearts aren't mended, Severus," the painting spoke softly. "Don't resent the *déjà vu*-

"If history is deciding to repeat itself, then we already know that there is no happy ending."

"You could help them find one."

Snape turned his back on the portrait and returned to gazing out of the window, wondering how fate could be so callous and intent on tormenting him with such a familiar setting and story. He stared back at his distorted reflection in the drizzle-kissed glass and gritted his teeth against the ache in his heart, unable to decide if he pitied the two doomed lovers, or envied them.

Chapter End Notes

Hey guys! I am so sorry about the wait...I've had a lot of Uni work recently, but I made this chapter extra-long to try and make up for it! I hope you like it! And thank you so much for all the response so far! You guys are adorable!

The only thing I really need to say is that Snape's password (*Agere Sequitur Credere*) is Latin for "We act according to what we believe (ourselves to be)".

And that's it really! Hope you liked it! Please read and review! Hopefully, the next chapter won't take as long, but I do have a lot assignments coming up, so I can't say for definite how long it will take. Sorry about that, and thank you so much for sticking with my fic so far! Yeah I'll stop rambling now...

Bex.

Wands

Chapter Notes

Just the usual song recs! My first one (and possibly one of my favourite songs) is Slow Moving Millie - Please (please please) let me get what I want (for Hermione), and then Muse's version of the same song (for Draco). Or the original Smiths version, if you prefer! And also Snow Patrol - Chasing Cars.

Also, I just want to wish a HUGE HAPPY BIRTHDAY to Nicole (niicoleelee) from Devi, myself, and all the Dramione shippers on tumblr! This chapter is for you, so I hope you like it! You're awesome and lovely, and make some of the best graphics EVER, so if you're following her (and if you're not, you should be), go and wish her happy birthday!

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

Hermione twirled the strand of black hair between her thumb and forefinger, and watched it spin like a miniature tornado.

After waking up some ten minutes ago and taking her potion, she had slipped out of Draco's arms and tested her legs. Still numb from the waist down, she had half-hobbled and half-crawled to the chest of drawers where Tonks had told her she would find her bag. She'd started to remove the contents — mainly her potions and books — checking that nothing had been damaged during their encounter with the Snatchers and the incidents that had followed in Malfoy Manor, and when she'd found her bloodstained clothes, she'd shuddered to the onslaught of flashbacks they'd stirred.

And then she'd found the strand of hair, tucked between the threads of her jumper; definitely not hers, and almost certainly Bellatrix's.

She twirled it again, focussing on the black, coiled wisp and analysing it so intently, her eyes began to feel dry and sore.

"Granger, what the hell are you doing?"

His voice startled her and she whipped her head around to meet his inquiring stare, quickly hiding the hair in the pocket of her bag. "Nothing," she said. "I was just making sure the Snatchers hadn't taken anything, or broken something."

"Were you even paying attention when Tonks said that you should take it slow? Or are you just intent on injuring yourself further-

"Draco, I have some temporary nerve damage," she frowned. "I am not made of glass."

"Well, forgive me for trying to be sensible," he drawled slowly. "But I think it would be a wise idea for you to wait until I am awake before you try to walk around-

"Yes, because there are so many hazardous objects in our room."

"I guarantee you'd manage to find one."

She scoffed but didn't respond, instead smiling appreciatively as he raised his arms above his head to stretch, watching the muscles in his arms distend, flex, and strain against the short sleeves of his t-shirt. She thought he was his most beautiful in the morning; his hair slightly ruffled, his features relaxed, and his musky signature scent overpowering everything in the room. She mused it might be because all of his defences were down, or maybe it was because she was the only one who really had a chance to observe him like this, but either way, it was a temporary state, which made it all the more captivating to her.

"What time is it?" he asked. "It's still looks dark outside."

"Quite early," she replied. "About eight, I think."

"Come back to bed," he mumbled over a yawn. "I would offer you a hand, but I know you'll refuse."

She nodded stubbornly. "I can do it myself."

Crawling her way closer to the bed, she gripped the nightstand and heaved herself up, grunting with the effort. She managed to keep her footing for a few seconds, but when she went to take a step she stumbled, and landed on the bed in a graceless heap.

"Well, that was dignified," said Draco drolly.

"Oh, hush. I got up, didn't I?"

"Yes, and it only took an hour."

"Don't exaggerate, it's not attractive."

"Everything I do is attractive," he quipped, and his brow furrowed as Hermione burst into a fit of giggles. She futilely attempted to smother her laughter into her hand, as she often did; her body shaking and causing her tousled curls to spill around her shoulders. "Would you like me to leave and come back when you're finished?" he asked flatly.

"Sorry," she breathed between chuckles. "It's just...I've missed this. Just bickering with you. I know that sounds odd, but I feel like things are getting back to normal."

"Normal?"

"Well...as close to normal as we'll ever be, I guess."

"Except now we're surrounded by nosy buggers who insist on being so bloody intrusive."

She eyed him curiously. "Would you have preferred we stayed in my room in Hogwarts forever?"

"No, I was bloody sick of that room," he frowned. "But at least we had some privacy. At least we were left alone."

"Well, we're alone n..." But, as if to prove Draco's point, she was cut off by three solid knocks at the door.

"For Merlin's sake," he hissed. "Fuck off!"

"Draco, stop it," she scolded. "Answer the door."

"Sodding idiots," he grumbled as he got to his feet, his movements rigid with agitation as he roughly flung open the door to glower at Tonks and the baby in her arms, clicking his tongue impatiently. "What the hell do you want?"

"Such a morning person," said Tonks sarcastically. "And would you mind watching your language in my house? Especially around Teddy."

"There's a simple solution to that; don't bother me, and you won't have to hear me saying fu-

"Draco," warned Hermione from behind him. "Tonks, is everything okay?"

"Everything's fine, I just have a couple of visitors for you," she grinned, holding Teddy up so Hermione could see. "This little guy, and this little guy."

Tonks stepped to the side and Crookshanks bounded into the room, a flash of ginger fur that darted across the floor and hopped up on to the bed, straight into Hermione's lap.

"Crooks!" she exclaimed, smiling as her faithful pet nudged his nose into her palm. "I missed you, boy."

"Brilliant," mumbled Draco. "Do you have any flea repellent?"

"No," said Tonks, stepping into the room. "But I do have some irritating tosser repellent."

"Ah, that explains why I haven't seen Potter and Weasley this morning."

Both witches shot him harsh glances, which he casually ignored. "I would just like to point out that you made that extremely easy for me."

"Prat," Tonks mumbled, approaching Hermione. "Would you like to hold Teddy?"

"Yes, please," she practically beamed, gently removing Crookshanks from her lap and adjusting herself so Teddy would settle comfortably in her arms, his small frame cradled against her and secure between her elbows. "God, he looks like you, Tonks."

"You reckon? Everyone says he looks like Remus."

"He has Lupin's eyes, but he has your nose and mouth," she mumbled thoughtfully. "Have you told Harry he's his godfather yet?"

"Remus told him last night," Tonks nodded. "Apparently he was chuffed-

"Wait a minute," Draco interrupted brashly. "Potter's the godfather? Bloody hell, Tonks, you could've given the kid some hope."

Hermione tutted and pursed her lips. "Harry will make a wonderful godfather-

"Yes, because he has such a knack for staying out of trouble. Is Weasel-bee the godmother?"

Tonks extended her arm and flicked her wrist to slap Draco's shoulder, not particularly hard, but enough to make him wince. "Do you mind keeping your eye on Teddy for a bit, Hermione?" she asked. "I have a couple of things to do, and Remus has gone to meet Kingsley."

"I'd be glad to."

"Thank you," she said, giving Draco a stern look as she turned to leave. "And you mind your language in front of the baby."

Muttering a steady string of complaints under his breath as his cousin left, his quiet words fizzled into silence when his attention was drawn back to the sobering sight of Hermione, and the small bundle in her arms. He shifted his stance, instantly feeling uncomfortable, like the gravity in their bedroom had increased and had hooked onto his stomach. His eyes flickered between her and the baby, scrutinising Hermione's awed expression and contemplating excusing himself, but she glanced up at him and grinned knowingly before he could.

"Is there a particular reason you're standing over there, shuffling your feet?"

"I was not shuffling my-

"Draco, this isn't making me broody," she assured him, her mouth almost bent in a smirk now. "I am just holding my friend's baby, so you needn't be so nervous."

He huffed indignantly and cleared the distance to the bed, dropping to sit opposite her with such force that she bounced a little. "I was not nervous," he disputed, frowning down at Crookshanks when the cat nuzzled his hand affectionately. "I was just-

"Okay fine, you weren't nervous-

"Granger, I was not ner-

"He's sweet though," she mumbled thoughtfully, running her index finger across Teddy's tiny knuckles. "Isn't he?"

Draco cleared the scratch in his throat. "If you say so."

"You don't like children?"

"What's to like? All they do is shit-

"Language, Draco-

"And eat," he went on. "And they require help to do it. Your cat has more independence and appeal."

"We were all babies once, you know," she replied. "I like them. I like that they remind you what innocence looks like."

That comment caught him off guard, and he watched her from under his lashes as she sighed and stroked the small collection of thin hairs on Teddy's crown. "I think innocence is subjective," he told her hesitantly. "To me, you are innocent."

"I don't think I am," she said after a slight pause, blinking at him, somewhere between confused and moved. "Perhaps...comparatively to other people you know."

"Perhaps," he agreed noncommittally.

"So, you don't want children?" she asked, and he couldn't tell if she rushed the question out to beat an awkward silence, or if she was anxious about asking.

"Wanting them was never really an issue," he confessed. "It was just always assumed and necessary that I have them; carry on the Malfoy line and all that." He paused and clicked his jaw. "I don't have that responsibility anymore."

Hermione's heart plunged down to her stomach as she watched the change in Draco's demeanour. Perhaps if she had not come to learn the telling subtleties of his expression and stance, she wouldn't have noticed, but she could see his disappointment and dejection in the lowering of his eyelids and the tightening of his fists. Even Crookshanks seemed to sense it, resting his front paws against Draco's knee and meowing quietly.

"Do you miss them?" she blurted clumsily. "Your parents, I mean."

Draco averted his gaze. "Granger-

"I'm not asking to use it against you, Draco-

"I know that."

"I'm asking because...well, I'll admit I am a bit curious, but also because I care," she explained gently. "You never talk about them."

He sighed and lifted his hand to comb his fingers through his hair, licking his teeth with thought as he regarded her. "'Miss' isn't the right word," he started reluctantly. "I'm used to spending long periods of time away from them. Well, we all are-

"But you haven't seen them in over a year, Draco."

"A few months and a year don't feel that different really," he shrugged. "No, I don't miss them. I am more...concerned for my mother's well-being than anything else. I know she seems cold and hard, but she's not designed for the life she's being forced into now. She's not a killer. And you did say she tried to help you."

"She did."

"You see, she's not one of them really. She just...she's doing what she has to in order to survive."

Hermione hesitantly parted her lips. "And...your father?"

"My father," he echoed tiredly, releasing a short, humourless chuckle as he rubbed his chin. "I have no idea. To be honest, it varies everyday, but it's irrelevant. He won't want anything to do with me once he finds out about us, and when I think of all the shit he's put my mother and I through...Let's just say I'm prepared for whatever. I doubt he could surprise me with anything anymore."

"You know, your parents might not disown you, Draco-

"My mother might not, but my father definitely will," he stated confidently.

She worried her bottom lip between her teeth. "Do you resent me for that?"

"What?" he frowned, his eyebrows knitting together. "Granger-

"No, just hear me out on this," she interrupted. "I know you don't think how you used to, and that's a good thing, but...I know it's difficult for you. I mean, no matter how much I might not understand, you did have certain expectations of your life before all this, and...well, I assume they're different now?"

"Of course they are," he snapped. "Why would I resent you for that?"

"Because I-

"Do you resent me for anything?" he questioned quickly. "For putting a strain on your relationship with Potter and Weasley? And your other friends for that matter. Or for Bellatrix torturing you? Or for-

"No, of course not," she hushed him. "You know I don't."

"Why not?"

"Well," she started uncertainly. "Because I was aware that these things would happen, but I made the decision to be with you anyway. I knew that certain members of your family hate me and might hurt me in this war, and I knew that Ron and Harry would have trouble accepting us. I wouldn't resent you for a choice that I made."

He nodded his head once. "Exactly."

"But they're your parents, Draco," she stressed. "It's a little different. They're your family. Your blood."

"Blood has caused us enough problems," he muttered behind his teeth, but he could tell she'd heard him. "Granger, just rest assured that my decision has been made, and I have no desire or intention to change it. We will deal with my parents when we have to. Can we change the subject now?"

She pulled in a long breath like she intended to argue, but her shoulders relaxed as she exhaled, and she tilted her head with acceptance. "Okay," she said, her attention diverted as Teddy made a small noise. She looked back to Draco with the ghost of a mischievous smile tugging at her lips. "Would you like to hold the baby?"

He choked on his indignation. "Absolutely not."

"Why not? He is your cousin, and-

"Second cousin."

"Technically, he's your first cousin once removed," she corrected. "And that still has 'cousin' in the title."

"That's beside the point, I'm not holding him," he shook his head firmly. "Aside from the fact that Tonks would beat me to death with a rusty shovel if I dropped him, I don't want to."

"You're not going to drop him. And even if you did, we're on the bed-

"Granger-

"If you hold him, I'll make you a hot chocolate," she offered with a grin. "With cream."

"That's a weak bribe," he scoffed. "I am perfectly capable of making my own drinks-

"Oh, come on, you know you love the hot chocolates I make."

"I know no such thing," he retorted, eyeing her inquisitively. "Why are you so determined to get me to hold him?"

Hermione's smile fell for a moment, and she contemplated telling him that it was because she thought family was important; that even if his parents had disowned him, he still had other blood relatives that he could turn to. She thought about telling him that she had a feeling Andromeda, Tonks, and Teddy might become more significant to him than he could possibly foresee at this point in time, and that she wanted him to have more than her and his friends on the Light side. That even though blood might not be thicker than their water, it helped to keep the heart beating.

"My arms are getting a bit tired," she told him instead. "And plus, I...I guess it would be interesting to watch."

He hummed under his breath, evidently unconvinced by her reasoning. "If you let me take the piss out of Weasel-bee and Potter for a day without making faces or complaining, then you have a deal."

"There's no chance I would agree to that-

"Half a day."

"Draco-

"Fine, fine," he groused. "Honestly, you have no sense of humour. Fine, one hot chocolate-

"Okay-

"Every morning, until I get sick of them," he finished with a smug tilt of his chin. "Deal?"

"Deal," she echoed, quicker than he'd expected. "Right, settle your arms in your lap like mine."

Releasing a perturbed breath that disturbed his fringe and already regretting this, he mimicked the angles of her arms. "Like this?"

"That's fine," she said, leaning forward to carefully transfer the baby into his hold. "That's good, just mind his head. There you go."

Draco adjusted his elbows and hands to accommodate Teddy's small frame, alternating his position until he managed to find a semi-comfortable spot with the baby's head nestled into the curve of his arm. Teddy made a few quiet sounds of discomfort and fidgeted a little before he calmed, staring up at Draco with a wide gaze for one long moment, but then they fell shut, and Draco felt some of his qualms dissipate as the baby yawned with what seemed to be contentment.

"See," said Hermione as Crookshanks crawled into her lap. "It's not so bad, is it?"

He raised his cynical eyes to her and grunted. "If he gives any indication that he's going to shit or vomit, I'm pointing him in your direction."

"And they say chivalry's dead."

He regretted his next question before it even found him. "I presume you want children then?"

"Not for a while," she replied, more for his benefit than hers. "But someday. Maybe two, I think. I always wanted a sibling, so I think I'd like more than one."

He frowned with unease, intending to change the topic to something a little less profound, but Teddy's small fingers coiled around his thumb with a grip that felt very real, and he looked back down at the slumbering child with a peculiar sense of incredulity.

"He has no idea there's a war going on," said Draco vacantly. "Does he?"

When his eyes returned to Hermione, he couldn't decide if she looked hopeful or hopeless.

"No, he has no idea."

"Lucky him."

"Yes," she nodded blankly. "Lucky him."

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Draco managed to stifle the telling look of affection that almost stole his features. The way Hermione's nose wrinkled as she laughed at something Blaise had said was undeniably charming, but he was too aware of the others in the room; Blaise, Lovegood, and Theo. Instead, he rested his arm against the back of her chair, giving her shoulders a secret stroke as he did so.

"It was simply a cooking experiment," Luna said passively. "I wasn't aware that mixing Lavender root and Valerian would react with the cake ingredients in such an...interesting way."

"Oh fuck, I remember those cakes," Theo nodded. "Yeah, they made the room spin, and all I saw was bright colours for five hours."

"At least you weren't sick on the carpet," Blaise muttered, rising from his seat. "Do you want another coffee, Luna?"

"I'll have a herbal tea please."

"Blaise," said Draco. "Make me a coffee while you're up."

"Do I look like your House-elf? Make it yourself."

"Prick," he mumbled half-heartedly, also getting to his feet. "Do you want anything, Granger?"

"No, I'm fine, thank you. I haven't finished this."

Theo sniggered and rolled his eyes. "I might have another tea. Do you want...Oh wait, no. I don't have anyone to ask."

Luna moved her lazy eyes over to him. "Was that a hint that you're uncomfortable with being the metaphorical fifth wheel, Theo?"

"On the contrary, Lovegood," he said quickly. Hermione thought perhaps too quickly. "I prefer being by myself. Although, if I was going to burden myself with a girlfriend-

"Burden yourself?" Hermione repeated, taking a slow sip of her tea. "Isn't that a tad pessimistic?"

"Yeah, hello, my name is Theo and I'm a Slytherin," he quipped. "As I was saying, if I was going to have a girlfriend, apparently goody girls from the boring Houses are in fashion-

"Goody girls from the boring Houses? Excuse me, but-

"You know, you interrupt people a lot," he remarked drolly. "Yes, goody girls from the boring Houses. I stand by that description. Which brings me to my point actually. I don't suppose you know if the Patil twins are currently single and partial to some kinky shit, Granger?"

Hermione coughed mid-swallow, sputtering and choking up her tea and trying to shield it behind her hands. Through the haze of her watering eyes, she saw Draco come up behind Theo and smack the upside of his head with the flat of his palm, and the urge to laugh only made her choking worse, especially when Theo flinched like a reprimanded child. She felt Draco's hand on her back then, rubbing slow and soothing circles between her shoulder blades and easing away the stress in her throat.

"You alright?"

"I'm okay, I'm okay," she breathed once it had diminished, giving Draco a grateful smile. "Sorry, that just caught me off guard."

Draco grinned down at her, his eyes almost soft with amusement, and Hermione lost herself in the surreality of his calm expression for a moment. She wondered if he was even aware how different his features acted when he was in the company of people he evidently felt quite comfortable with, and she thought she felt something as she studied him; a little spark of heat in the numb spot beneath her stomach, but before she could give it any mind, the kitchen door opened, and in walked Harry.

The change in the room's atmosphere was immediate, and her smile faded as she watched her best friend hesitate by the doorframe, his face uncertain and perhaps even a bit nervous. His eyes narrowed behind his spectacles, warily shifting between Theo, Blaise and Draco, and Hermione felt Draco's hand press firmer against her back.

"Hello, Harry," Luna broke the silence, seemingly oblivious to the tension between the four young wizards. "Would you like something to eat? I can warm up the soup Tonks made?"

"I'm fine, Luna, thank you," he replied, turning to Hermione. "I need to talk to you. In private."

"Yes, of course," she said. "You'll have to help me walk though."

He nodded and made his way towards her, and she noticed he kept his eyes down, refusing to acknowledge the Slytherin boys as he helped her to her feet and began to carefully lead her

out the room. Draco kept his eyes fixed on the pair of retreating forms, noting absently that Hermione's balance had definitely improved, and waiting until Potter had closed the door behind him until he dropped into a chair and grunted with distaste.

"I guess you'd better get used to Potter and Weasley pissing on your parade," commented Theo.

"He's such a dickhead," mumbled Draco. "Honestly, he probably wants Granger to help tie his shoelaces, or it's something just as insignificant and he asked her to go with him just to prove a point."

"I think their friendship is lovely," Luna said suddenly, and her three companions shot her baffled looks. "They're like brother and sister and they've been through a lot together. You rarely see friendships like that really, when you think about it." She rose from her seat and brushed away the toast crumbs in her lap. "I think I'll go and help Tonks with the laundry."

Blaise made to follow her. "I'll give you a hand."

"You know," said Draco, after the door had clicked shut behind Blaise, leaving Theo and himself alone in the kitchen. "I never thought Blaise would become so...attached to a girl. He's like a clingy pet."

"And you're so much better?"

"I'm not that bloody bad."

"You're not far off," he muttered, but then Theo's features seemed to wilt, and he almost appeared upset. "It must be pretty...decent for you two though; to have someone like that."

Draco couldn't help but gawp at his friend. "What the hell are you on about?"

"You know what I mean," he sighed. "If You-Know-Who wins this war, then we'll all be killed anyway, and it won't matter. But if we win, then people are hardly just going to accept us straight away with our Death Eater parents and the things we did before. At least you and Blaise and have someone who will give a shit about you. At least you won't be alone."

Draco's brow furrowed as he rolled those words around in his head, watching Theo's shoulders slump and hands clasp tightly together.

"You won't be alone," he offered, somewhat uncomfortably. "You know, I might need you around to help me come up with new names for Potter and Weasley."

Theo smirked. "You mean one-wank-Weasley and pity-whore-Potter?"

"Exactly."

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* * *

In the rare moments Hermione stopped fretting about the war, it always seemed to sneak up on her with a new threat, and she wondered if she should feel guilty for letting it occasionally slip into the dormant part of her brain.

She sat on her bed, testing the wand's weight in her hands and trying to ignore the uneasy twitch in her gut. She could practically feel it resisting her; the residual Dark magic scalding her fingertips as she timidly fiddled with it and ran her thumb along its edge. Ollivander's earlier words for it rang in her ears.

Unyielding.

She couldn't help but think of all the people who had suffered or been killed by the will of this wand; Sirius, Frank and Alice Longbottom, Dobby, herself, and Merlin knew how many others. She hated the thought of using it, but it had been the most logical option, and she'd opted herself to become its new owner. Both Harry and Ollivander had agreed that with her magical capabilities and proficiency in spells, she was the most likely candidate who would be able to harness its powers effectively. And if Harry could use Pettigrew's wand, the man who had betrayed his parents, then she could certainly learn to adapt to using Bellatrix's 12¾ inches of walnut with a dragon heartstring core.

According to Harry, Ron had managed to disarm Fenir at the Manor, and presumed he still had that wand, assuring Hermione he'd ask once Ron was willing to speak to him again. They'd tried knocking on his door and found it locked, which had at least confirmed Ron was using someone's wand.

After sitting in a room for an hour with the fragile and frail wandmaker, and listening to him describe the properties of Pettigrew's and Belletraix's wands and possible methods that might make handling them easier, Hermione had assumed little else would be discussed. But then Harry had raised the topic of the Elder Wand; had revealed that he'd had a vision, in which Voldemort had acquired it, and Hermione's head still felt a little dizzy from that revelation.

Harry had then helped her back to her bedroom and they'd spent a few more hours discussing the ramifications of Voldemort possessing the Elder Wand, sorting through Hermione's eighty or so books and trying to separate the ones that were likely to include any details about the elusive artefact.

With a pile of thirteen books set aside, which Hermione had organised in order of relevance and reliability, she'd promised Harry she would read through them and see what she could find, but had warned him not get his hopes up, fearing that the majority of the context would be based on rumours and folklore. Having already read up on the Deathly Hallows during their stay in the Forest of Dean, she knew that there was little to work with, and almost all of her findings would consist of hearsay. After searching three books for anything significant

and finding nothing, she'd decided it might be more beneficial to try some simple spells with Bellatrix's wand, just to ease her into the habit of using it.

That was where she found herself now; anxiously twisting it between her thumbs and fingers and considering an Accio to get started, but the bedroom door opened before she could begin, and she literally felt Draco's outrage as he took her in, toying with a wand he would easily recognise.

"What the fuck are you doing with that?" he demanded harshly. "That'd better not be-

"Bellatrix's wand," she finished for him. "Yes, it is."

"Why the hell do you have that thing?"

"Harry and Ron disarmed Bellatrix," she explained, exhaling slowly before she went on. "And I'm going to be using it now."

Draco felt his eyes bulge of their own accord, and a vein in his throat throbbed as his anger rose into his mouth. "You are NOT using that wand!"

Her features creased up with offence. "I wasn't asking for your bloody permission-

"Do you have any fucking idea how many people have been killed and tortured by that thing?" he ranted. "Probably hundreds between this war and the last!"

"I'm aware of that!" she retorted. "But wands don't kill and torture, Draco, people do,"

"It's not that simple and you know it! Wands chose their owners, remember? That thing is evil and you will not be able to control it-

"Yes, I will!"

"Aside from the fact that you're a Muggle-born and the wand will sense that, you are too good for it!" he shouted furiously. "It will do everything it can to work against you-

"There is no other option!" she yelled back at him. "Our wands were taken by the Snatchers and Tonks doesn't have any spares. We have to work with what is available to us-

"So this was Potter's idea?"

"No, it was mine!"

"And whose wand is he using?" he asked curtly. "Rudolfus' I suppose? Or my father's?"

"No, he's using Pettigrew's wand," she replied steadily. "And I can assure you that it is far more difficult for him than it is for me. But, as I said, we have to work with what is available to us-

"This is fucking ridiculous," he mumbled, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands, and raking his fingers back through his hair. "Why aren't you listening to me? You are completely

underestimating how evil that thing is-

"Or perhaps you're underestimating me and my abilities," she fired back. "I know I can do this, so stop it! I have already made up my mind-

"For Merlin's sake, Granger, why do you have to be so sodding stubborn?"

"I'm being stubborn?" she repeated incredulously. "You're the one who won't let this drop-

"You can use my wand," he blurted, and it was almost a plea. "Just use mine."

Hermione stilled, momentarily struck speechless by how easily he offered his most precious item as a wizard to her. "You know that's not a suitable option," she murmured.

"Why not?"

"Because then you wouldn't have a wand-

"We could share-

"But why should we share when there is this wand to use? And you know, I felt your wand resist me when I used it yesterday," she told him, noticing his expression turned slightly troubled with that comment. "If you would be using it too, then it would take even longer for it to become accustomed to me. It makes more sense that I use this wand, and you know it."

Draco clenched his eyes shut, grinding his teeth. "I'm not going to be able to talk you out of this, am I?"

"No."

"You can be such a pain in the arse sometimes, Granger," he grumbled, but the irritation in his tone had simmered. "You really can."

She smiled a little. "I know."

Suddenly feeling quite exhausted, Draco sat himself on the bed, hunching forward and perching his elbows atop his knees. He was just considering listing several more reasons why his suggestion might be appropriate, but he felt her fingers reach out and absently stroke across the dents of his wrist, and his objection withered before he had a chance to voice it.

"I know it's hardly convenient," she spoke softly. "But nothing is ever convenient during times of war."

Draco's lips twitched. "Then I guess...Well, at least let me help you with it," he said reluctantly. "I've seen her use it, and I know its character. I might be able to give you some advice on it, or something."

"I would appreciate that," she agreed quickly, leaning forward so she could peck the barely-there dimple at the corner of his mouth. "Thank you, Draco."

Chapter End Notes

Sorry about the huge wait, guys! But you know...Christmas kinda keeps everyone busy, and I've had a few assignments and stuff, but yeah...sorry! Also, I'm sorry this is kind of a filler chapter, but I promise the pace will be picking up after this, but there were just some things that needed to be brought up in this chapter and stuff...and yeah, I'm blabbing! But sorry if it's a bit crap and boring, but I promise this is the last filler chapter! (I'm pretty sure it is anyway...)

Thanks for all your lovely reviews and messages, and I hope you all had a wonderful Christmas, and all the best for the New Year! Read and Review! Thanks for reading!

Bex-chan

Flaws

Chapter Notes

Just the usual song recs! I have a few... Florence and the Machine - Bedroom Hymns, The XX - Crystallised, and Glen Hansard and Marketa Irglova - If you want me. Hope they work well for the chapter! Let me know if you have any song suggestions! Thank you to Elizabeth (wandofhawthorn) for betaing!

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

Draco wasn't sure if he'd woken up with a headache, or if it was the headache itself that had caused him to stir not long before five in the morning. Either way, it was there, hammering against the backs of his eye-sockets, and he gritted his teeth against the pain.

While he couldn't remember anything specific, he knew he'd been tormented by nightmares for the majority of the night — could feel the ruthlessness of them in the cold sweat dribbling down his back — and instinct told him they'd most likely revolved around Granger, his parents, and Voldemort. It was probably why his arm was wrapped so tightly around Hermione's midriff, and why her hair was tousled at an odd angle, disturbed by his heavy breathing.

He released his hold on her and sat up, trying to ease away his headache by clicking his neck and massaging the bridge of his nose. At the foot of the bed, Crookshanks was curled up into a tight ball, one eye peeking out from under his paw and studying Draco curiously.

"Bugger off, ugly," he whispered, tossing back the covers and leaving the bed.

As expected, he was parched, and he pulled on some clothes and collected his wand before he left the bedroom, intending to grab a drink from the kitchen and hunt for a vial of Dreamless Sleep potion. But when he collided with something that felt very much like a human just outside the door in the dark hallway, he jumped and barely managed to stifle a bark of surprise. Fumbling with his wand and casting a Lumos, he rolled his eyes when the light caught the offending person's lopsided grin.

"Fucking hell, Theo," hissed Draco. "Are you trying to scare the shit of me?"

"Well, I wasn't trying," he quipped. "But it was certainly an amusing accident."

"What the hell are you doing out here?"

"I'm assuming the same thing as you. I can't sleep, and I'm thirsty. Or are you just going to the bathroom?"

"No, I'm going to the kitchen," he said, heading towards the stairs. "Come on then."

"So, why can't you sleep?" asked Theo. "Does Granger snore?"

"No."

"Does she fidget a lot?"

"No."

"Does she-

"It's nothing to do with Granger!" he growled as harshly as possible in a hushed voice.

"Nightmares then," he said in a knowing tone, shrugging at Draco's confused look. "We all get them. Blaise used to have really bad ones; used to wake up screaming his lungs raw and puking for hours. It's kind of inevitable, I guess. No one ever really sleeps during war."

Draco was still contemplating how he could rationally reply to Theo's remark as they reached the kitchen door, and had either of them been paying attention, they might've heard the muffled voices on the other side. Ron and Harry were sat at the table, their heads snapping up and their mouths falling shut as Draco pushed open the door and interrupted whatever conversation they'd been having. Ron was on his feet in a second, straightening his spine and glaring at Draco, his lip curled back in anger and his hands fisted at his sides. Taking a few nonchalant strides into the room, Draco simply cocked his head and flashed Weasley a condescending smirk, eyeing his rival up and down for effect.

Ron still possessed that slightly disorientated and frazzled air about him, like someone had flipped him upside down and he was unsuccessfully trying to adapt to a topsy-turvy world or, Draco thought, that Muggle metaphor about a fish out of water. Despite an improvement since the last time they'd quarrelled in this very room, Weasley still looked on edge, and even from a distance, Draco could make out his bloodshot eyes and gnawed fingernails. Judging from Potter's exasperated expression and Weasley's flushed complexion, Draco deduced that he and Theo had interrupted a rather intense discussion, not that he particularly cared.

"Great," remarked Theo flatly from behind him. "It's the tactless twosome. No, wait. I can come up with something better than that-

"What the hell do you want?" demanded Ron, his stance hostile and his teeth bared in an semi-snarl. "I said, what the hell do you want?"

"I fucking heard you, Weasley," Draco scowled. "Calm down, you'll give yourself a nosebleed-

"I'll give you a fucking nosebleed," he threatened.

"Wehey! Weasley's got his wit back," taunted Draco, taking a few cocky steps into the room. "Someone alert The Prophet -

"I am warning you, Malfoy, I will break that sodding pointy nose poking out of your face-

Draco scoffed. "I'm terrified-

"Come on then, wanker!" the redhead spat, jerking his body forward aggressively. "I'll smack that bloody smirk off your face-

"Ron," said Harry, rising to his feet and stepping into his friend's path. "Just relax a minute, mate-

"No! We were here first!"

Theo snickered behind Draco. "Ten points to the Gryffin-dick for stating the obvious."

"And you can shut your bloody mouth and all, Nott! You lanky prick-

"Oh, come on now, Weasley," he said, rolling his eyes. "That almost hurt my feelings-

"Why don't you just piss off back to your fucking father?" Ron spat coldly. "Oh wait, Daddy won't have you without a Dark Mark stamped on your arm, bent over and kissing You-Know-Who's feet!"

Draco cocked an irate eyebrow and twisted his head to Theo, just in time to witness all the humour drain from his face, and then his expression turned hard and sharp with rage. Draco could see the flashes of fury sparking in his friend's eyes, a vein bulging in his throat, and his nostrils flaring with the early warnings of a looming outburst, but before Draco could even consider a calming word, Theo erupted.

"DON'T YOU DARE MENTION MY FATHER, WEASLEY!" he yelled, heaving in a few sobering breaths to steady himself. "You talk about my father again, and I swear-

"You'll what?" challenged Ron. "What the hell will you do, Nott?"

"I'd break your fucking jaw if I didn't think I'd catch something, like rabies or poverty!"

"You think you're better off than me without Daddy's inheritance?"

Theo charged forward a few steps. "I TOLD YOU NOT TO MENTION MY BLOODY FATHER!"

"WELL, I DID!" Ron shouted, shoving aside Harry. "Touched a nerve there, have I, Nott?"

"Fuck this," Theo mumbled, digging his hand into his pocket and trying to remove his wand, but his fingers were shaking with impatience, and Weasley had his wand out first.

"Stupefy!" yelled Ron, but his aim was off, and the incantation was weak.

The spell caught Theo at an odd angle, not precise enough to knock him unconscious, but it kicked him off his feet and sent his body flying, skidding across the floor. Glancing behind to check Theo was alright, Draco then hastily withdrew his own wand and hurled an Impediment Jinx at Weasley, successfully catching him right in the chest and throwing him backwards until he crashed into the wall with a loud thump. Before Draco could even take a moment to smirk as Weasley groaned with pain, he heard Potter shout, "Expelliarmus!" and he watched his wand leave his grip and land in Potter's ready hand.

"Give my bloody wand back, Potter!" he snapped.

As he marched forward and glared down Harry, he was vaguely aware that both Theo and Ron had risen from the floor and were stalking towards each other with clenched fists and adrenaline-fuelled tempers. They were all charging at each other, set to clash in the centre of the room like warring stags defending their territory, but before they could collide, a new voice was calling out a spell.

"Dispersum!"

And Draco felt the force of the spell in his stomach, picking him up off his feet and lifting him upwards until he was effectively pinned — half against the ceiling and half between two walls — locked in place in one of the room's ceiling corners. Lifting his head, he discovered that Theo, Weasley and Potter were in similar predicaments; all wedged in the room's ceiling corners, squirming with unease like flies tangled up in cobwebs. Twisting his body and trying to break the spell's seize on him, Draco's eyes settled on the caster, and he paused his struggling.

Hermione was stood near the door; her arm outstretched with Bellatrix's wand sitting somewhat awkwardly in her hand. Her hair was wild around her face, tousled by sleep, and her expression was tense, fixed in a disapproving frown with her cheekbones enhanced by her pursed lips, and her eyes half-lidded in scrutinising slits. Barefoot, still wobbly on her feet, and clad in a tattered, purple bathrobe that was probably two sizes too large for her (possibly Tonks' from her pregnancy, Draco concluded), she still somehow managed to look intimidating.

"Hermione!" exclaimed Weasley. "Let us down!"

"No!" she fired back. "You should all be ashamed of yourselves! There are people dying because of this war, and you lot can't get over your pathetic school rivalries? Do you honestly hate each other that much that you are willing to let it potentially affect the outcome of this war?"

Draco cleared his throat. "Granger-

"I am not finished, Draco!" she cut him off with a firm look. "You are not boys anymore! You are men! So bloody act like it and show some maturity and dignity!"

"Hermione," tried Harry. "Let us down, and we can-

"No, Harry, you will all stay where you are until I am done!" she ranted on, changing the tilt of the wand slightly so that the pressure holding the four of them in place bordered on painful, and they all grunted with discomfort. "I will not have you lot bickering and arguing like a bunch of second-years! I refuse to be a referee to my friends and boyfriend anymore, so you will just-

"Granger," Theo interrupted, and Draco rolled his eyes at his friend's apparent death wish. "I would just like to point out that as I am not your boyfriend and technically not one of your friends either, I shouldn't be included-

"Shut up, Theo," she snapped. "I am done trying to reason and play peacemaker to you all! I am not asking you to be friends or even get along, but I am telling you to put aside your ridiculous issues and tolerate each other, or so help me, I will give you boys hell!"

Draco's eyebrows shot up high on his forehead and he wondered when he'd last seen her like this; so flustered and infuriated that she was practically vibrating with the heat of her outburst. He glanced at the others, finding matching expressions of disbelief on their faces as they regarded the furious witch and the ominous grip she had on Bellatrix's wand.

"I will say this one last time," said Hermione, her voice eerily steady now. "You will tolerate each other, you will put aside any resentment from Hogwarts, and you will do it now. Is that understood?" The silence that replied to her was so deep it rumbled, and she sucked in a harsh breath, bending her wrist slightly and altering the slant of Bellatrix's wand in a foreboding way. "I said, is that understood?"

"Yes," Harry rushed out. "I understand."

"Yeah, got it," nodded Theo. "Blah blah blah, hug a Hufflepuff. Can we come down now?"

Hermione ignored him, her eyes darting between the two wizards who had yet to respond. "Ron? Draco?" she prompted impatiently. "Well?"

"Fine," Ron forced out through grinding teeth.

"Whatever," grumbled Draco, licking his teeth stubbornly when Hermione narrowed her stare at him. "Fucking fine, yes, just let us the hell down!"

"Good," she said in a clipped tone. "We are all verbally agreed then."

With that, she lowered the wand and released the spell, crossing her over her chest as the four wizards slid down the walls and dropped to the floor in graceless heaps with heavy thuds. Draco groaned as he climbed to his feet, reaching behind himself to nurse his bruised coccyx, and watching Hermione warily as she seemed to consider the situation with that pensive look of hers that usually led to a decision he didn't like.

"Harry, Theo, Draco," she addressed them when they were all standing, moving her hands to her hips. "Go to bed. I want to talk to Ron."

Draco's face morphed into an incensed scowl before he scoffed loudly, ignoring the bemused glances exchanged between the other three as he shook his head and tensed his jaw. "Are you fucking kidding me?" he asked her. "Granger, there is no way-

"It was not a request," she told him, tilting her head to fire him a stern glare. "I'm serious. You three, go to bed."

Draco was speechless for a moment, watching her while she offered Potter a grateful half-smile as he made to leave the room without argument. Theo followed but lingered by the door, evidently waiting for Draco, and trying to catch his attention — not that he noticed. He

was too busy frowning at his girlfriend and exercising all his restraint to not throw his fist into Weasley's gloating face.

"What the hell do you think you are playing at?" he demanded, stepping towards her. "You expect me to-

"You just agreed to tolerate-

"I never agreed to leaving you alone in a room with him!"

"Draco, do not test me tonight," she warned under her breath. "I need to talk to him and I want to do it alone, so go to bed, and I will be up when I am finished-

"I don't bloody think so-

"Draco, I am serious," she said stiffly, and something about the hardness in her features told Draco that this was an argument that he was not going to win. "This needs to be done and it will be easier if you aren't here. Now, for the last time, go to bed and I will be up shortly. I won't say it again."

He growled behind his teeth, flashing Ron a menacing scowl for good measure before he turned to Hermione with a pointed look. "We will discuss this after you're finished," he hissed.

He brushed past her in a purposefully cold manner, striding towards the door and almost knocking Theo over as he barged out the room, slamming the door behind him with enough force to make the hinges screech. He was seething. Completely and utterly enraged; all his muscles rigid and taut with anger and his blood rushing through his system as he stormed down the corridor with Theo close behind.

"So...", mumbled Theo. "No points for guessing who wears the trousers in your relationship-

"Shut it," he spat.

"Just an observation," he defended. "I have no shame in admitting that I am a bit terrified of your girlfriend. She's scary when she's all bossy like that-

"Damn it, Theo, fuck off!"

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Hermione winced to the harsh bang of the door, but the silence that followed and wedged itself between her and Ron was even more disruptive.

She studied him intently, her heart sinking when he refused to make eye contact or give any indication that he was aware of her presence. He simply stood there; his gaze focused on the floor and his posture stiff with uncertainty. Sighing heavily, she moved forward and sat at the table, tucking Bellatrix's wand into the pocket of her bathrobe before she leaned forward and clasped her hands together in rather business-like fashion.

"Ron," she said gently. "Sit down please-

"I don't bloody want-

"Sit down, and calm yourself," she told him in an authoritative tone. "We need to talk."

If it was possible, his body appeared to seize up even more, but he lifted his gaze and peeked at her between the untidy strands of his red fringe. "I'm not sure what I can say to you."

"You can say anything to me. You know that."

"Well, that was before all this," he frowned. "Before I knew about your...thing with him."

"I'm still the same person, Ron," she said. "I'm still me."

"Are you?"

She flinched at that, nervously tucking a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "Look, I understand that you're angry with me-

"That's the thing," he stopped her. "I'm not angry at you, I am...I don't know. I just don't know, Hermione."

"Please just sit down," she bade, feeling a small wave of relief when he actually did so this time. He exhaled as he dropped down into the chair opposite her, resting his hands on the table. She tried to reach out and hold them, but he pulled them away from hers before she could even graze his knuckles. "Ron," she tried. "Please, talk to me-

"Hermione, it's not that easy-

"If you just try," she pleaded with him. "Just say something, and it-

"I think you were right," he rushed out, almost too fast for her to absorb. "About us, I mean. I've been thinking about what you said for the last couple of days, about how we wouldn't work. I was imagining what it would be like to be in a relationship with you, and you know what I thought? I thought it would be nice, and then I remembered that nice is the worst word-

"In the English language," she finished for him with a knowing nod. "I'm sorry, I just don't think we're...designed to be together like that."

"No," he agreed in a slightly distant voice. "No, maybe we're not. I thought we were though. Hell, everyone did."

"If the majority was always right, there would be no progress," she murmured, more to herself. "Sorry, I just mean that...people see what they want to see sometimes."

"I do love you," Ron told her sincerely. "But...I don't know if it's as a friend or as something more. It's confusing the hell out of me, and maybe if I don't know, that means it's not what I thought. Does that make sense?"

"Yes, it does," she assured him. "It makes a lot of sense actually."

"It's like..." he tried awkwardly, rubbing the back of his head in that endearingly clumsy fashion of his. "It's like, when I thought you were dying, I wasn't thinking, 'that's the girl I love,' I was thinking, 'that's my best friend,' and...when I was thinking about it afterwards, it just sort of hit me, you know?"

"I know," she said, and when she reached to grab his hand this time, he didn't resist. "I know what you mean."

"We really wouldn't have worked, would we?" he muttered sadly. "It's like you said, we would be too convenient. And you and me-

"You and I," she corrected automatically, but she covered her mouth and grimaced. "I'm sorry, it's not the time-

"But that's who you are," he shrugged. "And there's another thing right there. I don't understand what you're on about some of the time. If we were together, I'd spend half the day with my head in a dictionary trying to catch up."

"Ron, you're not stupid-

"But I'm not on your level, and I never will be," he went on. "You see, I get that, I really do. I'm not angry that we aren't together. I knew there was always a chance that could happen. I'm angry because...because it's Malfoy. I just...I can't understand that. I don't feel like you've dumped me, I feel like you've betrayed me. As a friend."

"It's difficult to explain," she breathed. "I mean, I lived with Draco for months. I got to know him. I promise you, he's not that...that prat he was-

"Seems like it," he grumbled. "He still acts like a complete tosser."

"Look, I know he can be rude, and short-tempered-

"To name a few-

"But that doesn't make him a bad person," she continued persistently. "You have quite a temper yourself, you know. And I know I can be bossy and stubborn, and I always have to be right, and Harry is stubborn too when it comes to accepting help, and it makes him reckless."

We all have our flaws, Ron, it's what makes us human. Draco might be a lot of things, but he is not who he was. He's not bad. The fact that he's here proves that."

"But everything he did to us. To you," Ron argued. "How can you just forget all that?"

She hesitated and rubbed her lips together, contemplating how she should even begin to rationalise her reasoning to Ron. She stretched across the table to grasp his hands again, and the words that settled on her tongue felt bizarre and a little heavy, but they were falling out of her mouth before she could attempt to stop them.

"Draco's like...snow," said Hermione quietly, her gaze absent and distracted. "It's cold and cruel to begin with, but it's somehow beautiful, and you miss it when it's not there. And if you hold it in your hands close enough and long enough, it changes. It melts."

She inhaled, and the sound of it snatched her from her trance. Lifting her head, she caught Ron's puzzled eyes, and her cheeks began to burn with embarrassment. Even in the company of the people who knew her best, she didn't like losing her usual control and logic, but the wistful metaphor had been so persistent. She was preparing what to say next, planning to regain her composure and appropriate prudence for their discussion, but Ron beat her to it.

"You really love him, don't you?" he asked. "I mean, you really do."

"Yes, I do," she replied, trying to stifle a smile. "I think this might be it for me."

Ron frowned. "But why him?"

"I...don't know how to explain it," she confessed hesitantly. "I just do. Some things just are, I guess. Perhaps you're not supposed to try and reason things like love."

He grinned, and the familiar compassion in his expression instantly comforted her. "Even you won't try to reason it?"

"Even me."

"And he loves you?" asked Ron, looking slightly uncomfortable with the question. "He's told you?"

"He hasn't said it, but I know he does," she said honestly. "The fact that he's here is proof enough for me."

Lowering his eyes to their linked hands, he remained silent for a moment and chewed his tongue with thought. "You know, Lupin came to see yesterday morning."

"He did?"

"Yeah," he nodded. "He talked to me for a while; told me about how hard it was for Sirius to separate himself from his family, and that Malfoy would be going through the same thing. I'd never really thought of it like that, but...as much as I hate to admit it, it did make me think."

"Good," she mumbled, uncertain what else she should say. "That's...good."

"And after the whole Malfoy Manor thing," he said reluctantly. "The way Malfoy reacted to seeing you like you were...he completely freaked out, and that made me think too."

"Sounds like you've been doing a lot of thinking," she commented with a brief smile.

"Yeah, it's been giving me headaches," he joked half-heartedly, but then his expression turned serious. "Look, Hermione, I can't stand Malfoy-

"I know-

"And I'm not making any promises that that will change," he told her bluntly. "I doubt I ever will like the prick. But..." he sighed, pausing to rub at the faint stubble on his chin. "If Tonks and Remus and Luna can stomach him, I guess I can...try to get used to him."

"You will?" she gasped, trying to reign in her elation. "You mean it?"

"Yeah, I'll try," he repeated. "I promise you, I will try. I'll have to, won't I? It's not worth losing you."

She tightened her hold on his hands. "You could never lose me."

"And you have to promise you won't lie to me again," he insisted. "I mean it, Hermione."

"I swear, I won't," she agreed quickly. "I'm sorry. For everything."

"I know. I'm sorry too. It's been weird, not talking to you these last few days," he admitted, giving her hands a slight squeeze. "It's like I've been missing a limb. A bossy limb that talks too much and corrects my grammar, but a limb nonetheless."

She laughed, but it was a short laugh of relief more than anything, and meeting his eyes across the table, she asked the question that had been making her brain sweat since she'd fallen for Draco. "We're going to be okay, aren't we?"

"Yeah," he said, offering her a reassuring smile. "Yeah, we'll be fine."

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Draco stopped his pacing to check the clock again, swearing under his breath when he realised its long hand had barely moved two ticks since the last time.

He recommenced his agitated steps, marching back and forth across the length of the bedroom like a caged dragon and with as much fire scalding the tip of his tongue. It had been

close to half an hour since Hermione had dismissed him so abruptly from the kitchen to be alone with Weasley, and the heat of the resentment had been swelling up inside of him like a blister set to burst. Grinding his teeth and wondering how many more minutes he could endure waiting, he was just about ready to stalk back downstairs and intrude on their little reunion when the door opened.

His head snapped up as Hermione slipped into the room with her chin lifted defiantly, her steady gaze skimming him, analysing him like one of her books. His mouth was already open, ready to release a livid tirade, but she turned her back to him as she shut the door, mumbling incantations under her breath and slowly waving Bellatrix's wand.

"What the hell are you doing?"

"I'm locking the door and casting a Silencing Spell so nobody will hear me yelling at you," she said matter-of-factly. "Almost done-

"You're going to yell at me?" he scoffed. "You were completely out of line!"

She spun around with an affronted expression. "Me? I was out of line? How in Merlin's name did you reach that conclusion?"

"The way you fucking dismissed me like that!" he snapped harshly. "You made me look like an idiot!"

She rolled her eyes. "You accomplished that all by yourself."

"Don't bloody patronise me-

"I am completely serious!" she shouted irately, stepping towards him and prodding his chest with her finger. "You were behaving like children! I mean, honestly. Bickering like kids and starting pathetic fights, and you-

"Hey!" he interrupted. "Weasley was the one who started getting all agitated-

"Oh, that's a great way to contradict my point about you being childish, Draco; saying Ron started it!"

"Did you shout at him like you're shouting at me?" he questioned suddenly. "No, of course you didn't! You mollycoddle Potter and Weasley, and it's fucking ridiculous!"

"I do NOT mollycoddle them!" she disputed. "They're my best friends, Draco! We look out for each other-

"Oh, come on, Granger! I know you didn't bash Weasel's eardrums like you're bashing mine!"

"I treated you all the same!" she defended sternly. "I used the same spell on you, Theo, Harry, and Ron! I'm more angry about the way you behaved when I asked you to leave Ron and I alone! You had a tantrum-

Draco inhaled sharply. "I did NOT have a tantrum!" he barked. "The way you brushed me off made me look like a sodding tool, and that was out of order!"

"This isn't about your pride!" she retorted stubbornly. "I needed to talk to Ron, and I asked you to leave, and you refused-

"Of course I bloody refused!"

"Without good reason!" she argued, poking his chest again. "You should trust me enough to be comfortable with me talking to my friends alone!"

"It has nothing to do with trusting you!" he shouted, huffing out a frustrated breath. "Of course I bloody trust you! You know, for being such a know-it-all, you're as thick as Longbottom sometimes!"

"Oh," she sighed knowingly. "So it's the typical argument of you don't trust him around me?"

"No shit, Granger, of course I don't trust Weasley!" he snapped. "And yes, I am possessive, and I will always regard Weasley with suspicion around you, but that's not the point!"

"Then what the hell is your point?"

"YOU TOOK HIS SIDE!" he yelled, raking his hands through his hair. "You shot me down, and in front of him!"

"I did not!"

"Yes, you did! And you didn't even consider for a moment that Weasley goaded the fight! You just walked in there, and then..." his voice simmered out, and he pulled back to drag his stare from her toes to her crown. He lingered on the pretty, red flush tinting her cheeks, and the fiery spark in her dilated pupils, feeling a flicker of heat in his gut before he looked back down to her legs. "Wait a minute-

"Even if Ron did start the argument, you shouldn't have retaliated like that!" Hermione went on, oblivious to Draco's probing eyes. "And another thing-

"You're walking," he stopped her, gesturing to her legs. "You can feel everything again?"

"I...what?" she stammered, blinking when it dawned on her. "Oh, right. Yes, I took some potion and I can feel everything better...anyway, look, Draco, you acted like a complete-

But she was cut off when he practically charged at her, slamming his body into hers with a haste-clumsy impact that broke her balance and knocked her off her feet. But that was okay. The wall caught her back and Draco pinned her in place, his hands roughly gripping her sides before his mouth was latched onto hers, kissing her hard and frenziedly between shallow breaths. His lips were hot and wet from their argument, and she could feel his staccato heartbeat buzzing against her own chest as he pressed himself as much into her as he could, until she thought the wall might crumble under the force of them.

She grabbed his upper-arms, her fingers digging into the taut muscles beneath the sleeves of his t-shirt, and she absently wondered if her nails would leave crescent-shaped dents despite the thick fabric depriving her of that skin-on-skin friction she suddenly craved. There was a damning desperation in his kiss that was too urgent to resist, like they hadn't kissed in months, and she guessed they hadn't. Not like this. Not like they were a whirlwind of lust with their limbs and lips locked around each other and simply drowning in the rush of the moment.

"Wait," she blurted, tearing her mouth away and trying to regain some of her irritation towards him. "Wait, I am still angry with you-

"You are always angry with me, remember?" he shrugged, dropping his mouth to her neck. He parted the lower half of her robe and settled his hand against her inner-thigh, curled his fingers, and dragged his nails up until he felt her shiver. "Can you feel that?"

"Draco," she said breathlessly. "We were discussing-

"Can you feel it?"

She swallowed. "Yes, but I-

"Leave it, Granger," he mumbled. "If you're really so intent on having a go at me, then you can-

"God, you are so bloody incorrigible," she told him, but she tilted her head to kiss his temple, and her fingers were clawing at his shoulders again.

"At least I can spell it," he quipped, pulling back to admire her pink cheeks and the erratic rise and fall of her chest. "Are you still angry with me?"

"Furious," she said.

"Good," he grinned, giving her thigh another stroke, and then her nails were practically stabbing his shoulders as her body tensed up. "You're uninhibited when you're angry."

Hermione gave him one of her obstinate looks, her eyebrows drawn together with defiance, and for a fleeting moment, Draco thought she might actually shove him away and recommence screaming at him, but then she smashed their mouths back together. Her fingers were in his hair then, nails dragging across his scalp and gathering his hair into small fistfuls as she pulled him as close as she physically could. Draco naturally obliged to the frenzied pulls of her lips, and his hands sought the tie of her robe, tugging it loose and then pushing the garment off her shoulders until he heard it fall by their feet. Clad now in just a small pair of bed-shorts and a baggy vest, Hermione's skin begged to be touched, and Draco wasted no time in doing so.

He ran his hands down the length of her arms and then slipped them beneath her top, gliding his knuckles across her ribcage and the underside of her breasts. He felt her breath hitch in her throat and he adjusted his head to suck at her jaw line as she released a small noise of pleasure. That little sound was like a catalyst, sending a wave of hot blood to his groin, and

his actions became more urgent and heavy. Yanking her top over her head, he melted their lips back together, grabbed her waist, and picked her up, stepping sideways until her backside was perched on the rickety chest of drawers near the bed.

The wobbly piece of furniture shifted and groaned as Draco guided her legs to fall either side of him and stood in the space between, knocking his knees against the wood as he tried to get as close to her as possible. He helped her remove his t-shirt and exhaled huskily when she kissed his chest, pausing to retrace the line of his Sectumsempra scar with her tongue. Absently grazing his teeth against the scar on her shoulder, he felt her ankles jab into the backs of his thighs, just below his buttocks, forcing their pelvises together, and they both moaned at the friction. Draco's erection was full and swollen, straining against his loose-fitting trousers and rubbing against her spot as they grinded into each other, guided by instinct and the intense static sparking between them, like hot shafts of lightning.

When Draco tucked his thumbs under the hems of her shorts and underwear, she looped her arms around his neck and hoisted herself up so he could drag them down her legs. His actions were fast and impulsive, but as he scraped his fingers up her inner-thighs again, she felt like each move was significant and measured to hit the right nerves to build up the anticipation. She accidentally clamped her teeth down onto his bottom lip when his fingers finally stroked the swell of her clit, and Draco circled his free arm around her waist when she jerked her hips forward.

He broke the kiss again, keeping their faces close enough that he could feel her eyelashes catching with his between blinks. "You can feel it, right?" he asked, pushing his fingers inside of her. "You can feel that?"

"Mhmm," she managed with a nod. "I can feel everything."

And she really could. She had no idea if it was because she'd had limb-block, or if it was because she hadn't been caressed by Draco in this way for months, but each intimate touch was like a powerful jolt of sensation, and her insides were burning within minutes.

She let out a soft whining sound and yanked his head down to resume their kiss, craving the contact as her arousal inflated, like a warm and tingling bubble. His thumb was rubbing over her clit in fast swipes, and the two fingers inside of her worked in and out with a deliberate pattern and speed. She shifted her pelvis, and the movement against Draco's hand sent a powerful shock of pleasure shooting up her spine, and she dropped her head back against the wall to let out a strangled groan, watching Draco watching her through hooded eyes.

"The bed," she said between pants. "The bed, Draco."

He flashed her a cocky smirk, pausing the thrusts of his fingers so he could pick her up again, steering her legs to wrap around his torso, and his erection was grinding against her again. He speckled her breasts, shoulders, chest, and throat with lingering kisses as he carried her across the room, dropping her onto the bed a little rougher than he'd intended before he stepped out of his trousers and boxers.

Covering her body with his, he positioned himself between her legs and pushed his length into her tight and wet warmth. He felt her thighs clench around him and her back arched off

the bed with those first few rocks of his hips, and he buried his face into the crook of her neck to smother a groan. He knew he wouldn't last long; it has simply been too long since his body had been buzzing like this for him to physically resist reacting to the sensations coursing through his blood and muscles. It was why he had ensured she would be close to bursting before seeking any pleasure for himself, and judging from her laboured breathing and the shorts spasm beginning to flutter around him.

Draco slowed his frantic thrusts when an odd urge overtook him, and he tenderly grazed the backs of his fingers across her cheek, studying her parted lips and her lusty eyes. She peered back at him and almost smiled as she reached up to brush her fingertips along his jaw, craning her neck to melt her mouth back into his.

The pace of their love-making escalated again, with Draco pushing in and out with an urgent rhythm, and the sounds of sweat-drenched flesh smacking together mingled with their loud moans and gasps. In a bold moment of spontaneity on her part, Hermione hiked her legs a little higher, and the pumps of his erection felt deeper and so much more concentrated. She held onto him like her life depended on it as those final few powerful drives sent her flying, and her muscles went taut and rigid, and then she was shuddering without control, trembling and quaking as the heat of the bliss sunk into her bloodstream and swept throughout her entire body. She half-purred, half-whined at the peak of the orgasm, and when it subsided, she felt light-headed but completely content.

The ripples of her muscles around his length had brought Draco that much closer to his own orgasm, and he waited until she had absorbed all she could from her release until he jerked his hips once, twice, and a third time before his heartbeat was pounding in his ears and he was shaking too. He growled hoarsely by her ear and absently pecked his lips against her temple before all the energy left him, and he carefully rolled onto his side. Tossing his arm around her waist, he pulled her to him, resting his chin against her forehead as she began to stroke absent-minded circles against his chest, as their rates of their breathing began to return back to normal.

"Give me a bit and we'll go again," he rasped out.

She tilted her chin to shoot him a curious look. "How do you know I don't intend to continue our argument?"

"Come on, Granger, don't piss on my fire," he sighed. "Besides, didn't we agree that once you were all healed, we would shag until our bones were sore?"

"What? No, I don't think we did."

"Oh," he shrugged. "That must've been in my head then."

She laughed softly and kissed his chest, feeling his pulse pound against her lips. "Okay, no arguing about Ron. You will stick to your word though, won't you? You will refrain from confronting each other?"

"If Weasley keeps his distance, I'll keep mine," he agreed stiffly. "Happy?"

"Very much," she smiled. "Thank you. I love you."

He frowned and licked his lips with consideration, pulling her a little closer into his body. It wasn't the time, but the need to say something made his tongue itch. "Granger," he started hesitantly. "You know that I-

"I know, Draco," she assured him. "It's okay, I know."

Chapter End Notes

Hello! Sorry about the wait, guys, I've had a few Uni things on that have taken up my time! Thank you SO BLOODY MUCH for getting me past 5,000 reviews! I was completely speechless and there are no words to express how grateful I am! And thank you for all the feedback for Love Me Twice! You guys are wonderful!

Hope you enjoyed the chapter! Read and Review! And I'll see you soon!

Bex

Again

Chapter Notes

Just the usual song recs! VNV Nation - Illusion, Sleeperstar - Soon, Scheer - Goodbye, Oh Laura - Release me (the last two in particular are my favourites). Hope they work well!

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

Draco stretched out his legs and tilted his face up to the morning sun. His thoughts were rather jumbled today — perhaps from his early start — and the warmth of the reaching rays seemed to steady him for a moment.

It had been four days since Hermione had barged into the kitchen and shouted at Potter, Weasley, Theo, and himself, and aside from a few snarky yet harmless comments the following day, things had settled down remarkably quickly. Andromeda had even had a private word with him and commended him for his 'maturity', but the fact of the matter was it had all seemed to dawn on everyone that there was simply no room for schoolyard grudges when the world was falling apart.

And that was the odd thing.

They still all gathered around the radio, listened to crackling Potterwatch broadcasts about Muggles being tortured, Muggle-borns being slaughtered, and the death-toll rising and rising. The pace and brutality of the War seemed to accelerate everyday, and yet at Tonks' home, where one-time enemies had managed to reach an unvoiced vow of amity, there was a bizarre sense of peace. It was disconcerting; it almost felt like they were detached from it all, but of course they weren't, and a glance at Granger confirmed that.

In the past couple of days, she'd been waking at dawn to practice spells with Remus and Tonks, insisting she needed to get used to Bellatrix's wand. He'd decided to watch her today, coaxed outside by the sun and also intrigued to see how she handled the unfamiliar wand, and so were his friends apparently. She was a fair distance away from where he was sat with Theo and Blaise near the front of the house — maybe fifty or so feet away — but he could see the thin gloss of sweat streaked across her brow as she discussed something with her two companions and shrugged out of her jumper. Before he even had a chance to realise he was staring, Theo spoke and shattered his trance.

"It's the last day of April."

Draco frowned. "So?"

"So remind me to punch you for first of the month tomorrow."

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Hermione nodded and raised Bellatrix's wand, hunching her shoulders defensively as Tonks and Remus took a few steps away from her.

"Ready?" asked Remus, and she nodded again. "Go!"

"Stupefy!" she yelled.

He blocked it effortlessly, and she twisted her body to try and deflect the spell Tonks had fired at her, but she was still a little unstable on her legs. The moment her back was turned, she felt magic scalding her skin, and when she turned back to Remus he was already aiming his wand for his next move.

"Wait, just wait a minute!"

"You think a Death Eater is going to give you a chance to recover?" he retorted.

"No, I know that, but-

"They're going to know you're reluctant to use Dark Magic, and they will probably recognise Bellatrix's wand," he continued. "On top of that, you're reciting your spells. In doing so, you're telling your enemy what your move is-

"I know, but Bellatrix's wand is resisting me, and-

"You can do this, Hermione," he said firmly. "Brightest witch of your age, remember? Now come on, you are better than this!"

"Remus, give her a moment," sighed Tonks. "Perhaps we should just practice one-on-one-

"No, he's right," said Hermione. "The Death Eaters are hardly going to play fair, are they? I need to be prepared."

Remus gave her an approving look. "Exactly. Ready?"

Drawing in soothing breath and gripping Bellatrix's wand tighter, she focused on the tingling heat gathering in her fingertips. Her magic. Bobbing her head, she crouched a little and bent her knees, her eyes steady on Remus as he began to tilt his wrist for a spell. Without uttering a word, she extended her arm, and a bright, violent light shot out of Bellatrix's wand, and Remus stumbled back, his hand reaching up to shield his eyes. Spinning around, Hermione

narrowly missed Tonks' Stupefy and hurled back an Impediment Jinx that caught her right in the stomach, sending her flying backwards several feet.

Turning back around just as Remus was beginning to recover, she aimed her wand again, and a rope came shooting out of its tip, wrapping around Remus' wand arm and throat, and with a few tugs he was on his knees, his wand discarded at his side, and she had Bellatrix's poking at his Adam's apple. Summoning his wand into her hand and turning back to Tonks, she fired a silent Expelliarmus at her.

With three wands in her possession, Hermione smiled to herself; not out of pride or a sense of achievement, but because she felt in control again.

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Fifty feet away, Draco smirked almost fondly as he watched his lover beam with confidence and triumph. He'd only seen that smile once, back when they'd been ice skating at Christmas and she'd managed to keep her balance without his support, and the memory felt warmer than the sun.

Theo released a low whistle. "Fuck me, remind me not to piss off Granger," he mumbled. "Well, you know...again."

"You're honestly that surprised she's good at spells?" asked Blaise. "She was the smartest witch in our year. Of course she knows what she's doing with a wand."

"It's one thing to practice a few spells in a classroom. It's a whole different thing to use them effectively, and with someone else's wand, no less."

Arching an eyebrow, Draco glanced at Theo sceptically. "It's not like you to make a reasonably intelligent comment. Especially at this time in the morning."

"Piss off," he scoffed, grinning cockily. "Don't envy me because I have a brain to go with this handsome face and you're stuck with that ugly thing sitting on your neck."

"You're taking her recovery well," Blaise remarked, his shrewd eyes settling on Draco.

"Why wouldn't I?"

"Because it probably means she'll be leaving with Potter and Weasley soon."

Draco sat up straight, eyeing his friend with a narrowed glare. "What the hell are you on about?"

"What, you didn't think she was actually going to stay here, did you?" he replied with a shrug. "Granger and those pair hardly have a history of sitting back and watching things happen. I bet you anything they've already discussed plans about leaving and doing whatever the hell they're doing to beat You-Know-Who."

Clicking his jaw, Draco thought back over the last few days, recalling that Hermione had disappeared to talk with Potter and Weasley at least once every day, but not once had she given indication that they were scheming to leave. And he would've noticed if something was going on. Surely, he would have.

"No," he muttered, shaking his head. "You're wrong, Blaise."

"You reckon?" he replied, his tone cynical. "Luna's planning to leave and she hasn't told me."

"Then how the hell do you know that?"

"I just know she is. I'm pretty sure she's planning to go back to Hogwarts with Dean Thomas. They've been talking."

"You shouldn't assume the worst like that," said Theo. "Perhaps she's just cheating on you with him."

Blaise swiftly landed a hard punch to Theo's arm, and his sly smirk gave way to a wince. "Make another comment like that, and I'll aim for your face-

"Why would you punish so many girls by damaging this magnificent work of art? Anyway, I'm only taking the piss. Honestly, my hilarious jokes and wit are wasted on you people-

"Shut it," he snapped, turning his attention back to Draco. "The point is, I know Luna is leaving soon. She hasn't told me because she knows I'll try to stop her. It's the same reason Granger hasn't said anything to you."

Draco snorted and rolled his eyes. "You don't know Granger well enough to know what she would do."

"Perhaps not, but yesterday I saw her, Potter, and Weasley leaving the Goblin's room. Why would they be talking to Griphook if they weren't planning something?"

Hesitating as he tried to conjure a explanation, his brow furrowed with uncertainty, and a seed of doubt swelled up like a blister in his mind.

"Look," sighed Blaise. "You know I'm right. Our girlfriends have that bloody hero complex that is apparently contagious if you wind up becoming friends with Potter. Remember, we used to mock them for it all the time?" He breathed out a short, humourless chuckle. "And now it's our problem too."

"Pretty sure they call that irony," Theo quipped. "Or sod's law."

"If you're so sure Lovegood's leaving, why don't you confront her about it?" asked Draco.

"And what good would that do? She'd go anyway, and trying stop her would be like asking her not to...be her." He paused and massaged the bridge of his nose. "They will fight. There is nothing you, me, or anybody else can do to stop them." Getting to his feet, he casually brushed away the dirt on his trousers like everything he'd said had been insignificant. "I'm going to help Andromeda prepare breakfast. I'll see you in a bit."

Shaking his head as he watched Blaise stroll towards the house, Draco rolled his eyes and feigned indifference, casually leaning back into his previous position. "Do you ever think he'll go a day without pissing on someone's fire?" he said to Theo.

"Unlikely. Even for one of us, he's a depressing git sometimes. I think he might have a point about Granger though."

"Don't you start."

"Sorry, mate," he sighed, gesturing to Hermione. "Look at her. Blaise is right. She's not testing out a wand for convenience. She's preparing. For war."

Draco tensed so much his neck cracked as he turned his head, watching Hermione intently as a spell surged from the tip of Bellatrix's wand and caught Tonks' arm. She spun, crouched, ducked, blocked, fired; her movements agile and calculated. Prepared. He averted his eyes and bit down on his tongue until he could taste iron, and he could feel Theo's eyes studying him expectantly.

With a growl thundering around his mouth, he lifted his head and scowled at his friend. "Why don't you just mind your own fucking business?" he snapped. "Bugger off. Help Blaise or something. I don't care, just get out of my face."

"Fine," said Theo, shrugging his shoulders like he'd expected the reaction, and then rising to stand. "You know, if I was a Ravenclaw, I'd make some comment about you being in denial-

"Theo, I am warning-

"Yeah, got it. I'm buggering off."

He pivoted on his heel and stalked towards the house, leaving Draco alone with his bleeding tongue and the dull thud of an unforgiving headache in his skull. He stayed there for a few minutes, clenching and unclenching his fists as he stared at Hermione and her changing stances. Attack, defence, attack, defence, attack, attack, attack. She didn't glance over at him once, too absorbed in the task at hand, so he got up and left, feeling that if he watched her a moment longer, Blaise's words might start ringing in his ears.

It probably means she'll be leaving with Potter and Weasley soon.

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When Hermione, Potter, and Weasley hadn't shown up for breakfast, Draco had grinded his teeth and pushed his food around the plate, refusing to make eye contact with Blaise. He didn't need another knowing look cast in his direction, nor did he wish to witness Blaise's anxious glances at Lovegood every time she turned to talk to Dean Thomas. And when a scratchy Potterwatch broadcast had announced a long list of fatalities, he hadn't lifted his head, simply sat there in a volatile silence with his finger tapping irately against his knee. He'd wondered if Granger had heard the broadcast, wondered if it would provoke her desperation, and tempt her and her sodding friends to abandon the safehouse and take action.

In an effort to distract himself, he'd forced his mind to drift elsewhere and realised there'd been a thought niggling at his brain for the last few days; he'd lost his wand. He couldn't for the life of him remember the last time he'd used it, and Granger had been so keen to practice with Bellatrix's wand that she would insist on performing any spells before he could even think to locate his.

After breakfast he'd headed to his room, attempting to Summon it several times with no success. Reasoning that it must've fallen out of bed and was stuck under something, he began to hunt for it, searching under the bed and checking the drawers in case Hermione had put it away for safekeeping. When he was on his knees checking beneath the bedside table, the door swung open and painfully smacked into his ankles.

"Draco?" called Hermione, frowning down at him as he sucked a profanity through his teeth. "Sorry! Are you alright?"

"Yeah, brilliant."

"What on Earth are you doing on the floor?"

Huffing his fringe out of his eyes, he got to his feet. "Looking for my wand. I can't find it. Have you put it somewhere?"

"No, I haven't seen it," she said, walking past him to sit on the bed. "You should ask Andromeda. She might've picked it up."

He looked at her then, and immediately wished he hadn't. She was studying him with soft and sad eyes, blinking heavily like she was trying to resist a tear or two as she drank him in. It reminded him of that pulse-slowng way she'd stared at him the first time she'd said goodbye, when she'd Petrified him, shoved a Portkey between his fingers, and sent him here. It was subtle this time, cleverly concealed with a steady expression that might almost be convincing if he couldn't see her eyes. Her eyes gave her away. They always did.

"Is there something you want to tell me?" he hastily asked.

The question seemed to stun her for a moment and she froze, mouth half-open like she might actually answer, but then she sighed, smiled, and shook her head. "No. No, I was just

thinking about something."

"Why weren't you at breakfast?"

"I was with Harry and Ron," she said. "Harry's been having...bad dreams-

"Of course he has," he groaned. "The rest of us hardly have an easy night's sleep-

"No, I know that, but his are...different. It's difficult to explain."

He waited for her to elaborate but she was simply staring at him again. Soft, sad honey, and he thought he might drown in it. Sinking down on the mattress next to her, he clasped his hands in front of him, his wrists knocking against his knees. He considered just spitting it out, asking her if she intended to leave, but he rejected his instincts, convinced he was simply over-thinking Blaise's comments, and his stubbornness clamped down on his already swollen tongue.

"Are you okay?" asked Hermione, reaching out to tenderly trace her fingertips across his pulse point. "You seem anxious about something."

"I'm fine," he said firmly. "Blaise and Theo pissed me off earlier, that's all."

"What did they do?"

"Nothing important. Are you going to help me with my wand?"

She smiled at him. "Was that intended to be an innuendo of some sort?"

"No," he smirked back, cocking his head so he could peck the sensitive underside of her ear. "Although if that's what you'd prefer to do, I'll happily oblige."

"Draco, I'm sorry," she hummed with disappointment, gently pushing him back. "I have some things I need to do."

He grunted with irritation and drew away from her. "Like what?"

"I promised Harry and Ron I would help them with some...things-

"Is there a reason you're being so bloody vague?"

She cringed. Only slightly, but Draco saw it. "Well, Ron needs some help adjusting to the Snatcher's wand he stole," she explained uncertainly. "And then I want to practice more with-

"Lupin and Tonks," he finished for her, his tone curt. "Right, fine."

"I am sorry, Draco, I just need to discuss these things with them-

"It's fine. Are you at least going to share a bed with me tonight, or I am going to be stuck with your flea-ridden cat?"

"I won't be long," she assured him, craning her neck to leave a kiss at the corner of his mouth, one that lingered in a way that again reminded him of their last night at Hogwarts. "I love you."

He closed his eyes, and the image of her crying in the rain was plastered against the backs of lids, as if to torture him with the memory. "I know," he mumbled, watching her leave.

He quickly returned to the task of searching for his wand before he could think about Blaise's words again. It was only a hunch that had been born out of nothing. Just inane words without substance or foundation, yet they were ricocheting around his skull anyway, like frantic wasps, stinging his brain.

They will fight. There is nothing you, me, or anybody else can do to stop them.

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When Draco woke up, he knew she wasn't there; he could tell by the cold air clinging to his shoulder where her skin should be.

He probably wouldn't have paid much attention to the clock had it not read exactly midnight, and something about the perfection of the time left an unsettling sensation in his gut. Turning to the empty space next to him, he ran his palm across her indentation, finding it still warm, and her pillow still damp from her shower before bed. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands, glancing around the dark room as if it might hold some clue about Hermione's whereabouts.

The rational part of his brain — usually the loudest part — told him that she was most likely in the toilet or downstairs grabbing a glass of water, yet there was a tenacious, little itch that persuaded him to leave the bed, slip into some clothes, and seek her out. Scowling when he remembered he didn't have his wand, he made his way towards the door, grateful for the dazzling glow of the moon, casting shadows for him to navigate around. But when he left the room and stepped into the corridor, it was pitch black, the kind of darkness that suffocates you, like a coffin or tar.

Flattening his hands against the walls, he guided himself along the hall and down the stairs, and his ears twitched when he heard low voices drifting from the kitchen. He could hear Potter mumbling words that he couldn't quite catch, and he steadied his steps into silent footfalls as he approached the kitchen door. Hermione's voice joined in, and then Weasley's, but it was all too muffled and quiet, and he waited in the shadows for...something. Something to click.

And then he heard one word amongst all the whispers: Horcrux. It was sharp and definite, like a punctuation mark, and he was kicking open the door before he realised it.

Three pairs of stunned eyes snapped towards him, but he only felt the hazel ones. The three of them were standing around the table, papers sprayed across it like battle plans, and something in his chest sank, leaving it hollow and aching. But there was anger bubbling inside of him, rising into his throat, and he almost choked on it. Potter and Weasley seemed to edge a little closer to his girlfriend, their stances protective, and that pushed him over the edge into rage.

"Shit," said Ron. "I had a feeling that the wand didn't let me lock the door properly."

"Draco," breathed Hermione, futilely attempting to hide some of the papers. "What are you doing-

"What the fuck are you doing?" he shot back. "What the hell is this? A little secret Gryffindor meeting?"

"Malfoy, we were just-

"Don't even bother, Potter. I'm not stupid."

Ron snorted. "Well, that's not entirely true-

"Shut it, Weasel," he snapped, tuning back to Hermione with an accusing glare. "You're planning to leave again, aren't you?"

"Draco," she said softy, her tone almost pleading. "It's not...it's not like-

"What the hell is wrong with you?" he asked, forgetting the other two men in the room for a moment. "How the fuck could you not tell me?"

"Malfoy-

"This has nothing to do with you, Potter!" he hissed coldly, baring his teeth. "And don't fucking stand in front of my girlfriend like that! Like I would do something to harm her! You two are not her bloody bodyguards, and I am not a threat!"

"Draco, just calm down!" shouted Hermione

"Don't tell me to calm down when you're plotting something behind my back! We're talking about this right now! Alone!"

Hermione dragged in a long breath and dragged her nails through her chaotic curls. "Okay," she agreed. "Okay, we'll talk about it. Just give us a moment-

"Now, Hermione," he groused. "Get rid of them."

"Two minutes," she argued defiantly. "Just wait outside while we clean up, and we'll talk. I promise."

He hesitated and instantly regretted it. Her features were already softening with relief, as if he'd actually backed down, and he covered his frustrated growl with a sharp exhale. Narrowing his eyes into serpentine slits, he flicked them from Potter to Weasley for good measure, and reluctantly nodded his head.

"Fine," he forced out. "Two minutes."

He twisted around so fast it made his head spin, but he stalked out of the room with heavy and fuming strides, slamming the door behind him with enough force to make the walls judder. Back in the darkness of the hall, he paced back and forth like a caged dragon, counting the seconds and listening to the shuffling and incoherent whispers in the kitchen.

When he'd reached one minute and fifty-eight seconds, he was about ready to implode with impatience, but then the door swung open, and light poured into the corridor. Out ambled Weasley with a predictable frown on his face, and he didn't even glance at Draco as he breezed past and headed upstairs. Then came Potter with a more tentative walk, as though he was considering stopping and saying something, and Draco frowned when the boy-who-lived paused in front of him to do just that.

"What?"

"Listen, Malfoy," Harry rushed out. "Don't try to stop her-

"This has nothing to do with you, Potter, just sod off-

"It does have something to do with me. Look, I may not completely like it, but I know you are a part of Hermione's life now, and you need to acknowledge me as a part of her life too. She's family to me, like a sister-

"I am fully aware of your bloody relationship," Draco interrupted. "What the hell is your point?"

"My point is I know her, and I know that if you try to stop her, she will resent you for it," he said, quietly enough for only them to hear. "Hermione won't be talked out of anything. When she sets her mind to something, she does it. Don't try to change it, because it's what makes her brilliant, and it's who she is."

Draco kept the muscles of his face stiff, trying not to appear effected. "Are you done?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then piss off."

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Hermione fidgeted nervously after she'd cast the Muffliato, wringing her hands and knotting her fingers as Draco marched back into the kitchen with a scowl still scrunching up his features. She could practically feel the anger radiating off him, striking her in waves, and she resisted the urge to nibble her lip. He took one, two, three steps towards her, his eyes never falling from hers, and burning he was that livid. But she refused to seem swayed, keeping her expression steady and deciding she would tackle this like any other challenge; with a calm and logical mind.

"Draco-

"Are you planning to leave?" he questioned, dragging out each word. "Well? Are you? Come on, Granger, you said we'd talk!"

"Listen, it's not that simple-

"Yes or no, Granger?"

She gave in and chewed her lip. "Yes, we are."

The dark and damaged shadow that swept across his face might've almost been beautiful if it wasn't so heartbreaking, and she didn't know if she wanted to reach out and hold him or turn away so she wouldn't have to see it. She held her ground and waited for him to react, ignoring the spike of guilt that pierced her heart. This is exactly what she'd hoped to avoid.

"How the fuck could you lie to me?" he asked.

"I didn't lie, I just didn't tell-

"Don't you dare try to pull that childish shit! You lied to me, plain and simple! What the hell is wrong with you?"

"Draco, I just couldn't-

"What's the plan then?" he cut her off again, scoffing at her confused frown. "Oh, come on, Granger, we both know you always have a plan for everything! You expect me to believe that you're just going to wing it?"

"I don't think I can-

"TELL ME WHAT IT IS!"

She winced at the vibrating volume of his voice and then sighed, pursing her lips with thought. Of course she had a plan, she was Hermione Granger, but she'd never anticipated having to reveal it to him, and the thought of doing so was oddly daunting. She considered refusing, but judging by the way his nails were digging into his palms, he was prepared to chip away at her reluctance for hours. And she didn't have hours.

"Okay," she mumbled, gathering some poise. "Yes, we have a plan."

Draco's nostrils flared. "Tell me."

"When we were at Malfoy Manor, Bellatrix hinted that she might have a Horcrux in her vault at Gringotts," she explained, and she was surprised how detached she sounded. Her tone was composed and stern, like she was conducting a lecture in very McGonagall-like manner. "I found one of Bellatrix's hairs on my clothes, and I intend to use Polyjuice to impersonate her to gain access to her vault so Harry, Ron, and I can examine its contents, and hopefully find a Horcrux."

She hadn't realised she'd been running out of breath until the last word had tripped past her lips. She watched Draco intently as his face went from shocked to outraged, his brow furrowing and his mouth slightly agape, like he barely recognised her, or couldn't comprehend what she'd said.

"Have you gone completely insane?" he spat incredulously. "First of all, the Goblins will see straight past-

"Griphook has agreed to help us with that."

"You're trusting a Goblin? Do you have any idea how sly-

"We have made a deal with him," she stated confidently. "We have insurance-

"And there is no way in hell that you will be able to mimic Bellatrix-

"I know her mannerisms well enough-

"And there will be Death Eaters at Gringotts-

"We will be able to handle it-

"Well, if it's such a fool-proof plan, then why can't I-

"Adding another person to the plan now would be too complicated. Plus, you might be recognised-

"STOP IT!" he yelled furiously. "Just stop! Stop fucking acting like this is sane! You will get yourself killed!"

She slumped her shoulders. "Draco, this is the only way."

His arm shot out like a whip, backhanding a few glasses off the table, and they shattered at his feet. "BULLSHIT! Why do you have to do this? Why not just tell the Order and let them handle it? Why do you have to play the sodding hero?"

"Because they won't find the Horcruxes. Only Harry can find them."

"What the hell are you on about?"

"Remember I told you about Harry's dreams?" she said, looking down at the puddle of glass. "They're more than that. Harry is somehow...connected to You-Know-Who's mind. He sees things, and he can sense things, including the Horcruxes."

Draco hesitated, raking his trembling fingers through his hair. "Right, then you know what? Let Potter do it by himself."

"You know I can't do that."

"Why not?" he demanded. "This is his fucking war, let him deal with it-

"This is as much my war as it is Harry's!" she shouted, pointing a finger at her own chest. "Muggle-born, remember?"

"That's not-

"And it's your war too! And your Mother's, and your Father's! And Tonks, and Remus, and Blaise, and Theo, and Luna, and everyone else that we bloody know!" She was panting by the end of her fiery rant. "And don't you even think for a moment that I will just sit at the sideline and observe-

"If it's my war too, then I see no reason why I'm not invited along to your fucking suicide attempt!"

"No," she groaned tiredly. "I've told you! Adding another person to the plan now would be far too dangerous, and someone could easily identify you! Not to mention that you don't get along with Harry and Ron, and that could cause all sorts of problems! You would be a liability and another risk that we can't afford!"

He flung his arms in the air irately, his temper flaring. "You always have to have an answer to everything, don't you? If I'm not going, then you're not going."

"YES, I AM!"

"TWICE, HERMIONE!" he blurted, and there was something about the way his voice cracked that made her gasp. "FUCKING TWICE!"

She blinked at him, her chest going numb as she watched him clench his eyes tight shut, as if he were in pain. "Twice what? I don't understand."

"I've had to lose you twice! The first time when you Petrified me at Hogwarts, and the second time when they brought you back here and I thought you were dead!"

He was still loud, his voice booming around the kitchen tiles, and there was a desperate and broken hum at the back of his throat that was devastating. But his eyes, Sweet Merlin, his eyes were what ruined her. He could barely look at her, but she saw the torment swarming in them, the ache, and it struck her speechless.

"Twice," he repeated quietly. "And I refuse to do it again." He paused and shook his head. "I can't."

Hermione licked her dry lips. "Draco, this is hard for me too, you know."

"Is it?" he hissed, and the anger returned to his face so quickly. "It was easy enough for you to fucking lie to me."

"Easy?" she echoed, the offence rich in her voice. "You think this is easy for me?"

"Well, you're certainly handling like it a pro-

"SHUT UP!" she barked, and she thought he might've flinched slightly. "How dare you assume this is easy for me! You think it was easy to Petrify you and send you away? You think it was easy to send you somewhere and not know if I would see you again?"

"Well, it wasn't exactly a pleasant experience for me-

"Let me finish!" She slapped the flats of her palms down on the table with the last syllable. "You saw how difficult that was for me! It broke my heart to have to do that, and I refuse to do that again! Do you understand that? Do you have any idea how hard it is to tell a statue that you love them, and then just send them away without having any idea how they feel about you? That broke me down!"

Draco was studying her closely from the other side of the room, watching her chest heave and her hands shake with emotion. He wondered why they were still so far apart. "You didn't have to Petrify me," he said slowly. "That was your choice."

"That was the choice you drove me to!" she yelled, and she could feel her eyes beginning to sting as she tried to smother a frustrated whine with the back of her hand. "I won't do that again. I won't. That was...horrible, and I knew you'd try to stop me again, and I...saying goodbye just doesn't work for us."

"So what, you were just going to disappear?" he asked.

"No, of course not. I was going to leave you a note."

"Oh, a note?" he remarked sarcastically. "Excellent! How fucking thoughtful of you!"

"Dammit, Draco, what else was I supposed to do?" She could taste tears at the corners of her mouth. "I can't win, can I? What can I do?"

"Stay here!"

"NO! When are you going to get it into your head? I. Am. Leaving! And there is nothing you can do about it! Why can't you just accept that?"

"BECAUSE I LOVE YOU!" he blurted heedlessly, his face crumpling up in complete agony, and Hermione fell into an awestruck silence.

He leaned forward and gripped the table, and she thought he might be crying, but he was hunched over and his fringe was shielding his eyes. She could his shoulders trembling though, like his body was trying to manage, and her absent gaze dropped down to the

straining veins sticking out of his arms, and then to his death-white knuckles. He was breathing heavily; she could hear him sucking in each harsh breath between his gritted teeth, and when he swallowed, it was more of a stifled choking sound, like the noise a near-death animal would make, and it tore right through her.

All his energy seemed to gush out of him, and he sank down to the floor, crumbling, exhausted, and deflated. Hermione was moving then, oblivious to the glass shards stabbing at the soles of her feet before she knelt down in front of him and tried to hold his face in her hands. He yanked his head away but she persisted, clutching his face firmly enough that she thought his sharp cheekbones might slit her thumbs. Bringing her face close to his, she sought his eyes, frowning when she realised they were pink, his lashes damp, lips tight, and his jaw clenched so much she worried he might chip his teeth.

"I know," she told him gently. "I know you do, and I love you-

"Then don't go-

"Draco, please." She dropped her forehead against his and felt his brow wrinkle against hers. "Enough now."

He shook his head vehemently. "Why you?"

She sighed and pushed her fingers into his hair, stroking the too-blond strands of his fringe away from his face. "Do you ever think about a future for us?" she asked. "I do, and I don't want us to have to hide. To run."

"I would rather run with you than walk alone," he said.

"I'm sorry," she frowned. "But it's not an option for me. I want more than that, and I believe we can win. I believe that Harry can do this, and I need to help him. I need to do this. It's just...who I am."

Draco grinded his teeth as Blaise's voice invaded his head again.

Trying stop her would be like asking her not to...be her.

He sucked down a long and quivering breath into lungs, inflating his chest so much that it pressed into hers, and Hermione swore she could feel his heartbeat, and it felt slower than it should. He looked away from her again, staring at a shard of glass poking out of her knee, and he plucked it away like a delicate petal. And then another one in her calf. And another. And another. And she thought it was so typical of them, shivering on a carpet of crushed glass, bleeding and mumbling confessions of fears and love.

"If Bellatrix's vault is anything like my mother's, there'll be a high shelf at the back where the most valuable items are stored," he said so quickly that she barely caught it. "If the Horcrux is anywhere, it will be there."

She gasped, eyes round with surprise and hope. "You're okay with it?"

"Of course not," he scoffed. "I fucking hate everything about it."

"But?"

"But..." he exhaled, his voice strained and reluctant. "I will let you...disappear."

The warmth that rushed into her body was an overwhelming mix of relief, gratitude, and love, and she wrapped her arms around his neck, melting her body into his, nearly crushing him in an embrace that she hoped expressed how much she adored him at that moment. She felt his arms slip around her, his fingers digging into her sides, almost painfully. Pulling back and crying again, she kissed his chin, then his cheek, and then finally his tense lips. She kept kissing until they softened and responded, pouring everything in her heart into his mouth, and swallowing down everything he breathed into hers. It was a raw and clumsy exchange, too driven by desperation to be neat, but it ended when a sob exploded from her throat.

"When?" asked Draco.

"Soon," she mumbled between sniffs. "Very soon."

He nodded absently, knowing from experience that she wouldn't elaborate, and he was too tired to argue now. Without a word, he made to stand, hoisting her into his arms as he did and carefully placing her down away from the glass puddle with little care to his own shredded feet. She helped him remove the shards from his ankles, heels, and soles, and then healed the scattered puncture wounds with a few swishes of Bellatrix's wand, all in silence, like there was nothing left to say.

"I meant what I said," he muttered after all the glass and blood had vanished from the room. "That I love you."

"I know," she said. "I love you, and I want you to know that I...I am so proud of you-

"I don't need you to be proud of me, Granger," he stopped her. "Just come home."

"I will," she agreed, as if she could promise or predict such a thing, but then they both knew she couldn't, and that somehow made it okay. "Draco, you can't tell Tonks or Remus-

"I won't." Another promise. The first he could remember making. "I won't say anything."

She forced a smile of gratitude and raked her finger through her hair. "We should go to bed."

She reached for his hand, but he avoided her touch, heading up to their bedroom without a glance behind to check if she was even following. She was of course, yet even as they entered the room and began to undress for bed, he didn't look at her, didn't speak.

It was only when they were in bed that he seemed to acknowledge her, snaking his arms around her waist so tight that he knew he must be hurting her a little, but she didn't protest. Didn't resist. He kissed the spot between her eyebrows while she kissed jaw, locking his arms around her like a cage and trying very hard to not to succumb to the persistent pull of sleep.

But he did, and when he woke in the morning, his arms were cold and empty, and he knew she was gone. Again.

Chapter End Notes

So I know it's been a ridiculous amount of time, and I am SOOOO sorry! I had a lot of uni work and deadlines, and then there was a family issue and yeah...not a good few months. Anyway, I hope you like the chapter! And thank you so much for all your lovely feedback on this, and Graveyard Valentine! You guys are the sweetest people anyone could hope to get for reviewers, so thank you!

Also, Theo's comment near the beginning about the punching Draco comes from a tradition where you pinch and punch someone on the first of the month. We do it in the UK, and a few people told me this wasn't an international thing, so I thought I should explain, just in case!

Read and Review!

Bex

Drown

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! Just some song recs for the chapter: OneRepublic - Come Home, Alexi Murdoch - Through the Dark, and Temper Trap - Solider On.

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

Draco had exactly ten seconds to frown at the empty space beside him before there was a roar of footfalls hammering down the corridor, towards his room, and then the door was flung open so hard the handle cracked the wall. In stormed Remus and Tonks, his cousin looking flustered as she shot him a brief glance before she eyed the other side of the bed, dented with Hermione's absence, and she let go of a harsh, frustrated breath.

"Shit, she's gone too."

"I need to go and contact Arthur and the others," said Remus. "See if they've heard from them."

"Alright," she nodded, waiting until her husband had left the room before she turned back to Draco, her expression hard. "You, downstairs, five minutes."

And with that, she left, slamming the door behind her before he could even muster a comeback. Clenching his eyes tight shut and rubbing his face with his clammy palms, he let his sullen eyes linger on Hermione's impression, shaped into the mattress and pillow, and he swallowed down the clot of angst in his throat, almost choked on it.

"Déjà vu," he mumbled to himself, leaving the warmth of the bed, the subtle scent of Granger clinging to the blanket.

It was cold today, and he absently listened to the staccato beat of raindrops hitting the window as he pulled on some trousers and a jumper, his movements sluggish and inattentive. Beyond the bedroom door, he could hear more footsteps, raised voices, chairs scraping, and all the peace that had seemed so surreal just yesterday was ripped apart, replaced by a racket. Combing a hand through his hair, he headed downstairs, made his way to the kitchen, and barely lifted his head to acknowledge Blaise and Theo, sat at the table, and Tonks leaning against the countertop, her arms folded, and her face creased up with irritation.

"Why the fuck have I been woken up at eight o'clock in the sodding morning?" demanded Theo. "I haven't got a girlfriend who's gone AWOL, and I'm hardly friends with-

"Shut it," said Tonks, levelling her glare at Blaise. "Well?"

As Draco sank into a free chair, he glanced at Blaise, wondering if the troubled shadow in his friend's eyes was mirrored in his own. He looked like he'd been up all night, haunted by stress and anxiety, grimacing for hours and trying to claw himself out of a bad dream.

"Well what?" muttered Blaise. "I've told you. I don't know where she's gone, and I don't know where Thomas is, or Granger, or Weasley, or bloody Potter-

"Luna must've told you something, or hinted-

"Tonks, I swear on my questionable soul, I don't know! My best bet would be Hogwarts, but I don't have a fucking clue. She never said anything to me."

She sighed, rubbing her forehead with shaky fingers as she flicked her eyes over to Draco. "And you?"

"What about me?"

"Well, you didn't exactly look shocked this morning when I walked in the room, and Hermione wasn't there."

He shared a quick look with Blaise and shrugged. "It's hardly the first time Granger has made an abrupt exit."

"Where is she, Draco?" she asked, her tone sharp. "Where have they gone?"

"I don't know." He knew it wasn't a convincing lie. He didn't particularly try to make it convincing.

"You do know, I can tell-

"Nope," he said shortly.

"Draco, you do realise we just want to help them-

"You're wasting your time-

"Dammit, Draco!" shouted Tonks, stalking towards the table and pounding one fist against it. Theo and Blaise jumped at the sound. "You tell me right now!"

"NO!" he snapped, rising to his feet so they were level. "I will not betray the trust of the only person I make promises to!"

That comment appeared to knock his cousin off her course; a flicker of shock stole her features and her mouth forgot to work for moment, all the severity and urgency dissipating as quickly as it had come. She sighed and shook her head, massaging her forehead again. "I'm going to ask you one last time-

"You have my answer," he cut her off. "It won't change."

"Count yourself lucky we don't have any Veritaserum in the house," she said, turning away and heading out the room. "Fine, we'll find them ourselves."

Draco didn't retake his seat until she'd shut the door behind her, and he could feel the blood pumping in his face when he settled back down, still aggravated, and he didn't know if it was from his argument with Tonks, or from Hermione's disappearance.

"Bloody hell, I thought she was going to beat the truth out of you, or hurl some curses your way," remarked Theo. "Not going to lie, I was kind of looking forward to the show."

"Sod off, Theo."

"You know where they are?" asked Blaise, addressing Draco with a look that might've been mistaken for hopefulness.

"Only Granger, Potter, and Weasley," he said. "I don't know where Thomas and Lovegood are." He paused, then added, "Sorry, mate."

"It's fine, I expected as much."

"So where are they?" asked Theo.

"I think I made it clear I had no intention of telling anyone-

"Yeah, but-

"You wouldn't believe me anyway," mumbled Draco, clasping his hands in front of him. "It's fucking insane."

"Well, considering Potter's suicidal tendencies," Theo mused. "I reckon they're probably knocking on You-Know-Who's front door."

"So my front door then? Seeing as the psychopath is currently living in my house. The fucked up thing is you're not far off." He exhaled heavily and scrunched up his hands into tight fists. "What the hell was I thinking? I should've never let her go. This is all your fucking fault, Zabini! That bullshit you fed me yesterday screwed with my head!"

He flinched when Blaise's hand landed on his shoulder, with what he assumed was meant to be a pat of reassurance. Keeping his eyes downcast, he fought very hard to keep his composure, staring at his hands as they trembled with the exertion to keep his temper subdued. He wasn't sure if he was more angry at Hermione for leaving, Blaise for his ridiculous pep-talk yesterday, or at himself for allowing Hermione to disappear, or even if he was angry at all. Perhaps it was simply nerves and concern, or dread and helplessness, or regret and the ache of her absence. Perhaps it was all those things, but the anger bubbled to the surface because he knew it too well, knew the familiar warmth of it.

"It will be alright," said Blaise unconvincingly.

"Don't try optimism," said Theo. "It doesn't suit you."

"It's all getting a bit real now, isn't it?" Draco whispered, never intending to say it aloud. It was only when he noticed his friends' confused looks that he realised he'd said it at all.

"It's always been real," Blaise sighed. "It's just closer now. Very close. People believe in something more when they can touch it."

Theo leaned back in his chair, his expression uncharacteristically pensive and grim. "Wherever the hell they are, I hope your girlfriend and her two thick pets know what they're doing, Draco."

Draco felt a shiver shoot across the line of his spine, like a cold finger scratching its way down his back. "Yeah, well. Me too."

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"Okay, I think the dress looks like something she would wear now. How do I look?"

"Still bloody hideous."

Hermione frowned at Ron's response but realised it was simply his way of assuring her that it had been a successful transition, and judging by his unnerved stare, he meant it.

With the bitter tang of Polyjuice still rolling around her gums, she looked down at her hands, or rather Bellatrix's hands; long, chipped fingernails that were more like claws, and pale hands, flecked with scars, like she'd been wringing glass. Black, matted curls poured down her chest, and she ran her tongue over her sharp, uneven teeth, absently thinking of her parents as she did.

"You look rather awful yourself," she told Ron, eyeing his long, wavy hair and altered features with a nod of satisfaction. "I did a good job on you."

"I'll take your word for it," he said, raising his hand to scratch his false beard. "Bloody hell, this thing itches. Remind me never to grow one."

She laughed but didn't respond, too nervous to really conjure a humorous or inventive remark, but she could tell he was nervous too, so that was fine. At least she hoped it was. Perhaps Ron was expecting her to say something reassuring or positive, but words were having a hard time forming in her mouth, and she was just so nervous. She looked away, her eyes landing on Harry as he toyed with the Invisibility Cloak with his shaking fingers.

"Ron, keep an eye out."

"I always do."

Patting his shoulder as she walked past, she made her way over to Harry, ignoring the low, pessimistic grumbles of Griphook a few feet away in the abandoned side-street they were hiding in, just a short walk from the Leaky Cauldron. Harry was waiting between some bins, crouched down in what must've been an uncomfortable position, evidently distracted, shifting his weight and fidgeting like a toddler at the dentist.

"How are you doing?" she asked.

He glanced up, grimaced, and averted his eyes. "Sorry, I can't get used to you looking like that."

"It's alright, I find it quite disconcerting myself. Nervous?"

"Terrified."

"It will be okay-

"Perhaps this wasn't such a great idea," he blurted, nodding his head towards Griphook and lowering his voice. "He's shifty as anything. He's going to stab us in the back."

"Then we'll ensure our backs are never bared to him," she said. "Harry, we have planned this meticulously. It will work."

He shrugged. "I guess it has to, doesn't it?"

She sighed and watched his hands, wanting to reach out and stop them trembling, but she caught a glimpse of something familiar poking out of his pocket. Before she could stop herself, she removed it, twirling it between her fingers and inspecting it carefully, just to double-check, and when she looked back at Harry, he had an almost embarrassed look on his face.

"This is Draco's wand."

"Yes. I may have...borrowed it."

She eyed him quizzically. "Why?"

"I disarmed him after you separated us that night," he explained, sighing. "I still had it when I went to bed and I...I practiced a few spells, just out of curiosity really, and it works well for me. Better than Wormtail's." He paused and gave her a fixed look. "I even managed to cast my Patronus with it."

"You did?" she gasped. "Wow."

"I was going to return it to Malfoy but...but I just get this feeling that I should keep using it. But if you want, after this, you can use it. I mean, it is your boyfriend's."

Hermione hesitated, rolling the wand's tip between her thumb and forefinger, wondering if she was imagining the sudden blast of Draco's scent that seemed to be swarming in her nostrils. A part of her wanted to smile, deciding it was nice to hear her best friend, or anyone for that matter, finally refer to Draco as her boyfriend, but the setting hardly seemed appropriate for a selfish and wistful moment. The setting hardly seemed appropriate for any sort of smile.

"No," she said after a moment, replacing the wand back in Harry's pocket. "If it's that compliant with you, you should keep it. I'm used to Bellatrix's wand anyway."

"Thank you."

"Although, I should warn you that Draco will probably hex you when he finds out you're the one who borrowed his wand."

Harry smiled. Apparently she'd been wrong; his smile seemed to fit the situation just fine. But, like everything else at the moment, the spark of happiness was all too brief.

"If you intend to go through with this, we need to do it now," sneered Griphook. "Diagon Alley will start to get busy soon. The less people, the better."

Hermione felt Harry's long and troubled breath stir Bellatrix's curls, and she released an apprehensive sigh of her own as they straightened their backs and nodded their heads. They were ready, or as ready as they'd ever be.

"Okay, let's do this," said Hermione, looking over to Ron. "Are you ready, Ro—I mean, Dragomir?"

"Yes, Madam Lestrangle."

Waiting until Griphook had climbed onto Harry's back and they were safely concealed beneath the Invisibility Cloak, they left the shelter of the shadowy side-street, Hermione a few steps ahead of Ron, her posture defiant and bold. They slipped into the Leaky Cauldron, barely glancing at Tom, the landlord, as they made their way into the backyard, and Hermione's heart was pounding in her chest as she rapped Bellatrix's wand against the brick wall.

As predicted, the cobbled street was quiet, with barely enough people to form two Quidditch teams, but they were all retreating away from her anyway, pulling up their hoods and ducking away like she might stab them with her jagged nails. And she played on it, shooting them hostile glares, just as she imagined Bellatrix would.

"Madam Lestrangle!"

Hermione whirled around, half-prepared to bark down whoever had addressed her in true Bellatrix fashion, but she heard Harry whisper, "Travers, he's a Death Eater," into her ear, and she steadied herself as the man approached them.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Madam Lestrangle," said Travers.

"Why would you be?"

"It was my understanding that you and the other inhabitants of Malfoy Manor were confined to the house after the...well, you know. The Escape."

Hermione didn't waver. They'd expected this. "As I have proven my loyalty to the Dark Lord on countless occasions, I was an exception," she told him crisply. "It would do you well to remember that before you question me, Travers."

The Death Eater's cool expression faltered. "My apologies," he murmured, turning his attention to Ron. "Who is your companion."

"This is Dragomir Despard. He's an ally from Transylvania. He speaks little English, but he'll be staying for a while, assisting our efforts."

The two men exchanged nods of acknowledgement, and then Travers' eyes were back to her. "Why are you here today, Madam Lestranger?"

"I have some business at Gringotts."

"I am also headed that way," he said. "I'll escort you."

Hermione managed to contain her trepidation. Having a tagalong hardly seemed ideal when Undesirable No. 1 was at her side, even if he was adequately hidden, but perhaps this would work to their advantage. Having a genuine Death Eater in their presence might work in their favour, so she walked beside him, hoping to hell and back Travers didn't hear her booming heartbeat, or see the sweat gathering in her balled fists. Shutting her eyes for a few seconds longer than a blink, she did everything she could to avoid thinking of Draco, fearing that a sentimental smile might steal her features, and look far too out of place on Bellatrix's face to go unnoticed.

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"Draco," said Theo slowly, his teeth clenched. "Stop drumming your sodding fingers. You're giving me a headache."

Draco scowled but flattened his palm against the table, eyeing his fingernails, half-tempted to scrape them across the wood, just to cause some friction, or create a piercing noise to cut through the chaos in his head. Instead, he leaned back in his chair, eyeing the radio expectantly as he let go of a long and laden sigh.

"Twelve," said Theo.

Draco slanted his eyes over to his friend. "What?"

"That's the twelfth time you've sighed. You make it thirteen, and I'll remind you why it's an unlucky number."

"Piss off, Theo."

"He has a point," Blaise chimed in. "Your self-pity and brooding is too loud."

"Well, what the hell would you have me do?" asked Draco, throwing his hands in the air with frustration. "Chat merrily with you two?"

"You? Chat merrily?" Theo scoffed. "Anyway, why are you so miserable? You should've expected this from Granger. When you decided to have feelings for her, you knew what you were getting yourself into."

"Decided to have feelings?" echoed Draco, furrowing his brow. "It was hardly fucking intentional."

Blaise shook his head, his lips curved into a wry and detached smile. "Love's never intentional, you idiot. It's the most inconvenient thing in the world. That's why it knocks you sideways. Especially cynical bastards like us."

"Cynical? Me?" grinned Theo. "I'll have you know that I make daisy-chains and frolic with unicorns on the weekends."

Draco rolled his eyes, too preoccupied by Granger's whereabouts to appreciate his friend's humour. "You're not funny."

"I think we all know I'm hilarious, you're just being a moody git. But that's fine, I know you love me really," said Theo, smirking when Draco fired an irate glare his way. "Don't give me that look, you know it's true. Fifty Galleons says you'll even name one of your kids after me, or at least make me godfather-

"What?" Draco snorted, but the corners of his mouth lifted for a moment. "You think I would name one of my kids after you? Why would I call my child Useless Twat Malfoy?"

"I know you're joking but that actually has quite a ring to it."

The chuckle that ripped its way out of Draco's throat was dry, cracked, and brief, more like a low cackle, but at least it was there. At least it was something raw and instinctive. At least it wasn't sigh number thirteen. A part of him was tempted to punch Theo for forcing a distraction, as pathetic and fleeting as it was, but Draco reluctantly realised he felt slightly more at ease, and judging by the softer expression on Blaise's face, he did too. The moment passed so quickly though, and Draco was back to picturing Granger, disguised as Bellatrix, trapping herself in Gringotts with Merlin knew how many Death Eaters, and he began to absently tap his fingers against the table again.

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Hermione pulled back the drenched hair in her eyes and sputtered out the excess water in her mouth.

"You okay, Hermione?" asked Ron, somewhere next to her, and his hand came into her view.

"Fine," she nodded as he helped her to her feet, and she shot a quick glance over to Harry to ensure he was well. "You okay, Ron?"

"Yeah, thanks to your quick thinking. Cushioning Charm?"

"Yes, it was the first thing that popped into my head."

"Lucky for us."

She was about to smile, but then she saw him, and he was Ron again; red hair, friendly, freckled features, blue eyes, and a gasp burst past her lips. "You're you again! All the charms-

"Shit, you're you too."

She looked down, analysing her young hands and the tips of her brown waves with complete bewilderment. "But I drank enough Polyjuice to last at least an hour. And the spells I used on you...I don't understand."

"It's the Thief's Downfall!" shouted Griphook. "It counteracts all magical concealment and enchantments! They must suspect us! We need to hurry!"

Hermione chewed her lip. Aside from a slight issue with Bellatrix's wand when they'd first entered Gringotts, she'd actually thought their plan had been going well. In hindsight, perhaps too well, although she gathered that Harry had helped a little along the way, mumbling a few Confundus Charms to delay the guards at the doors, and she knew he'd used the Imperius Curse to gain Bogrod's assistance, much to her discomfort about him using an Unforgivable. But she reasoned it was necessary at the moment, and as she turned her head, it seemed Bogrod was beginning to kick up a fuss, evidently no longer under the spell's possession, but Harry had already lifted his wand, reciting "Imperio", just as he had before.

"We need to move!" insisted Griphook. "They will be coming!"

"Protego!" called Hermione, lifting Bellatrix's wand until the Shield Charm cut into the cascade of the Thief's Downfall. "That should buy us a bit more time."

The three of them followed Griphook deeper into the cavernous structure of Gringotts, and Hermione wondered if she would even remember the way out when it came to it, but she lost

her train of thought when an echoing roar blasted towards them from somewhere ahead, and the breeze of it tickled her wet cheeks.

"What the bloody hell was that?" asked Ron.

"That's why we need the Clankers," Griphook explained, holding up the odd device for emphasis.

As they turned a corner, Hermione's breath caught in her throat as she took in the beast: a tethered dragon with faded, grey scales and pinkish eyes, scars carved into its body from obvious mistreatment, and chains around its hind legs to keep it incarcerated.

"It's partially blind," said Griphook. "But that just makes it more savage. It's been taught to associate the Clankers with pain."

"That's barbaric," snapped Hermione.

"If you want to go up against it, be my guest," the Goblin sneered. "Otherwise, shut up, girly."

On any other day, she knew she'd have pestered Griphook with a long-winded rant about the abuse of creatures until his ears had bled, but time was hardly on their side. Hell, nothing was on their side, so she let it go, frowning as Griphook rattled the Clankers, and the tormented dragon recoiled, allowing them access to the vaults beyond its reach. The trio and two Goblins approached the Lestrage vault, and Griphook directed Harry to compel Bogrod to place his hand against the door until the wood peeled back, like burning paper, and the five of them stepped inside.

"Okay, search quickly!" said Harry, and as he said it, there was a loud bang as the vault's door reappeared.

"Bogrod can release us," said Griphook. "Find what you're looking for!"

Casting Lumos Charms, the trio began to search, but when Hermione picked up a golden goblet, she yelped in pain, heat scorching her fingertips. "Ow! It burned me!" she yelled, but it was quickly forgotten as the trinket duplicated itself, and a shower of goblets rained down to her feet. "What the-

"They must've added Germino and Flagrante Curses!" said Griphook. "Everything you touch will scald and multiply! We could be crushed if you-

"Shit!" gasped Ron, cradling his hand as several plates clattered to the floor by his feet.

"Sorry, that was an accident."

"Be careful!" shouted Harry, narrowly avoiding nudging an ornament himself. "We need to find it!"

Watching her step, Hermione carefully meandered her way around all the objects cluttering the vault, her eyes desperately scanning the space when Draco's voice popped into her head.

"You know," she said. "Draco said his mother's vault might be similar to this, and if it was, the most valuable items would be kept at the back on a high-

"Shelf," finished Harry.

It was the finality in her best friend's voice that caught her, and when Hermione looked up at him, he was staring hard at the vault's corner, his wand tilted upwards, and she followed his line of sight to a small cup on the back shelf. Helga Huffleuff's Cup; engraved badger and all. Harry had mentioned a while ago, not long before he and Ron had disappeared to hunt for the Horcuxes, that Dumbledore had alluded to the possibility of the ancient artifact being a Horcrux, and there it was, and she could tell by the intense expression on Harry's face that he could feel it was a Horcrux.

"It's there!" exclaimed Harry, but as he propelled his body towards it, he knocked into a set of ornaments, then a suit of armour.

Within seconds, the floor was a sea of gold and silver, erupting like beautiful, shimmering lava as the carpet of trinkets began to rise above their knees. And beyond the vault door, the dragon roared, accompanied by the murmur of approaching voices, and Hermione met Harry's panicked eyes.

"I need to get up there," he said desperately. "Hermione, I need-

"Levicorpus!" she shouted, gritting her teeth as the vault's contents singed and scorched her skin, trying to keep her focus.

The river of metal rose higher and higher, and the voices outside grew louder and louder.

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The sound of a glass hitting the floor snapped Draco out of his trance, but he turned his head in time to catch the spray of shards skid across the floorboards, and it reminded him of ice skating. It took him a moment or two to realise it was his glass, and that he must've been the one to send it tumbling, and he studied the shallow puddle of crushed crystal by his feet with dead eyes.

"You clumsy dick," grumbled Theo, flicking his wand to clear the mess. "Why the hell did you do that?"

"It was an accident," he mumbled. "I had a...shiver or something."

Blaise tilted his head and exhaled. "We've been here for hours, talking about nothing."

"We should know something by now," said Draco, his tone suddenly impatient. "Where the fuck has Tonks gone? And Andromeda? And what-

"If you're that concerned, perhaps you should consider telling Tonks where they are-

"I've told you-

"Do you think you could kill your father?" Theo asked, the words crisp and clear, eerily comfortable on Theo's tongue.

After exchanging a puzzled look with Blaise, Draco eyed his other friend warily, noting the completely calm expression on Theo's features as he casually flicked one fingernail, like he'd asked them how they take their tea.

"What did you say?"

"I asked if you think you could kill your father," he repeated in the same nonchalant manner. "I mean, we're probably going to have to help the Order, and we'll be fighting against our parents. If it was necessary, could you? Blaise?"

Blaise shifted in his seat, his eyebrows low and his lips pursed in thought. "I don't have a father."

"Your mother then."

"She's hardly a mother," he sighed, tapping his chin hesitantly. "I don't know. I...guess it would depend on the circumstances-

"She's about to kill you, maybe even Lovegood," Theo supplied quickly. "Could you do it then?"

"You've certainly given this a lot of thought," remarked Draco.

"There's hardly a busy schedule in this place. Answer the question, Blaise. Could you kill your mother, or not?"

"I don't know," he said again. "If it was Luna, possibly, but I have no idea. There's something...unnatural about shedding blood that's effectively your own. I guess it would all come down to instinct, or even impulse."

Theo seemed to take his time absorbing Blaise's response, his head cocked thoughtfully to the side until he nodded, apparently satisfied. "And you, Draco?"

"I haven't seen my father in over a year," he replied. "I don't...even know what he's like now-

"He's still a bastard."

Draco tried very hard to be angry at Theo's comment, and he fired a glare at his friend, but it was half-hearted, forced, and lazy, because he knew the comment was true. It wasn't as if he'd ever been oblivious to his father's cruel conduct, on the contrary, he'd admired it, relished it

even, emulated and thrived off it, proud to be compared to him. But Draco felt so much older now; more grounded and aware of the balance that relied on his feet and his mind, not his father's, and it was an oddly comforting epiphany.

"I don't know," he mumbled. "Blaise is right, blood is blood-

"And bile is bile, and shit is shit, and spit is spit, and sweat is sweat," Theo listed, annunciating each syllable. "It's all just biology."

"It's not that simple-

"What if he went for Granger?" he pushed. "And you know he wouldn't hesitate given the opportunity. What then?"

Draco closed his eyes and tried to calm his temper, feeling the heat of it rise from his chest into his throat, and it was wedged there, like a stone, choking him, stopping his breath. He wondered if this would be what it felt like, to raise his wand and aim it at his father's chest, if it would make him choke, if he would be able to breathe. Granger would probably talk him back to sanity anyway, even if his father did threaten her. That was just how she was, forever seeking the good buried within the darkest hosts, just as she had with him, and the image of her on the backs of lids helped him breathe again.

"I...I don't know what I'd do," he confessed, clearing his throat to rid the itch. "I'd do what was necessary."

Theo did as he'd done with Blaise, nodding absently, weighing up the response in his head before deeming it good enough. Then he coolly shrugged his shoulders, plucking away a speck of fluff from his sleeve.

"I think I could kill my father," he stated evenly. "Yeah, I think I could. I think he deserves it. I think I'd be doing the world a favour." He paused to nod with confidence. "I don't think I'd feel a shred of guilt either."

Draco couldn't decide if he should envy Theo for his conviction, or pity him for being so damaged, or even if he should feel completely indifferent because, in reality, Theo had simply voiced the question they'd all been asking themselves for weeks, and it had been like a needle, incessantly stabbing into their minds.

"Well," said Theo, his voice upbeat now, and a strained grin on his lips. "That was a very morbid and gloomy conversation, wasn't it?"

"You started it," Draco frowned.

"Someone had to. And it least it stopped you two whinging about your girlfriends for a bit."

"And you'd prefer we discussed the death of our parents?"

"I'd prefer we didn't discuss either, but it's all related. Death, love, blood, friends, enemies, parents. They're all synonymous when there's a war going on," mumbled Theo, hooding his

eyes. "Ted once said that wars are like the sea; unpredictable and unforgiving, and before you know it everyone's drowning."

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Hermione surged upwards, her mouth wide open and gasping for air as she broke the lake's surface. Whipping her head around to ensure the boys were alright, she checked she had her bag and her wand before she swam for land, struggling to even manage a doggy-paddle, the heavy dress dragging her down. When her feet finally found pebbles, she was tempted to stay in the water, finding that it soothed all the burns on her skin from the items in the Lestrage Vault, but Harry was grabbing her elbow and helping her stumble onto land before she could protest.

When she'd caught her breath, she looked to the sky, watching the dragon that had aided their escape fly over the mountains and out of her sight. "Do you think the dragon will be okay?"

"I'm more worried about us at the moment," said Harry, flinching as he shrugged out of his jumper. "You have anything for these burns?"

"I have Dittany," she replied, reaching into her bag and handing the vial to him. "Try not to use so much though. We might need it."

"That sodding Goblin!" hissed Ron. "I knew we couldn't trust him, that thieving shit. I can't believe he just nicked the sword and left us to fend for ourselves!"

"We escaped with our lives and the Horcrux," said Harry. "Let's just be grateful for that-

"Yes, we have a Horcrux and no way to destroy it. Fucking stellar."

"At least we know how to destroy it though," offered Hermione. "I'm more concerned about the fact that You-Know-Who is going to know now that we are searching for the Horcruxes. What if he..."

She trailed off when she noticed the blank stare in Harry's eyes, and in a second he was growling in pain, clutching his scar, and falling to his knees. Both she and Ron were at his side, calling his name as he twitched and writhed, trying to pull him out of it, but it was futile. Hermione couldn't tell if Harry's turmoil lasted for one minute or ten, but then his eyes snapped open, darting around wildly, and he swallowed heavily before he spoke.

"We need to get to Hogwarts."

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry! It's my final year and I've had exams and assignments and my graduation's coming up, and it all got a bit hectic! My sincere apologies! I know it's been ages. And thank you so much for all your reviews and messages of support and the like, you are wonderful people! As you can tell, I stuck quite close to the book with the chapter, but I didn't want to repeat anything too much as I'm sure you all know the gaps etc. I'm sorry it's kind of a filler chapter but these plot ones are necessary, so I hope it was okay! There's not many chapters left, but there will be a couple of fillers along the way.

The next chapter will be up quicker, I PROMISE, and I have a couple of one-shots coming up soon to apologise for my crappiness. Again, really sorry! Thanks for Reading! Read and Review!

Bex

Fight

Chapter Notes

Thank you SO MUCH Maeghan (occupymalfoysbed) for betaing this chapter! I owe you a favour! And I just have the usual song recs! 30 Seconds to Mars - Vox Populi, Muse - Knights of Cydonia and Nicholas Hooper - In Noctem. Hope they work well!

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

Hermione toyed with a loose thread on her jumper, pulling it tight until there was a temporary dent slicing into her index finger; she frowned, lifting her eyes back to Harry.

"Right, explain one more time what you saw, Harry. Slowly."

"I told you!" he said, evidently exasperated. "You-Know-Who killed the goblins for letting us escape from Gringotts, all of them! Including Griphook! And he knows we have Helga's Cup. He's anxious and panicky now, because he suspects we know about the Horcruxes."

"Well that's not good," mumbled Ron.

"No, but I could hear his thoughts, and I know that he's keeping a Horcrux in Hogwarts. I heard it. And he's going to head there, so we need to get there before he has a chance to move it."

"But, Harry, we don't even know what we're looking for," said Hermione, "Or where to even start looking. Hogwarts is a big place, and it probably has hundreds of hiding places we don't know about."

"But we have the map."

"But not everything shows up on the map, like the Room or Requirement-

"But most of it does. And we know that the Horcrux must be linked to Rowena Ravenclaw somehow. Dumbledore said last year that he believed the Horcruxes would be connected to the Founders, so this one must have something to do with Ravenclaw-

"But we don't-

"And, You-Know-Who revealed that Nagini is a Horcrux, and if he's heading to Hogwarts with her, then that's two Horcruxes in the same place."

"Two birds, one stone," said Ron. "But how do we destroy them without the sword?"

"I don't know yet, but at least if we get them, we can figure that out later-

"Harry, wait," sighed Hermione. "Do you realise how difficult it's going to be to get to Hogwarts? We might be able to get into Hogsmeade with the Invisibility Cloak, but Hogwarts is practically impenetrable. They have Death Eaters and Dementors everywhere-

"We'll figure something out; see how bad it really is when we get to Hogsmeade," he hushed her. "Once he realises the ring and the locket are gone, he'll be heading to Hogwarts. We don't have time for hesitation, Hermione."

Her frown deepened as Harry tugged her bag out of her hand and pulled out the cloak. She knew he was right, of course, that they didn't have time to linger on the edge of idleness, but the abruptness of it all left her feeling uneasy. She was hardly spontaneous at the best of times, and she wondered if Harry's eagerness might be clouding his judgement and his ability to remain rational.

"This doesn't sit right with me," she whispered to Ron. "We are not properly prepared."

"Yeah but bugger it," he replied. "I doubt all the planning in the world could prepare us for this. Even your kind of planning."

"Perhaps you're right, but I just feel like...this is it. I feel like-

"Guys, come on!" called Harry, holding up the cloak for them to slip under. "We need to get going!"

The words died on her tongue as Ron gave her an innocent shrug and left her side, joining Harry beneath the cloak. Smothering the urge to protest or insist that they should take some time to prepare, she headed toward her two companions with heavy ankles, dragging her heels in the mud. If Harry noticed her reluctance, he didn't say anything, but as they linked their hands to Apparate, he gave hers a gentle, reassuring squeeze.

And with the sound of a whip snapping the air, they were gone.

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"Check."

Draco resisted the urge to roll his eyes. Blaise and Theo's chess match had been in play for almost two hours, and this was the fifth time Blaise had cornered Theo's king. Theo had never been particularly skilled at the game, but his inadequacy today was irritating Draco to no end, although he acknowledged that he'd hardly been in the best of moods anyway. Perhaps that was why he was focussing all his attention on their game, directing all his frustration at Theo, distracting himself from thoughts of Granger and her welfare.

"Shit," hissed Theo, moving his king. "I don't know where my game is today."

"You never had a game," said Draco. "You were always shit at chess. Even Goyle beat you."

"Hey, I've beaten you before."

"One time in third year."

"And you still look fucking bitter about it," Theo smirked, "Like I shoved the king up your arse or something."

Blaise shook his head. "Must you always be so crass?"

"Yes, it's part of my charm."

"Check," said Blaise again, snaring the King with his Bishop and directing a bored look at Theo. "Your charm is about as good as your chess playing skills."

"Well, we all know that's bullshit," he replied. "I could've charmed the chastity belt off Umbridge if I'd wanted to-

"Theo, what the fuck?" growled Blaise. "Do you think I need those kinds of thoughts in my head-

"I bet it would be a pink chastity belt with a metaphorical cat on it saying 'Don't touch my puss-

"Merlin, Theo, STOP IT!"

Draco caught himself grinning as his two friends bickered back and forth like they were fourteen again, before all the chaos had started to settle in. Before Voldemort had returned. And now he thought about it, they'd been confined before even then, bearing the burden of the hatred their parents had hammered into their heads from the moment they could listen. Looking at his friends now, particularly Theo, they looked so much...healthier, free and young. Even though they barely had a Galleon between the three of them, their girlfriends were AWOL, and there was a war waiting around the corner, Draco thought that this was the best they'd ever been as young men.

Not boys. Men.

And at least Theo seemed to be getting over Ted's death day by day, wit and profanity pouring out of his mouth, just as they should be. His temper had simmered, his cockiness was back, and Draco could honestly look at Blaise and Theo now and consider them more than casual allies for personal gain. He wouldn't call them friends as such, if only because they would taunt him for using the word, but he trusted them and felt at ease in their company, even admired them.

"...it's not my fault you don't have a sense of humour-

"I have a sense of humour, Theo, you're just not fucking funny-

"Why must you lie to yourself everyday?"

"Would you shut the hell up and just make your move!"

"You two sound more like brothers every day," remarked Draco, smirking at their offended looks.

"Step-brothers," corrected Theo. "Aside from the obvious fact that I am far too good-looking to be related to Blaise by blood, the fact that he has no sense of humour-

"Bloody hell, Theo, don't make me come over to your side of the table."

"What are you going to do? Patronise me to death?"

Blaise shot up to his feet. "I'll show you what I'll bloody..."

He trailed off when Andromeda entered the room, retaking his seat with a rather embarrassed expression, not that she appeared to notice. Studying his Aunt curiously, Draco felt the knot of nerves in his stomach tighten as he took in her serious features, waiting expectantly as she met his eyes across the room.

"I thought you might like to know," she said carefully, "That they made it out of Gringotts."

Draco's eyebrows shot up as a sigh he couldn't stop rushed out of him. "You're certain?"

"Yes, they got out."

"Who got out?" asked Theo, and then his eyes widened. "Wait, Granger and the dipshit duo were in Gringotts?! What the fu-

"How do you know?" interrupted Draco, ignoring his companion.

"You know the Order has their...contacts. Tonks is at a safe-house with The Order, and she passed the information on to me."

Draco wondered if Snape had somehow relayed the information to McGonagall, and it had been passed on to Tonks, then to his Aunt, or if there were more spies creeping their way around Voldemort's den. And then he decided he didn't care. Granger had made it out of her suicide mission with a pulse, and that was all he needed and wanted to focus on for the moment. An odd sensation found its way to his chest, something he couldn't place, and he absently wondered if it might be hope, but quickly discarded that notion.

"I need to leave for a little while, there's a lot going on," Andromeda continued. "Will you boys be alright here?"

"We're fine," said Theo quickly, waving her away and waiting until she'd disappeared before he turned to Draco with uninhibited interest. "Granger went to fucking Gringotts? As in the Gringotts? The bank that's currently swarming with Death Eaters?"

"How many Gringotts do you know?" frowned Blaise. "Although I have to agree with Theo. That was ballsy."

"Ballsy?" Theo repeated. "It's fucking insane. You need to keep your girlfriend away from those morons she calls friends, because apparently death wishes are contagious-

"Andromeda didn't say where Granger is now," mumbled Draco, dropping his head. "She doesn't know where Granger is."

Theo snorted. "Look, she made it out of Gringotts alive, okay. I'm sure she's bloody fine. Quit complaining."

"You know how intelligent and resourceful Granger is, Draco," Blaise assured him. "And the Gryffindors have Irish luck. Again, I hate to agree with Theo, but if anyone will be fine, it will be Hermione Granger."

Draco nodded absently, doing his best to remove any hint of concern from his expression, and if any of it remained, Theo and Blaise didn't comment. Instead, they returned to their chess match, seemingly deciding it was best to leave him to untangle his thoughts, and Theo finally moved his king to a safe square.

"Just out of curiosity," said Blaise. "Why were they at Gringotts?"

"I can't tell you."

Theo clicked his tongue. "I feel like that's the bloody motto around here. 'I can't tell you' or 'It's a secret,' might as well be carved into the sodding door."

"Would you stop complaining?" Blaise snapped. "Just make your move so I can beat you already."

"Don't get cocky, Blaise-

"You're calling me cocky?"

"I believe that was the intention of my last sentence, yes."

"Just make your move-

"I'll make it when I'm good and ready..."

Draco barely heard them this time, their voices muffled static in his ears, distant and distorted. His eyes wandered over to the window, and he stared past the reflection of himself into the night outside. It had been dark for a couple of hours already and he guessed it was around nine in the evening now, but the darkness of the sky seemed so...permanent and consuming, and he couldn't look away. There was no moon, no stars, but somewhere in the distance, a shard of lightning cut through the vast, black emptiness, and a shiver ran up Draco's spine.

The air felt hostile and unbalanced tonight, like the electricity of the oncoming storm was prickling against his skin, and all he could do was silently beg some unseen greater force that Granger would be fine.

Then he looked back to Blaise and Theo, thought of Tonks, Andromeda and Teddy, of his parents, of Bletchley, Davis, and Bulstrode, hell, even Lovegood, if only for Blaise's sanity, and begged that obscure greater force that they'd all be fine too.

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Hermione felt the ground beneath her feet, and through the cloak's translucent veil, she could make out the buildings of Hogsmeade; so familiar and yet unfamiliar now. Zonko's and Honeydukes appeared to be half-burned down, the windows shattered, and the doors ripped off their hinges. She thought of Christmas, when lights, candles, and trinkets had adorned the shops, lighting up the street, and now it looked like an abandoned ghost town, save the glow coming from The Three Broomsticks.

The moment her eyes settled on the pub, a harsh and high-pitched shriek sliced through her, and it didn't fade; just kept ringing in her ears. The door of the pub burst open, and out poured several Death Eaters, their wands ready, and one was screaming, "Accio Cloak!" before she could really comprehend it. But the Invisibility Cloak didn't move, and she resisted the urge to sigh with relief.

"We know you're here, Potter!" one of them shouted. "No point trying to escape either! Spread out and find him!"

The Death Eaters surged towards them, but they managed to move out of the way in time, ducking down into a side street, all of them holding their breath as flashes of light began to erupt around Hogsmeade.

"We need to get out of here," whispered Hermione. "There are too many."

"You heard him, there's no escape," said Harry. "They must've set up some wards or something. They were ready for us-

"Get the Dementors!" a voice called somewhere in the distance. "They'll find him!"

Hermione turned to Harry, meeting his panicked eyes with her own, and she desperately reached for his hand, then Ron's, readying herself to Apparate, but it didn't work. The air around them felt heavy with wards, and she began to frantically search through her mind and memories for something she could do, but the cold crept up on her, and she could see the

Dementors heading towards them. Before she even realised it, Harry had his wand out, and then a brilliant, white stag was jumping out the tip, and the Dementors dispersed.

"Over there!" one of the Death Eaters shouted; but before Hermione had a moment to gather her thoughts, she heard a door open, and light poured into the dark space they were hiding in.

"Potter, get in here!" a harsh whispered ordered. "Head upstairs, keep the Cloak on, and stay silent!"

Harry was holding her hand again, dragging her and Ron towards the voice. Once inside the building, Hermione took in the musty scent and fragile bar, realising they were in the Hog's Head Inn, and she followed Harry to a door at the back that led to a flight of groaning stairs. Reaching a sitting room with a welcoming fireplace, Hermione let go of the breath she'd been holding, taking a second to study the large painting of a young and delicate girl smiling pleasantly at them.

Shouts from outside caught her attention, and she and Ron kept close to Harry as he made his way to a window, adjusting the Cloak a little to make sure they were sufficiently covered before they looked outside.

"I don't have a stag Patronus, I have a goat Patronus, you idiot! I just showed you!" yelled a man, who Hermione now realised was the Hog's Head's barman, and the man who had saved them. "I'm not having those Dementors out on my street-

"You broke Curfew!" argued the Death Eater.

"If I want to let out my bloody cat, I will!"

"Your cat set off the Caterwauling Charm?"

"So what? Going to send me to Azkaban, are you? I hope you haven't pressed your little Dark Marks and summoned him. He's not going to be happy if you called him here because of my cat."

"You broke Curfew-

"What are going to do, shut down my pub? And then what would happen to all your black market potions and trading?"

"Don't threaten me-

"I keep quiet, now bugger off."

The Death Eater backed off a little. "Don't break Curfew again, or we won't be so lenient."

Then Hermione heard a door slam, footsteps heading towards the sitting room, and in marched the barman. Hermione was struck speechless by his resemblance to Dumbledore. From the striking blue eyes to the beard spread out across his chest, the similarities were remarkable, and Hermione had read enough texts, including Skeeter's cruel account of Albus Dumbledore's life, to know that the man before them was Aberforth Dumbledore.

"You're Aberforth," confirmed Harry, stepping forward. "Thank you so much-

"You shouldn't be here," frowned Aberforth. "You foolish-

"It's your eye I've been seeing in the mirror."

Hermione switched her gaze to her best friend, confused about that comment, and then she realised that Harry was looking at the mirror on the mantelpiece above the fireplace, a corner of it missing, and the missing piece was in Harry's hand. Harry had told her in the days at Tonks' house how he'd stared into the mirror shard while Bellatrix had been torturing her, begging for help, and how he'd seen an eye staring back at him, and it all came together in her mind.

"You sent Dobby."

Aberforth nodded. "Where is he?"

"Dead," replied Harry, his voice shaking a little. "Bellatrix killed him."

"Pity," he mumbled, yet his face remained stoic. "I quite liked that elf."

Behind her, Hermione heard a low grumble coming from Ron's stomach, and when she turned to face him he had a sheepish look on his face.

"Sorry," he muttered. "I'm starving."

She was about to scold him for his timing, but then her stomach sang too, and she offered their host an apologetic glance.

"There's food over there," said Aberforth, pointing to the table in the corner of the room.

"Help yourselves."

Hermione and Ron slowly made their way towards the table and she picked up an iced bun, timidly picking at it to appear polite while Ron practically swallowed a muffin whole. Harry stayed where he was, his eyes flicking between Aberforth and the mirror on top of the mantelpiece.

"How did you get the mirror?" asked Harry. "It was Sirius'."

"Bought it from Mundungus a while ago. Albus explained what it was and I've been keeping an eye on you. Speaking of which, we need to figure out how to get you away from here-

"What?" snapped Harry. "We're not leaving. We need to get to Hogwarts."

"Don't be so bloody stupid, boy," said Aberforth. "You need to get out of here. Go overseas or something and stay the hell away from-

"No, I have a job to do! Your brother asked me to do a job and I'm running out of-

"If you know what's best for you, you'll forget everything my brother ever told you, and forget any promises you're keeping to a dead man," he replied coldly, bitterly. "My brother had a habit of tainting people's lives, and the best thing you can do is forget him."

"Dumbledore loved Harry," Hermione spoke up, feeling the need to defend him as she took in his disappointed expression.

"It was the people my brother loved who suffered the most!" he retorted, shooting his eyes over to the painting of the young girl. "Listen to me, Potter, forget whatever my brother told you."

"But it's not just about me, it's about everyone," tried Harry. "It could win...we need to keep fighting. You have to understand, you're part of the Order-

Aberforth scoffed. "The Order is over. Finished. We've already lost."

"That's not true, we still have a chance, and Dumbledore told me-

"Get someone else to do whatever job my brother left you."

"It needs to be me!"

Aberforth shook his head with weariness, his gaze falling to the painting again and lingering there for stretched out moment. Hermione thought she might know who the smiling girl was now, but she nibbled her lip nervously, uncertain if it was appropriate to ask, but the silence in the room became too profound for her to resist.

"Is that Ariana, Mr Dumbledore?" she asked. "Your sister?"

His eyes narrowed. "Been reading some Skeeter shit, have we?"

Hermione felt the heat warm her cheeks and she averted her eyes, idly picking at her iced bun, but the need to ask another question forced her to look back at Aberforth. "Were you...were you talking about Ariana when you said that the people your brother loved suffered the most?"

His eyes clenched shut and a shadow seemed to pass over his face. When he opened his eyes, he was glaring at Harry, his jaw clenched like he was trying to restrain himself. Seating himself in a dusty armchair that look older than him, he propped his chin against the back of his hand, and let go of a long and burdened breath.

"You want to know the truth about my brother, Potter?" he said. "Take a seat."

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Blaise moved his bishop. "Check."

"Oh, for fuck's sake," muttered Draco. "Theo, that's the eighth time he's checked you. Just give it up."

"Hush," said Theo. "I'm concentrating."

Draco shook his head with frustration, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms across his chest. This was so typical of Theo, dodging the final blow, avoiding the unavoidable. Even when they'd been kids he'd pushed the boundaries, refusing to give up when he was already beaten, usually earning him a harsh beating from his father when there was nowhere left to run. The bad always caught up with Theo eventually, even if he was a master at delaying the inevitable.

Sighing and huffing the hair out of his eyes, Draco turned his attention to the window again, and his eyes widened a fraction. "Bloody hell," he murmured, "That storm picked up quick."

Beyond the window pane the black clouds thrashed and throbbed, white sparks of lightning illuminating the sky accompanied by loud, angry growls of thunder that Draco swore made the glass vibrate. In such a short time, the chaos of the storm had crept up on them. Barely an hour ago it had been miles away, yet now, it almost seemed directly above Tonks' house, hovering above their heads, and Draco felt another shiver tickle its way up his spine.

"Checkmate," said Blaise.

Draco turned back to their chess match, noting that Theo had finally been defeated, courtesy of Blaise's black castle.

"Bollocks," frowned Theo, then he shrugged. "Best out of three?"

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Hermione could feel the tears gathering in her eyes, to the point that it was almost painful, but she refused to let any fall.

For the past seven minutes, she'd listened to Aberforth spill out the tragic details of his sister's short life: How she'd been attacked by a group of Muggle boys when she'd been six, and how it had traumatised her, leaving her magical abilities unstable. How her father had attacked that group of boys and then ended up Azkaban, and how her mother, in her desperation to keep her daughter close, kept Ariana hidden away, isolating her from the world. How Ariana

had then killed her mother with an accidental magical outburst, and then how she'd been left in the care of Dumbledore.

And then finally, she'd listened to how a confrontation between Aberforth, Dumbledore and Gellert Grindelwald had killed Ariana, and during Aberforth's speech, the resentment he felt towards Albus had been so loud and heartbreaking.

Hermione glanced at Harry, wondering what was going through his head after hearing the dark past of the man he had idolised and trusted like a wonderful grandfather. She would never admit it to Harry, but Aberforth's account had made her doubt her own feelings towards Dumbledore, and she wondered if she should feel guilty for that.

"Anyway," whispered Aberforth, "With Ariana gone, Albus was free to-

"He wasn't free though," interrupted Harry. "He wasn't. I know he wasn't. The night your brother died, he drank a potion that made him mad, and he kept on saying, 'Don't hurt them. Hurt me instead'. He thought he was back there with you and Grindelwald. He thought he was watching Grindelwald hurting you and Ariana, I know he was. He was never free."

Hermione stared at Harry, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. He'd never really gone into the details of the night Dumbledore had died, and she and Ron had never pushed him for details, knowing it would be too painful for him to revisit the memories of that night.

Aberforth dropped his eyes to his aged and withered hands, toying with them in his lap, and looking so sad that Hermione had to look away. "How do you know my brother wasn't thinking about the greater good instead of you, Potter? How do you know you're not just a pawn, a casualty of his vision, like my sister was?"

"No," said Hermione, shaking her head. "Dumbledore loved Harry."

"Then why didn't he tell you all to hide? To survive?"

"Because this is bigger than us!" yelled Harry, rising to his feet. "Because this is War, and you need to think beyond yourself! You might've given up, but I will not!"

"Who said I've given up?"

"You did! You said the Order's finished and that You-Know-Who has won-

"It's true!"

"Your brother told me how to defeat You-Know-Who! I will carry on! I will continue to fight until he is finished, or I will die trying!"

"We all will," said Hermione.

"Yeah," nodded Ron beside her. "We're not giving up."

Harry offered them both a smile of gratitude before he turned back to Aberforth, who seemed deep in contemplation again, looking so much older than he had just a few moments ago.

"We need to get into Hogwarts," Harry repeated. "If you won't help us, then we'll do it ourselves, but if you do know a way to help us, I am asking you...no, I am begging you to tell us, because we need all the help we can get."

Aberforth released a long and laboured sigh, stroking his beard with his thin fingers for a moment, and Hermione could see the conflict in his bright, blue eyes. After what felt like minutes, he slowly got to his feet and approached the painting of Ariana, looking at the portrait of his sister, and Hermione thought she saw a tear slide down his cheek.

"Okay," he said to the painting, "You know what to do."

Ariana's naive smile stretched a little, and then she turned and walked away down what appeared to be a tunnel painted behind her. Hermione felt her brow furrow with confusion.

"Ummm," said Ron. "Where is she-

"There's only one way into the castle," explained Aberforth. "All the secret passages are blocked, they have Dementors surrounding the walls, patrols inside the school, and you have Snape in charge with the Carrows following his every order." He turned to Harry. "I have no idea what you intend to do once you get inside, but as you said, you're prepared to die."

"I don't understand," murmured Hermione, approaching the painting and studying it closely. "What..."

But she trailed off when she saw a movement; a small speck of colour appeared at the end of the tunnel and Hermione guessed it was Ariana, growing bigger as she returned, but there was someone else at her side. Hermione squinted, trying to discern who it was.

The figure was tall, his clothes ripped and torn, his hair brown, and he walked with a slight limp towards them; yet there was a bounce in his stride, like he was excited, and it was that more than anything else that made her realise that Ariana's companion was Neville. The portrait swung open like a door, and Neville practically fell into the room with his eagerness, a huge grin on his face despite the cuts and bruises marring his skin.

"Harry!" he beamed, pulling Harry into a crushing hug. "I knew you'd come!"

"Neville?" mumbled Harry once he'd been released. "But...how...?"

Hermione was ready with her own string of questions, but suddenly she was being lifted off the floor, wrapped up in Neville's strong arms. He dropped her, moving on to greet Ron in a similar fashion, and Hermione frowned at Neville's tattered and bloodstained robes. In the better light of the room, the scratches on his face appeared so much worse, and Hermione shared a worried look with Harry.

"Neville," tried Harry again. "What on Earth happened to you?"

"Huh? Oh, I'm not too bad," shrugged Neville. "You should see some of the others. Seamus is pretty bad. Come on, let's get going." He turned to climb back inside the tunnel, glancing at

Aberforth over his shoulder. "There's going to be a few more coming, Ab. They'll be Apparating to the bar, okay."

With Ron's help, Hermione crawled into the tunnel after Neville, hearing Harry thank Aberforth for saving their lives behind her, and then the four of them began to move down the passageway, guided by the glow of bright lamps.

"So, is it true?" asked Neville. "You broke into Gringotts and then escaped on a dragon?"

"It's true," said Ron.

"That's bloody brilliant! But what the hell were you doing there? Have you been up to something, to defeat You-Know-Who?"

"Yes, but tell us about Hogwarts, Neville," said Harry, avoiding his question. "What's been going on?"

"It isn't really Hogwarts anymore. It's more like a torture house. The Carrow twins are sadistic. Amycus teaches Defence Against the Dark Arts and makes us use the Cruciatus Curse on each other."

"What?" gasped Hermione. "You can't be serious."

"I'm completely serious. I got this one," he said, pointing to the largest gash on his face, "For refusing to do it. They don't like when you stand up to them. And then Alecto teaches Muggle Studies, tells everyone they're vermin, that they're all stupid and feral, and I got this one," he pointed to another scratch, "For standing up to her in class."

"Bloody hell, Neville," mumbled Harry. "You should be more careful."

"No, it's good! It gives everyone hope when people stand up to them. Anyway, me and Ginny started up Dumbledore's Army again."

Hermione flicked her eyes over to Harry, witnessing his features perk up at the mention of Ginny, and she thought of Draco, safely staying at Tonks' home away from the horror that Hogwarts had become, and she was grateful for that.

"It's been hard," Neville continued. "Anyone who has relatives who are openly resisting You-Know-Who get a lot of shit. The Death Eaters pretty much want me dead now because I've been speaking up, so I had to go into hiding. Ginny too. And Lee. And - Oh! Did I mention that Luna and Dean showed up here this morning? Just turned up out of the blue! I don't know where they've been-

"They were with us," explained Hermione. "We've been staying at Tonks and Remus' house, recovering after what happened at Malfoy Manor."

"Yeah, we heard about that. Glad to see you all look okay, because that sounded-

"Wait, you said you had to go into hiding," said Harry. "But you're taking us to Hogwarts?"

"Ah, you'll see," replied Neville, a cheery grin on his face. "We're here now anyway."

Turning a small corner, they arrived at a door at the end of the tunnel, and Neville pushed it open, shouting, "Look, guys! I told you they'd come! It's Harry, Ron, and Hermione!"

Hermione barely managed to jump down into the room she didn't recognise before she was engulfed by a horde of twenty or more people, all of them hugging her, Harry, and Ron, shouting over each other with delight and relief. The Patil twins wrapped their arms around her, Michael Corner was beaming at her, Terry Boot was patting her back, and all she could do was take in their happy, scratched faces, wondering just what they'd been through in the last couple of months.

"Guys!" shouted Neville over the racket. "Guys! Give them some space!"

Finally able to take in her surroundings, Hermione studied the room, noting the many hammocks, all brightly coloured and strung up like festive bunting. She noticed bookcases bulging with books, tables and chairs scattered around, a wireless in the corner, some brooms resting against the wall, and hung up on the wooden walls were the House emblems of Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, and Hufflepuff. But no Slytherin. There was hardly a shimmer of green or silver anywhere. She'd never seen a room like it, and she wondered if they were in Hogwarts at all.

"Where on Earth are we?" asked Harry.

"The Room of Requirement!" supplied Neville. "I did a bit of redecorating. I was running away from the Carrows and it let me in! It was smaller than this to begin with, but since the D.A. arrived, it's expanded and gotten even more impressive. The tunnel to Ab appeared when I was hungry. He's been providing us with food because the room can't."

"And the Carrows can't get inside?" asked Ron.

"Nah," said Neville calmly. "I kind of learned you had to be more specific with what you want, so I just asked the room to make sure no Carrow supporters could get in. As long as there's always someone in the room, it's fine! Oh hey, guys" he addressed the group again. "They did go to Gringotts!"

"No way!" exclaimed Seamus. "What were you doing there?"

The others all started barking out similar questions, but Hermione zoned out when Harry suddenly lurched forward, his hand flying up to his forehead. She reached for his arm in an attempt to steady him, but in the next second he was fine, standing up straight, but the look of dread on his face was telling.

"We need to hurry," he whispered, so only she and Ron would hear. "He is on his way."

Behind them, there was a noise, and the door to the passageway swung open, revealing Fred, George, Lee, and Cho.

"What are you lot doing here?" asked Ron.

"Good evening to you too, little bro," grinned Fred. "We're here for the fight, aren't we? Neville called for us."

"The fight?" said Harry. "Now hold on, we're not here for that."

"Of course you are!" shouted Neville. "Why else would you be here?"

"We're looking for something."

"What, and then you're just going to leave?"

"Well...no, but...this is insane!"

"Calm down, Harry," smiled George. "Don't get your knickers in a twist."

"No, you don't understand..."

There was another sound behind them, the tunnel's door was being pushed opened again, and Harry fell silent. Upon seeing Ginny, Harry's face brightened, and Hermione smiled privately to herself, knowing how long it had been since they'd seen each other. But they didn't have the time for wistful glances, and Hermione nudged her best friend.

"Harry," she whispered. "The Horcrux."

"Oh, right," he mumbled, a little embarrassed. "But how do I ask them where it is without telling them what it is?"

"Just tell them we're looking for something to do with Ravenclaw. They support you; they won't force you to explain."

"Hermione, I don't want them to fight."

Biting her bottom lip and shifting her eyes to scan the room, she analysed all their friends' eager faces, the way they clutched their wands with excitement and anticipation, and then she turned back to Harry, offering him a pat on his shoulder.

"I don't think you can stop them, Harry," she whispered. "Look at them. They've been waiting for this. You can't hope to tame a revolution all by yourself. But you need to ask them about the Horcrux. That is what you need to do right now."

Sighing and turning back to the crowd, Harry directed his attention to the small group of Ravenclaws to his side; Cho, Padma, Michael, and Terry. "Look, we're searching for something. We need it to beat You-Know-Who. We think it has something to do with Ravenclaw, something signature to her, like the Sword was signature to Gryffindor. Anyone know what it could be?"

The silence that followed Harry's question was a loud one, and Hermione could practically feel his panic building as the four Ravenclaws exchanged uncertain looks with each other.

"There's the diadem."

Hermione's ears pricked up to the sound of Luna's warm and familiar voice, and her eyes eagerly darted around the room, trying to locate her friend. Dumbledore's Army parted to reveal the sweet blonde perched on a low-hung hammock, hands placed innocently in her lap and a brilliant smile on her lips.

"I told you about it, Harry," she went on. "Ravenclaw's Diadem-

"Yeah, but it's lost," said Cho. "No one's seen it in-

"Hush," hissed Ginny, and Hermione felt the tension fly between the two witches like hot sparks. "Let Luna finish."

"Well, that's the only thing that was signature to Ravenclaw. I could show you what it looks like. There's a statue of her in the Ravenclaw Common Room and she's wearing it."

Hermione frowned as Harry flinched again, his fingers returning to his scar, and then he turned to face her and Ron, his voice quiet and low. "He's on the move," he explained. "I want to have a look at this statue with Luna. I know it's not much to go on, but maybe I'll recognise it or something will click if I know what it looks like. Can you stay here and keep the Cup safe?"

"Of course," said Ron. "You should worry about keeping yourself safe, mate."

"Yes, Harry, do be careful," Hermione mumbled. "Stay under the Cloak. Constant vigilance, remember?"

"Sure. I'll be back in a bit. Try to calm these lot down."

Simply nodding and trying to hide any indication of her misgivings, she watched Harry and Luna walk away, guided by Neville to the exit, and then her two friends were gone, out into the dark halls of Hogwarts, where Merlin knew how many Death Eaters were patrolling. She heard Ron release a jaded sigh beside her and she echoed the gesture, rubbing her eyes with her fingers and trying to shake off the sudden feeling of exhaustion that washed over her. As the others in the room began to talk amongst themselves, they seemed distorted and blurred to Hermione, like she and Ron were separated from them all, trapped in a tiny bubble that nothing could penetrate.

"Do you think he'll find it?" he asked.

"I don't know," she murmured. "He can sense them. Maybe it will lead him to itself."

"Yeah, but even if he does find it, we can't exactly do much. Thanks to that bloody goblin-

"Don't speak ill of the dead please, Ron-

"Well, it's true!"

She was about to suggest that they take a seat and brainstorm some ideas, but the tunnel's door was being flung open again, and Hermione's jaw dropped as person after person emerged. Remus, Moody, Shackbolt, Molly, Arthur, Fleur, Bill, Percy, Oliver Wood,

Angelina Johnson, Katie Bell, Alicia Spinnet; all of them came, pouring into the room, much to the delight of Dumbledore's Army, who cheered and greeted the new recruits heartily.

"Bloody hell," mumbled Ron. "Who the hell called the Calvary?"

"I did!" said Neville. "Figured we'd need all the help we could get."

Hermione watched Ron leave her side to address his family, and she smiled at the cluster of redheads, listening as Molly launched into a loud rant at Ginny about taking part in any of this when she wasn't of age. As she glanced around the room, she realised someone was missing, and she made her way towards Remus, holding back for a moment when she heard that he, Shacklebolt, and Moody were discussing battle strategies.

"...if he does, we should head for the tallest towers," said Remus. "We'll have the best view and a good vantage point from up there."

"Not like you to say something bright, Lupin," grunted Moody. "We need to speak to McGonagall and the other Professors-

"Not until Harry gets back. We need to know what he's doing."

Moody rolled his good eye. "Fine, we'll just sit around here and twiddle our thumbs-

"Yes, we will," said Remus in an assertive tone. "Patience isn't a virtue, it's a necessity for victory."

"Yeah, yeah," Moody dismissed him, hobbling away from their small group. "I'm going to talk the kids about what's been going on here. Probably get some more sense out of them."

"Remus," called Hermione, making herself known. "Why isn't Tonks here?"

"Hello, Hermione," he smiled, waiting until Shacklebolt had excused himself before he spoke again. "She's at a safe-house with the baby. I asked her to head home."

"It's not like her to miss something like this."

"It took a lot of convincing. Someone needs to keep an eye on Teddy, and I'd rather she stayed somewhere safe. Hell, I'd prefer we were all somewhere safe, but it seems it's time to fight."

Hermione absently nodded her head, looking out at their ready band of soldiers, taking in the assorted expressions of excitement, trepidation, anxiety, hope, and just about every other emotion on the colourful spectrum. It was bizarre really, to think that this willing group, the majority of which were teenagers, would be the ones to fight Voldemort and his Death Eaters. Bizarre and sad.

"Remus, do you honestly believe that we are ready for this?"

He hesitated, his brow wrinkling with thought. "I believe that people can make themselves ready for anything when the occasion calls for it. You are not a naive bunch of kids, and

you're all of age. You've seen the birth of this War with your own eyes. Why shouldn't you see it end?"

Forcing a smile she doubted looked sincere, Hermione didn't respond because she didn't know how to, so she excused herself and meandered through the crowd for several minutes, chatting with Padma and Parvati for a little while until she caught Ron's eyes on the side of the room. He waved her over, tearing himself away from Molly's protective presence and meeting her in a quieter spot at the fringes of the crowd.

"I was thinking maybe we should try and figure out how we're going to destroy that Horcrux," he said. "This whole battle they're planning will be pointless if we don't think of something."

"I know," she sighed, raking her hands through her hair. "I need to go to the bathroom. I'll be back in a minute and we'll try to think of something."

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Draco massaged the bridge of his nose as the beginnings of a dull headache started to pound against the backs of his eyes.

Theo was just a few moves away from his second defeat of the evening, with his king trapped in a corner of the board and ambushed by Blaise's queen, bishop, and castle. Draco guessed he should be grateful that this match had been substantially shorter, barely an hour actually, but staring at the black and white squares was beginning to make him feel sick. He watched Blaise intently as he pushed his castle forward, letting go of a jaded sigh as he leaned back in his chair.

"Checkmate."

"Thank Merlin," said Draco.

"Balls," murmured Theo, scratching the back of his head. "Best of five?"

"Fuck off," spat Blaise, and the moment the words left his mouth, Andromeda stepped into the room, and Blaise looked like a sheepish child who'd been caught with red hands. "Sorry, 'Dromeda."

"It's alright," she smiled at him. "I'm not that much of a prude, Blaise."

"That's not fair," said Theo. "You always have a go at me when I swear."

"That's because every other word you use is a swear word, Theo."

"Have you heard anything else about Granger?" Draco asked, trying not to appear too eager. "Does anyone know where she is?"

"No, sorry," she replied, joining them at the table. "I tried to contact Tonks but I couldn't get through to her. I tried to contact a few other people too, but no one's answering. Perhaps they've all gone to bed. It is quite late."

Draco was as unconvinced as his Aunt looked with that comment, but he didn't argue with her. If she didn't know anything, there was little he could do about it, and she appeared so worn down and exhausted as she absently chewed her fingernail, evidently fearing that something was amiss. He had that feeling too, like something ominous was polluting the air, and his stomach had been twisted into a tight knot since the storm had started to rumble above their heads.

"Why don't you three go to bed?" asked Andromeda.

"Not tired," said Theo simply. "Are Miles, Tracey, and Millicent in bed?"

"No, they're in the other room playing cribbage." She paused and tilted her head, looking to the window as an explosion of lightening lit up the sky. "Perhaps it's just going to be one of those nights when nobody can sleep."

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Feeling uncharacteristically nervous as she muttered the password to the gargoyle, Minerva McGonagall rushed inside the Head's Office, her heart pounding wildly in her chest as she ascended the staircase. So much to do, so little time. Scanning the room, she found Snape with his back to her, his eerie silhouette set against the largest, grandest window in the room, seemingly oblivious to her interruption. The white-blue glow from the Protection Charms Flitwick had cast just moments ago illuminated the room, and Minerva stepped into Snape's shadow to save her eyes from the garish light.

"Severus-

"Potter's here," he muttered, still facing the window.

"How did you know?"

"My Mark burned. You-Know-Who will be on his way. I'm assuming that's why you've shielded Hogwarts?"

"Yes," she nodded. "And according to Mr. Potter, he is already close."

Slowly, he finally tilted his head, regarding McGonagall with confusion over his shoulder. "You've seen Potter?"

"Yes, I ran into him and Miss Lovegood in Ravenclaw Tower. Alecko was the one who summoned He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named."

"And where are the Carrow twins now?"

"Both stunned and bound. They are not a problem."

Snape's lips twitched. "And Potter?"

"He said he was searching for something on Dumbledore's orders," she explained, clearing the scratch in her throat. "Severus, I have ordered all the Heads of Houses to gather the children and other professors. The younger children are going to be evacuated, but those who are of age have been given the option to stay and fight."

"Those Protection Charms aren't going to keep them away for long, Minerva."

"I'm aware of that. I have also cast the Piertotum Locomotor to buy some more time, but I know they'll penetrate the barriers eventually. We are meeting in the Great Hall in fifteen minutes to discuss strategies and ensure the younger ones get out safely."

Arching an eyebrow, Snape twisted to face her. "Have you come here to ask me to delay him?"

"No, Severus," said McGonagall, shaking her head. "I came here to try and convince you to abandon your role as a spy, and valorously fight for our side."

"What?" he snapped. "That's preposterous, Minerva-

"I can vouch for your innocence and intend to do so in the Great Hall-

"I am more useful to you as a double agent. I can relay information to you and possibly hinder him, and the Death Eaters. To reveal my true loyalties would be foolish-

"Severus, we are moments away from a battle. Our side consider you an enemy. What if you are killed or injured by someone on our side? I would never be able to live with myself for allowing that to happen, and neither would the person responsible once they knew the truth."

"Minerva, I am more than capable of defending myself-

"Severus, please," she said, her voice strained and desperate. "You are my friend and I do not want to see you hurt because of a facade you feel you must keep. Fight for the Order-

"I am fighting for the Order," he sighed. "This is what I must do. I never thought I would need to tell you to remain logical, Minerva. I am far more valuable as a spy, and you know this."

"I ask you to reconsider."

"I decline," he replied crisply. "You are wasting your time, which is something you can't afford to do. Gather your students, make your plans, and go to the Great Hall."

"But, Severus-

"Go, Minerva," he insisted. "Go. Now. Prepare for battle while you have some time. Don't waste anymore energy on me. Save it for the fight."

Bowing her head in defeat, the wrinkles in McGonagall's expression became so much deeper, creasing up with regret as she pivoted on her heel to leave. Intuition was telling her to protest, to persevere and convince him to change his mind, but she didn't have the minutes to spare, and she had a school of underage wizards and witches to consider. She hesitated at the door though, turning back to meet his impassive stare.

"You are the bravest man I know, Severus. I hope everyone else gets to know you as I do, and thank you for what you've done."

Snape didn't respond, waiting until she'd left his sight before he released and tired and troubled breath. Looking back to the window, he watched the army of soldiers and statues march outside, into the courtyard, their footsteps pounding across the ground like a battle drum, and beyond the office door he could hear students moving along the corridors, their voices alarmed.

"Minerva is right, Severus," said Dumbledore's portrait. "You are a very brave man."

"Brave or insane, although I am now convinced that they are the same thing."

"You must not forget your task, Severus. Harry must know that he is the final Horcrux, and that Voldemort must kill him, or Voldemort will remain untouchable-

"Yes, you made it very clear that Potter must sacrifice himself," he sneered bitterly. "I will ensure that I inform Potter that he must commit suicide. And again, you have my eternal gratitude for leaving me with this responsibility."

Dumbledore's painting frowned. "Have you still not forgiven me?"

"I'll forgive you if it works, and if we win."

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Hermione splashed some water on her face, eyeing her reflection in the mirror and deciding she looked so much younger than she felt. Her limbs ached, her lids were heavy, and her heart felt swollen in her chest, like it was ready to burst with all the apprehension contained within. She couldn't decide if she was terrified of what seemed to be the inevitable now, or eager to reach the finale of the hell they'd been living in since fourth year; since Voldemort had regenerated.

Glancing down at her hands, she noticed they were shaking a little, but credited it to adrenaline and the lingering chill. She realised she had a small scratch on her ring finger, probably from Gringotts she concluded, and a drop of blood fell into the basin; scarlet set against porcelain, and she was momentarily fixated on it.

Blood is the beginning and the end of everything: birth, death, even love in her case, and she thought of a different blood-stained bathroom in a different time.

There. Now your blood's filthy too!

She didn't know why, but she pinpointed that incident as the turning point for Draco and herself; the catalyst for their relationship. She missed him now more than ever, craved his voice to steady her nerves, but she was glad he wasn't here. She was glad he was somewhere safe. Too many of the people she loved were here already, and the rational part of her knew that there would be losses.

People were going to die tonight.

People she knew.

She was too lost in her thoughts to hear the bathroom door open, or the footsteps patting against the tile floor behind her, but a flash of movement in the mirror startled her. Spinning around with a strange mixture of shock and instinct governing her body, she had Bellatrix's wand out in a second, aiming it at the intruder with a surprisingly steady arm.

"Whoa, Hermione, calm down!" sputtered Ron. "It's just me!"

"Bloody hell, Ronald, you scared the life out of me!"

"Jumpy much?"

"Well, in case you forgot, You-Know-Who is on his way," she said, tucking the wand in back in her pocket. "You shouldn't sneak up on people like that!"

"Sorry, I tried knocking, but you didn't answer."

"What the hell are you doing in here anyway? This is the girls' bathroom, Ron."

"Well, that's it! That's why I'm here!" he said, suddenly animated. "When you said you were going to the bathroom, something clicked in my head. The girls' bathroom! The bloody bathroom!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The Chamber of Secrets!" he exclaimed. "The Basilisk skeleton must still be down there, and if we get some of its fangs-

"Then we can use them to destroy the Horcruxes," she finished, a smile climbing up her cheeks. "Ron, you are a genius!"

"I know! We can use a broom and be in and out of there in a few minutes."

"And I can cast a Disillusionment Charm to keep us hidden," she said, already heading for the door. "Come on, let's go."

Fortunately, the girls' bathroom in the Room of Requirement was adjacent to the exit, and they slipped out before anyone would even notice, descending a claustrophobic staircase until they reached a wall. Ron pushed it open just as Hermione finished reciting the Disillusionment Charm, but the moment they stepped into the corridor, they were almost knocked off their feet by small stampede of first year Gryffindors, led by a rather flustered-looking Madam Hooch. Behind them was a group of fifth year Ravenclaws, and then behind them a group of third year Slytherins, and Hermione quickly released the spell on Ron and herself, nervous that they would get separated amongst the traffic of Hogwarts students.

"I guess Harry saw one of the professors and told them You-Know-Who is on his way," mumbled Ron, tugging on her sleeve. "Come on, we need to get to the second floor."

"Do you think Harry's alright?"

"Of course he is, you know he's got knack for keeping himself alive. He has the nickname 'The Boy who Lived', remember?"

Allowing Ron to drag her down Hogwarts' familiar corridors, she listened to the pandemonium echoing around the castle: the thundering footsteps and frightened shouts, and everything just seemed to blend into an ear-shattering roar that caused the very building to quake.

As they darted past a window, Hermione was momentarily blinded by the screen of glaring light surrounding the school, and she knew they were Protection Spells, forming a bright and brilliant shield to defend Hogwarts.

She knew it had begun.

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"Checkmate," said Andromeda.

"Fucking hell," muttered Theo. "It is just not my night tonight."

Draco was about to make another comment about Theo's poor chess skills, but a strange noise diverted his attention, and everyone in the room snapped their heads to the side when the kitchen door swung open. Tonks rushed into the room, clutching Teddy to her chest as he cried his little lungs raw. There was panic carved into Tonks' features, and her hair had turned an angry shade of red since he'd last seen her, and then Andromeda was on her feet, approaching her daughter with obvious anxiety.

"Nymphadora, what is it?"

"Mum, I need you to watch Teddy."

"Why?"

"Remus has gone to Hogwarts with the Order," she explained quickly. "Harry is there and You-Know-Who is on his way. We're going to fight. This is it."

"Is Granger there?" asked Draco, uncaring if he sounded pathetic this time.

"And Luna?" added Blaise.

"Everyone's there from what I can gather," she said, carefully settling Teddy in her mother's arms. "Remus told me to stay at home with the baby, but I need to go. I need to get to him, Mum."

That knot in Draco's stomach tightened, and the hammering of his heart quickened. This was it. This was the final battle. The deciding fight. If Potter was at Hogwarts, he knew Granger would be too, and if Voldemort was heading there, then he would have his army of Death Eaters with him, set for war, ready to kill. He saw all the dread and angst he felt mirrored in Tonks' face, and he understood how she felt, knew how desperate she was to be with at husband's side, because that was how he felt about Granger at that moment.

He needed to get to her, and that need made him ache.

And it wasn't even exclusively about Granger anymore. He'd be lying if he said that she wasn't the main reason he was so anxious to get to Hogwarts, but there were other incentives now that encouraged him to act. He wanted to it for himself, to prove that he was capable; that he could do something right for once in his miserable, mistake-ridden life.

And he had so many questions: Why was Granger there? Was she alright? What if something happened to her? Would his parents be there? Could the Order really win this War?

"I'm sorry, Mum," said Tonks, kissing Teddy's forehead, and then her mother's cheek. "I have to go."

"I know you do, love."

Tonks offered her mother a sad smile, her hair turning a calm shade of brown before she turned to the Slytherin trio, watching them expectantly. "And what about you three?" she

asked. "Are you staying here, or are you coming with me? To fight?"

Draco didn't hesitate. He was already getting ready to stand up and join Tonks, but Theo beat him to it, shooting up out of his seat in a second, his expression more severe and earnest than Draco could ever recall.

"I'm coming," said Theo. "I'm not going to let you Gryffindors have all the fun."

Tonks frowned. "I was in Hufflepuff."

"Same bloody thing. You lot will probably try to hug the Death Eaters to death. You need some Slytherins, believe me."

Ignoring his comment, she looked past him to Draco. "And you?"

"Of course I'm fucking coming," he snapped, getting to his feet.

The look that stole his cousin's face almost resembled pride, or maybe she simply understood his intention to get to Granger, but she didn't say anything. She flicked her eyes over to Blaise, but he was already up, nodding his head before she could even ask the question.

"And you're all prepared for this?" asked Tonks. "You're prepared to fight against the people you once considered friends? Your family? You're ready for-

"Blah, blah, blah," Theo interrupted. "Yeah, our parents are arseholes, we know that. We know it better than anyone actually. We did live with them."

"We know what to expect, Tonks," said Blaise. "Honestly, we know what we're doing."

Tonks seemed to consider Theo and Blaise for a second before she turned to Draco, studying him intently, and he knew why. His circumstances weren't as black and white as his friends'; while Theo and Blaise had been legitimately disowned by their families, he had no clue how his parents felt about him now, or even how he felt about them now. It was complicated, and he acknowledged that he was apprehensive about seeing them again, but he'd mentally prepared himself for every conceivable scenario. Getting to Granger was his main priority, and if his parents, or anyone else, tried to prevent that, then he would deal with it in whatever manner was necessary.

He didn't say anything, instead giving Tonks a final, firm nod of his head to let her know that he'd made up his mind. Grinning with approval and seemingly satisfied with his gesture, she stepped forward to place her hand on his shoulder.

"I am very proud of you," she told him, shifting her attention to Blaise and Theo. "And you two."

"See," mumbled Theo uncomfortably. "It's exactly this kind of soppy bullshit that proves Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors shouldn't be allowed near battlefields. Can we fucking go already?"

"Shit, wait," said Draco. "I don't have a wand. I haven't seen it in days, and I have no idea where it is-

"You can have mine."

Following the voice, Draco's eyes landed on his Aunt, who had already removed her wand, holding it out for him to take. He'd never really taken much notice of Andromeda's wand before, but now he noticed it was approximately thirteen inches, Vinewood, and with, if he wasn't mistaken, a Dragon Heartstring core, very similar to his own. Carefully testing his fingers against the wand, he felt it yield to his magic instantly, obediently, and he wondered if it was because his wand and hers were so alike, or if it was because she trusted him enough that the wand knew to obey him.

"Thank you, Aunt 'Dromeda," he whispered, so only she would hear. "For everything."

He hoped she knew he truly was thankful for everything she had done, because he would never be able to openly express his gratitude. She had saved his life and kept him alive, sheltered, and fed for the last few months, and had never asked for anything in return. And after everything his family had put her through in the past, she had never owed him anything, but had done it all regardless. He knew now that the Aunt he'd had nothing to do with up until a few months ago was an amazing woman, and she was family.

"Please be careful," blurted Andromeda, quiet tears on her cheeks as she regarded the others. "All of you, be careful."

"We'll be fine, Mum," said Tonks, pulling her wand out of her pocket. "Okay, boys. Let's go fight."

Chapter End Notes

Hello! I'm sorry this has taken me so long! About a month ago I got offered a job in the States for a few weeks with very short notice, and I had to be separated from my laptop while I was there! Sorry this chapter's a filler, but that's why it's a big one! I wanted to get all the filler stuff out of the way, but hopefully this is okay and not too boring...I hope...I know it's very close to the books, but I don't want to change much, and I wanted to avoid using Harry's perspective and give a different perspective, so hopefully that's okay...Shit, I'm rambling now. Thanks for all your lovely reviews/comments/messages, they make me smile so much, you have no idea! Read and review please!

Thanks for reading!

Bex-chan

Snape

Chapter Notes

Just the usual song recs! Placebo - Battle for the Sun, Son Lux - Rising, and Patrick Wolf - Born to Die (Lana Del Ray cover). Again, MASSIVE thank you to Meaghan (occupymalfoysbed on tumblr) for betaing this chapter! You are awesome and I adore you!

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

Nervously shuffling her feet, Hermione watched Ron as he stepped forward and yanked out seven fangs from the skeletal remains of the Basilisk. It was so cold and quiet down here; too quiet, like the silence was surrounding her, engulfing her, suffocating her. It was eerily still and isolated in the Chamber, and yet somehow Hermione knew that there was chaos swarming above their heads, and it only seemed to make the silence worse.

Reaching inside her bag, she removed Helga's Cup, stroking her fingers over the engraving until Ron held out one of the fangs for her to take.

"Come on," he said, eyeing her expectantly. "You should do this one."

"I don't know, Ron..."

"It will be fine," he assured her, prying the Cup from her hands. He placed it on the ground at their feet and handed her the fang. "Go on, Hermione."

Frowning as she reluctantly crouched down, she took a deep breath as she tightly gripped the fang, raising it above her head before bringing it down to stab the Cup. A breeze of dark energy rushed up, blowing back her hair, and then the Cup bled a thick, black fluid, before it seemed to shrivel up like a dead flower. Another gust of wind seemed to whirl around her, but then it faded, and the room was still again.

"That's it?" she mumbled. "I was expecting...I don't know, but I was expecting something bad to happen."

Ron shrugged. "Well, that's another one down. We should go and find Harry; let him know the Cup has been destroyed and that we have the fangs."

Nodding, she rose to her feet, wiping her dusty hands on her jeans. "I wonder what's going on up there now."

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Draco growled when Theo almost tripped him up for the third time, catching his ankle with his foot. They had squeezed past the last of the evacuating students — escorted by a grumbling Filch and Madam Pince — around five minutes ago, back at the entrance of the tunnel. Their small party had certainly earned a few confused looks and whispers, but they'd just kept marching through the tunnel, led by Tonks, who seemed to grow more panicked with every step.

Glancing behind him, Draco's eyes lingered on Miles and Tracey's joined hands, and if it was possible, his ache to find Granger intensified, like a physical pull on his chest.

He looked at Blaise and Theo then, who both seemed as anxious as he was to get to the end of this sodding tunnel. He understood Blaise's eagerness, but Theo's reasoning seemed more complicated than that; a mixture of many motives, such as vengeance for Ted's death, the need to confront his father, and even redemption.

But then maybe they were all here for redemption on some level.

Finally, he saw a door appear, and he practically shoved Tonks forward, desperate now, and almost light-headed as his breathing accelerated. Tonks pushed the door open, and Draco was momentarily blinded by the welcoming light as he dropped down into the room, closely followed by the other members of 'The Enlightened' as they all paused to absorb their unfamiliar surroundings.

"Where the hell are we?" asked Theo.

"The Room of Requirement," said Tonks. "Quick, look around for the exit. It's probably-

"Tonks? Is that you?"

Draco snapped his eyes to his left, catching a flash of bright, red hair, and then Ginny Weasley slowly meandered her way through the jungle of hammocks, looking past Tonks and eyeing the group of Slytherins suspiciously.

"Tonks, what's going on? Why are they here?"

But before she could answer, Voldemort's voice began to boom and vibrate around the room, so crystal clear that Draco would swear he was standing right beside him. Tracey screamed somewhere behind him, Blaise lifted his hands to his ears to try and muffle the sound, and Theo's eyes darted around the room, trying to find the source. Draco simply stood there, listening to every word. Every syllable.

"I know you are preparing to fight. Your efforts are futile. You cannot fight me. I do not want to kill you. I have great respect for the teachers of Hogwarts. I do not want to spill magical blood..."

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"...Give me Harry Potter and none shall be harmed. Give me Harry Potter, and I shall leave the school untouched. Give me Harry Potter, and you should be rewarded. You have until midnight."

Hermione could feel her mouth hanging open as she met Ron's eyes, which were as wide as hers.

"Oh my God," she breathed. "You don't think anyone would-

"No one's going to turn Harry in. Even if someone tried, the others would defend him."

"We need to find him, Ron. We need to hurry."

"Right," he nodded, grabbing the broom. "Let's go."

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Draco gripped Andromeda's wand a little tighter as the echoes of Voldemort's final words faded. The silence that followed was heavy and thick; the kind you can feel on your shoulders, and he turned to his fellow Slytherins waiting for one of them to break it. It was easy to predict which one would speak first.

"Well," said Theo, "That was fucking unpleasant. I feel like my ears were violated."

"Ginny, where is everyone?" asked Tonks, frowning when the youngest Weasley cautiously glanced at the Slytherins again. "They're fine, Ginny, they came with me."

"Yeah, but they're not exactly trustworthy."

"You don't have to trust them, but you should trust me, and I can assure you they came here to fight. On our side."

That seemed to catch Ginny's attention, and the look of suspicion slowly melted away, until she simply seemed intrigued.

"I don't really know what's going on," she said. "They told me to stay in here because I'm underage. Harry came here then went away for a little while to look for something, then he came back and told everyone to go to the Great Hall, and that the Professors would meet the Order there. But that was about half an hour ago. I don't know what's going on now."

"What about Luna?" asked Blaise. "Have you seen Luna?"

"And Granger?" added Draco.

"W-what? Luna and Hermione? Why would-

"Just tell them," Tonks interrupted, but her tone was soft. "I'm sorry, I don't have time to explain everything to you, but just tell them if you've seen the girls."

"Well...I um...I don't really know," Ginny sighed, evidently bewildered by the situation. "Luna left with Harry the first time and she didn't come back with him, so I guess she went to the Great Hall. And Hermione...I don't know. Hermione and Ron just kind of disappeared not long after Harry left the first time. I have no idea where they went."

"You know," said Theo, "On any other day I'd probably make a comment about Granger sneaking off with Weasley-

"Shut it," Draco grumbled. "Tonks, we need to get moving. I need to find-

"Wait a moment," she said, turning back to Ginny. "Are you sure you don't know where Remus is?"

"Well, I thought I heard him and Dad talking about going up to the tall towers, so they might be in Ravenclaw, Astronomy, or Gryffindor, but I'm not sure. They were talking quietly."

"Okay. Thank you, Ginny."

"How the hell do we get out of here?" asked Draco.

Ginny seemed a little surprised that Draco had spoken to her directly, but she slowly lifted her arm, pointing to a dark corner in the room. "The stairs are back there, but the door opens to somewhere different every time. I'll come with you-

"Not a chance," said Tonks. "If you've been told to stay here, that's what you should do, and-

"Come on!" snapped Blaise impatiently, heading to the exit. "We need to go! We're wasting time!"

Following his friend, Draco grabbed Tonks' arm, pulling her with him as their group headed down a narrow and dimly-lit staircase, and he felt suddenly nervous. His heart was practically bouncing around his chest, but he carried on. Instinct was warning him that beyond the Room

of Requirement's safe walls, Hogwarts was in turmoil, and they would be joining it, like sparrows trapped in a hurricane.

The fact that Granger was already caught up in it spurred him on. He knew she was here somewhere, he just needed to find her, and they could ride out the hurricane together.

For the second time in the space of ten minutes, they reached a door at the end of a passageway and Blaise warily pushed it open, poking his head to look left, and then right. The second the door was cracked open, the noise almost knocked Draco back a few inches. He could hear people screaming and shouting, fires burning, glass smashing, explosions, eruptions, and the castle trembled like an earthquake.

"We're on the Third Floor, near the Charms classroom," explained Blaise. "I can't see anything but it sounds like there's something going on further down the corridor...Yeah, there's definitely people fighting down there."

"If it's safe, go," said Tonks, "Wait outside for us."

Doing as instructed, Blaise slipped past the door, closely followed by Draco, until their small crowd was standing in the hallway, and the door from which they'd come had disappeared. Draco's eyes darted around vigilantly, taking in the shattered windows and a gaping hole in the wall just a few yards away from them. At the end of the corridor, the flashing lights of spells displayed twitching shadows.

They were just around the corner.

"Okay," said Tonks. "I need to find Remus, and I know you two," she gestured to Blaise and Draco, "Want to find the girls. We need to split up. There's no point in us all heading up to the towers. I...feel awful for leaving you though-

"Look, you go," said Blaise. "Do what you need to do and we'll sort ourselves out. It's fine."

The building shook as a loud blast penetrated Hogwarts somewhere above their heads, perhaps the next floor up, but it was difficult to tell amongst the din. The voices at the other end of the corridor seemed to edge closer, and the shadows grew larger.

"Tonks, you should go," said Draco. "You need to get all the way to the top. Just go."

Numbly nodding her head, she reached out to place her hand on his shoulder, looking him dead in the eye. "Stay safe, Cousin," she said quietly.

"You too," he replied, and he meant it.

She turned to the others. "All of you, be careful."

And then she sped off, disappearing down a side corridor, and Draco was surprised to find he felt a genuine level of concern for his only cousin, but another explosion somewhere to his left severed his thoughts. He looked to Blaise, who was practically fidgeting to go, and then to Theo, who seemed more alert and nervous than Draco could ever recall.

"Look," said Blaise, "I'm going to head off by myself to find Luna-

"Perhaps we should stick together," reasoned Millicent. "The Order might not even realise we're fighting on their side."

"I can't ask you lot to find Luna with me. It's my issue, so I will deal with it."

"Same here," said Draco. "I need to get to Granger and I'll do it alone. There's no sense in us sticking together when we have different plans."

"He's right," said Miles. "Okay, well, Tracey, Millicent, Theo, and myself will-

"Hold it," Theo cut him off. "I have some shit to do too and I'm not dragging you lot into it."

"Okay," Miles continued, "Then us three will head to the Great Hall, maybe try and find Slughorn and let him know there are some Slytherin allies here. Good luck, you three. Try and catch up with us when you can."

"Will do," Blaise nodded. "Good luck."

Their three companions removed their wands from their pockets and headed in the opposite direction to Tonks, towards the North-Western staircase, if Draco remembered correctly. And then it was just the three of them; their troubled little Slytherin trio, and they stood there in silence for a moment, their eyes downcast and their mouths tight. But another explosion in the vicinity cut through the quiet, and everything started to move again.

"Right," said Draco, "We could be running around here for ages trying to find them. Knowing our luck, you'll find Granger and I'll find Lovegood, so I reckon we should meet up in half an hour; see if we can help each other out."

"Alright," Blaise nodded. "That makes sense. We should meet in the corridor outside Binns' Office, then. It's about halfway, it's close to some of the staircases, and it's quite well-hidden."

"Oh yeah, we used to meet there to skive or plot against the Gryffindors, didn't we?" mumbled Theo. "But you can count me out of that. I won't need to exchange notes with you two."

Blaise narrowed his eyes at his step-brother, scrutinising him intensely, furiously. "And just why the hell are you going off on your own?"

"Bloody hell, Mum, calm down."

"Theo."

"I want to find my father," he said simply, shrugging his shoulders. "This might be the last chance I get to confront the bastard-

"For fuck's sake," snarled Blaise. "Are you really that stupid?"

"Well, it wouldn't be fair to the rest of the human race if I was this attractive and a genius-

"Now is not the time for your sodding jokes, Theo!"

"Hey, you pair are wandering off to find your girlfriends!" he protested. "How is what I'm doing any different?"

"It's completely different!" shouted Blaise. "You're going to track down your father to instigate a fight, and he is stronger than you, Theo!"

"Bullshit! I am stronger than my father!"

"You should've stayed with the group," said Draco. "They could've helped you. Going after your father is bloody-

"Don't you start, Draco. I know what I'm doing."

"No, you don't!" yelled Blaise, clenching his fists. "Would you just listen to me this once?"

"There's no point trying to talk me out of it, Blaise. Look, you and Draco are doing what you need to do, and this is what I need to do."

"He will kill you." Blaise enunciated each word. "You know he will."

"He's right, Theo," said Draco. "You should-

"Stop it," he frowned, his tone uncharacteristically severe and his expression hard. "I'm not fighting with you two when all this shit is going on. I've made up my mind and that's the end of it."

Blaise's frustrated sigh was drowned out by a crash of shattering glass above their heads, and they all instinctively ducked, shielding their faces with their hands as the shards rained down. The bright, green light of a spell shot into the corridor, scorching the wall opposite them, and Draco thought it might have been the Killing Curse, but he wasn't sure. The sounds of the battle seemed to be edging closer and closer to them, and Draco's heart was pounding again, beating loudly in his ears.

"Fuck this," he muttered, brushing the glass out of his hair. "We need to get moving. We're just easy bait, standing here like this."

Blaise nodded with agreement, lifting his wand and tapping it against his wrist until a watch materialised. "Draco, conjure one of these too," he said. "We'll need to keep an eye on the time."

Mimicking his friend's actions, Draco conjured a watch to cuff his wrist and when he looked back up, Blaise was storming towards Theo with heavy, purposeful strides. He roughly grabbed the scruff of Theo's shirt, pulling him close, and the expression on Blaise's face reminded Draco of that day he had destroyed an apple tree when Luna had gone missing. He was so furious with concern he was trembling, glaring at Theo with wide eyes and clenched teeth.

"You be fucking careful," said Blaise. "Do you understand me?"

"For Merlin's sake, Blaise, let me go-

"I mean it, Theo!" he shouted, his voice hoarse. "Please, just be careful, okay?"

The usual cynicism and wryness carved onto Theo's face softened, and he slowly nodded his head once.

"Okay, I'll be careful," he said. "Be careful yourself."

Releasing Theo, Blaise turned to Draco with the same sombre look. "You too, Draco. Be careful, yeah?"

"Of course I will," he replied. "I'll see you in half an hour by Binns' Office. Keep your head down, Blaise."

With a final nod, Blaise turned on his heel and sprinted down the corridor, making a sharp right, heading for the Grand Staircase.

And then they were down to two.

Blaise had barely been gone for a second before another spell burst into the corridor, colliding with the wall, and Draco and Theo hurled their bodies out of the way of the flying debris. As the dust cleared and they clambered to their feet, the screams from outside invaded Draco's ears, amplified by the acoustics of Hogwarts' ancient stones.

"Go on," said Theo suddenly. "Go and be all Gryffindor-y and get your girl."

"Did you just call me a fucking Gryffindor?"

He smirked mischievously, but it was forced. "I did indeed."

Draco scoffed. "I'm nothing like a bloody Gryffindor."

"Perhaps being all Gryffindor-y might do you some good," he murmured, his grin falling from his lips. "They do have a knack for surviving situations like this."

"It'll be fine," said Draco firmly. "We will be fine."

Another explosion ripped through the air, and Draco could hear a woman screaming somewhere, although it was impossible to pinpoint from where. The sound of it just seemed to ricochet around the corridor and then around his skull. His urgency to find Granger returned ten-fold, and he turned to Theo with an apologetic frown.

"Theo, I need to go and find Gra-

"I've told you. Go," he interrupted. "I'll see you later."

Draco sighed, extending his arm until Theo caught on and grasped his hand in a slow, slightly awkward but necessary handshake.

"Good luck."

"Likewise," said Theo. "Don't be an idiot and get yourself killed, alright?"

His jaw twitched. "Stay safe, Theo."

With that, Draco pulled back his hand, spun around, and broke into a run, darting like a bullet in the opposite direction to where Blaise had gone, with no real idea of where he intended to go.

And then he was on his own.

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On the fifth floor, Hermione gritted her teeth when a formidable amount of anger rose up inside of her, like hot steam.

She and Ron were still hunting for Harry, working their way up Hogwarts' floors and asking any Order member they encountered if they'd seen him. During their search for their friend, she and Ron had Petrified or Stupefied at least eight Death Eaters between them, and Hermione had managed to keep a level head, acting calmly and tactically. But when they'd turned a corner and seen Luna being viciously attacked by two Death Eaters, all of Hermione's control leaked out of her.

Sprinting ahead, Hermione aimed her wand and shot a non-verbal Stupefy at one of the masked Death Eaters, striking him square in the chest. Whipping around and deflecting the spell the other Death Eater fired in her direction, she retaliated with a powerful Impediment Jinx that sent him flying backwards to smash into the wall, and then she Petrified him for good measure.

"Are you okay, Luna?" she asked, helping the other witch to her feet. "Did they hurt you?"

"Just a couple of scratches," she shrugged.

"Whoa," mumbled Ron as he joined them. "That was really impressive, Hermione."

"It really was," agreed Luna. "Thank you."

"No problem," she said. "Luna, have you seen Harry anywhere?"

"Yes, I saw him speaking to Helena Ravenclaw's ghost by the Great Hall," she explained in that airy tone of hers. "I thought I heard him talking about hidden things, but I'm not sure."

And I passed him on the Grand Staircase not long ago, but he was heading upstairs."

"Upstairs," said Hermione, grabbing Ron's wrist and heading for the staircase. "Right. Come on, Ron. Sorry, Luna, we're in a rush and we need to get to Harry. Neville and some of the others are on the fourth floor. You should try to get to them. Be careful."

"I hope you find Harry," said Luna. "Tell him I said hello."

Hermione smiled at Luna over her shoulder as she practically dragged Ron back to the stairs, quickening her pace with her desperation to find Harry. She didn't even flinch when she heard an explosion outside; she was getting used to them now, and she was so focussed that the racket around them seemed blurred and distant.

"Why on Earth would Harry be heading upstairs?" she questioned, more to herself. "There's nothing up there."

"I know," mumbled Ron. "Well, the Room of Requirement is on the seventh floor, I guess, but what-

"The Room of Requirement," she repeated pensively. "Unless...hidden things...Ron, you are a genius!"

"I am?"

"Yes!"

"You know, that's the second time you've called me a genius tonight," he said. "Did you take a blow to the head that I missed?"

"I think I know where he's going!" she exclaimed, running now. "And I think I know where the Horcrux is!"

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"Fuck," hissed Draco under his breath.

The staircase he'd decided to use was impassable. The tower had been destroyed, and he'd barely ascended five stairs before he'd been blocked by a wall of stone and debris, evidently from a powerful blast on the upper floor. Sighing as he turned to head back from where he'd come, he jogged down the quiet corridor, but when he turned a corner, he found himself face-to-face with a Death Eater mask. His instincts took over and he raised Andromeda's wand, ready to duel, but then the Death Eater spoke.

"Draco?"

He faltered, but he kept his wand aimed. "Who are you?"

"It's me," she said, slowly removing her mask. "Pansy."

Draco's eyes widened as he studied her features. She looked so different, so...dark in her Death Eater robes, and it struck him speechless for a moment. Pansy was pale, thin, and possessed the same cold, cruel expression he'd always associated with Bellatrix, and it looked so at home on her face. She eyed him with a mixture of suspicion and interest, her upper lip curled back and her pug nose wrinkled with malice. It was so obvious in the way she squared her shoulders and gripped her wand that she didn't trust him, but that was fine, because he didn't trust her either. Not anymore. Not one bit.

"Pansy," he mumbled, scowling at her with distaste. "What the fucking hell are you doing?"

"What am I doing? What are you doing?"

"The right thing, for a change."

Comprehension stole her features. "You're here fighting for the Order?"

"Yes," he nodded. "And you're not."

"Of course I'm not!" she shouted. "What the hell happened to you? Did they brainwash you?"

"You're the one that's been brainwashed!"

"What are you-

"It was bullshit, Pansy!" he spat harshly. "Everything they told us was bullshit! All of it! Pureblood, Muggle-born; they're all just labels! Don't you get it?"

"What is wrong with you?" she asked. "Honestly, Draco, stop screwing around-

"I have never been more serious in my fucking life!" Taking a breath, Draco steadied his voice. "Pansy, they can't have fucked with your head that much. Let me help you. Just...just listen to me-

"No, you listen to me! Voldemort will forgive you if you just go to him now. You're still a Pureblood, and everything will be fine-

"Everything will not be bloody fine! He's evil, Pansy! Can't you see that? Can't you see how messed up all of this is? All of this is so wrong!"

"No, those Mudbloods are wrong and this is the way to exterminate them!" she barked back. "They shouldn't be allowed to live among us! Those disgusting, vile creatures!"

Draco saw red and he was all instincts again. He smacked Pansy's wand out of her hand with a fast flick of his wrist, and then the tip of Andromeda's wand was poking into her neck,

prodding at a vein with enough pressure to be painful. He towered over her, glaring her down.

"You watch your fucking mouth," he sneered. "Don't talk about them like that-

"You used talk about them like that all the time. You hated them, remember? What changed?"

"I did."

Her scowl hardened. "Well, they're all going to die. Every last one of them. And if I see any of them, then I-

"If you lay a finger on her, I swear, Pansy, I will-

"Her?"

He exhaled. "Granger."

Pansy's eyes went wide, and her mouth fell open like a trapdoor. "Granger? You and...no, that's not possible-

"Me and Granger," he clarified, speaking slowly to stress it, and looking her dead in the eye. "And I can assure you that we are very much possible. In fact, we are definite."

She choked on her gasp. "I...no...that's not...", she stuttered absently, but then all the cruelty returned to her expression, and she was snarling up at him like a feral dog. "You...you are sick! Sick!"

"No. I was sick. I'm better now," said Draco, pressing the wand a little harder against her throat. "And if you touch her, I'll kill you myself."

"You're not going to kill me now?"

He lifted his chin and clicked his tongue. "No," he said. "But don't think my threat is an empty one, Pansy. I'd rip out your throat before I'd let you breathe near Granger, and that's a promise."

Pansy's nostrils flared and all the muscles in her body tensed up, twitching angrily beneath her skin, and all Draco felt for this girl now was disappointment, disgust, and sympathy. He couldn't help the latter; Pansy had been present throughout the majority of his childhood. Had it not been for Granger, he could've so easily ended up standing beside Pansy, clad in Death Eaters robes and hurling Hexes at Muggle-borns with the same mindless hatred that was flashing in her eyes.

It was sad, but he could tell Pansy was beyond help. It was so obvious. She looked so eager to kill, almost excited, and there was nothing he could do.

He realised then that he was just wasting time, and he still had no clue where Granger was. Shaking his head, he lifted his foot and stamped on Pansy's wand once, and then again, until he heard a telling snap.

"It's a shame, Pansy," he said, lowering his wand and taking a few steps away from her. "You could have been somebody."

"I am somebody!" she snapped. "Look at you! What the hell are you now? You are a Blood Traitor!"

"And fucking proud of it."

"You and your little Mudblood girlfriend will die tonight!"

He opened his mouth to retort, but several voices travelling up the corridor cut him off, and he could tell by the aggressive and gruff tones that they were Death Eaters. As Pansy whipped around and called for them to assist her, Draco considered standing his ground, but there were at least six of them, and he had a task to complete. He fired an Incarcerous at Pansy to slow her down, waiting until the ropes were coiled around her body and she fell to the floor before he turned and ran, racing away from the advancing troop of Death Eaters.

He heard one of them call out a spell and then there was an explosion, and Draco glanced over his shoulder just in time to see the wall crumble and crash down on Pansy, cutting off her scream. He stopped running.

He was torn.

A part of him wanted to head back, maybe try to help, if only because no matter how dark his past had been, she had been a part of it, but those Death Eaters were getting closer. One of them must've mistaken her for a member of the Order.

The fucking idiots.

They hadn't spotted him yet. If he shot off now, he could easily evade them, but when he saw a small trickle of Pansy's blood slither out from beneath the fallen stones, he hesitated.

But then there was a hand clamping down on his shoulder and dragging him backwards, into a room. Whoever had grabbed him tossed him carelessly to the side, and his body smacked into a school desk, knocking the wind out of him. When Draco lifted his head, he realised he was in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom, and he looked up to find Snape near the door, waving his wand and mumbling incantations.

"What the hell-

"Shut up," hissed Snape. "Unless you'd like them to find you. Go into the office and wait there-

"I have to go-

"You're not going anywhere just yet. Go to the office. And keep quiet. Now."

Smothering a growl that itched his tonsils, Draco pulled himself up and made his way to the back of the classroom, descending a flight of stairs into the DADA Professor's Office. The room was in shambles: parchment scattered all over the furniture and floor, the bookcase

flipped on its side, and various ornaments littering the space. He stood there idly, frustrated that something else was delaying his search for Granger, and also feeling slightly disturbed after witnessing Pansy's death, wondering if he should be more affected by it than he actually was.

He heard footsteps approaching him, and he straightened his spine, tightening his fist a little tighter around Andromeda's wand. As always, Snape's shadow entered the room first, followed by his usual, sweeping, black robes, and then the man himself, wearing his familiar mask of scepticism and scorn.

"Well, well, well," he said, in his slow, droll tone. "Look at you. You look...different."

"What do you want, Snape?" asked Draco. "I have things to do."

"I'm sure you do. Unless I'm mistaken, you are here to fight with the Order, correct?"

Hesitantly, Draco nodded his head. "Correct. But how-

"Interesting," he drawled. "And does this sudden change of mind have anything to do with one Miss Granger? Or should I say, a change of heart?"

"Wh-How the fuck do you know about Granger and I?"

"Your mother used Legilimency on Miss Granger at Malfoy Manor, and she saw you two-

"I know that! How do you know that?"

"She visited me afterwards."

"You've spoken to my mother?" he asked, shocked. "Is she alright? Is she here?"

Snape's face became stern. "Your mother is fine, as far as I know. And yes, I believe she is here."

"Why did she visit you? What did she want?"

"It would appear you and your mother share more in common than blood and hair colour," he said. "She came to me to ask if she could assist the Order. As a spy."

"My mother's helping the Order?" mumbled Draco incredulously. "You're certain?"

"Yes, which is what I must tell you. Anything your mother tells you, you must believe. Don't doubt her intentions. Do you understand?"

"Yes, of course," he nodded, swallowing hard before his next question. "What about my father, Snape?"

"Lucius is a lost cause," said Snape bluntly. "Draco, he has been damaged for a while. You know this. So does your mother. Lucius will never swap sides. Accept that and carry on."

Frowning, Draco shook his head. "He's really that bad?"

"Yes. Lucius made his choice a long time ago." He glared at Draco like he was the most foolish person he'd ever encountered. "Did you honestly believe for a second that he would accept your relationship with Miss Granger and fight for the Order?"

Draco didn't respond. In all honesty, he'd never been certain what to expect in regard to his father, but as he'd told Granger, he'd been preparing himself for all possible outcomes since he'd been staying with Andromeda. His relationship with his father had started to deteriorate in Fourth Year, when Voldemort had returned and Lucius' priorities had become distorted. But still, he felt disappointed, and a certain level of loss, but then he presumed that Blaise and Theo had experienced similar notions, and they'd learned to live with it, albeit resentfully.

"Is that all you wanted to speak to me about?" he asked. "My mother?"

"I was also rather curious to find out if what your mother told me about you and Miss Granger was indeed true."

Draco pursed his lips defiantly. "It's true. So what?"

A sadness seemed to swallow Snape's sharp features, but it was gone before Draco could make any sense of it.

"So, you really have defected then?" he mumbled, closing his eyes for a moment. "And all for the love of a Mudblood."

"Hey!" spat Draco. "Don't call her that! You have no idea what happened! You would never understand!"

"I understand more than you could even begin to imagine."

Snape's voice was quiet and strained, almost desperate, and Draco studied his old professor curiously. He'd never seen the man like this; distracted and hushed, like he was lost in a memory, and the room suddenly seemed heavy with unspoken melancholy.

"You and I are not so different," said Snape quietly. "You want my advice? Find Miss Granger, and get her as far away from here as possible."

Draco blinked, uncertain what to say. "She...she wouldn't come. She wants to fight."

"Then find her, and don't let her out of your sight, or you'll regret it until the lonely day you die. Do you understand?"

"Yes...I think so," muttered Draco, doubtfully. "Is there anything else, or can I go?"

"We both have things we need to do," said Snape, averting his eyes to the chaotic room. "Go. If you can, stick to the west side of Hogwarts. It is less damaged."

"Right," he sighed, making his way to the stairs, but he paused on the second step. "Snape, I am...grateful that you brought me to Hogwarts. "

Although Draco kept his back to him, he somehow knew that Snape's face would be contorted in a troubled frown, shrouded in that strange sadness again. As the silence stretched on, Draco assumed that Snape had no intention of responding, so he continued to ascend the stairs, but when he reached the seventh step, he heard Snape's low, faint voice follow him.

The words were so bizarre that Draco concluded he couldn't have heard them correctly.

"If you are grateful for anything, be grateful that your Mudblood loves you back."

Chapter End Notes

Hello! Apologies for the wait...again...I know, I fail...Hope this chapter was okay! No real news or comments this time, just a massive thank you for all the support and lovely messages you've sent me! Oh, for the people that have PMed me on here, I HATE using the system on here. I probably check my tumblr inbox most often, so if you have any questions about translations etc, it's probably best to try me there, or facebook. There's a link on my profile page. Oh, and for the people that haven't read the books, the italicised speech from Voldemort is not mine, it's straight from the text.

Thanks for reading, and you guys are so amazing!

Bex

Blaze

Chapter Notes

Just the usual song recs! Faunts - M4 (Part II), Florence and Machine - Seven Devils, and Red - Nothing and Everything or Let it Burn (I love them, both!). Huge thank you to my Beta, Maeghan (occupymalfoysbed on tumblr) for betaing this chapter! Hope you like it!

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

"Bollocks."

After glancing at his watch, Draco quickened his pace.

Due to his encounters with Pansy and Snape, he now had less than five minutes to head to Binns' office and meet Blaise, as planned. He'd barely left the third floor in his hunt for Granger between the various obstacles, and he was half-tempted to forgo the detour at Binns' office, but he wanted to search upstairs anyway, and perhaps Blaise had had better luck than him.

Climbing the quiet stairwell to the fourth floor, he managed to avoid two Death Eaters, ducking inside the niches where the suits of armour had once stood. On this floor, he could hear familiar voices echoing all around him, travelling up and down the corridors and meshing together in a nonsensical jumble of noise. Among the clashing voices he recognised Longbottom's, Finnegan's, Professor Sprout's, and several others, but it was impossible to distinguish from which direction they were coming.

He continued on, passing a couple of students whose names he couldn't recall, but they paid him no attention. The further he went, the more distant the voices became; but then, this section of Hogwarts had always been quiet, which was why he and some of his fellow Slytherins had chosen this spot to gather when they'd needed to remain unseen. The corridors here were confusing and dimly lit; it was only from years of mapping out the route in his head that Draco knew where he was going.

The building shook and he lost his balance, stumbling sideways as the sounds of screams pierced the air, possibly from outside or somewhere in the castle. He glanced out of a window and the carnage in the courtyard made him pause and gasp. Aside from the many Death Eaters duelling with the students and professors, there were Giants hurling rocks and destroying parts of the building, Acromantulas crawling over debris and scattered bodies, suits of armour battling like men.

Fuck, he needed to find Granger.

Gathering himself, he rushed down the corridor, taking the final corner before he was outside Binns' Office. He leaned against the wall to catch his breath, wiping away the sweat-gems on his forehead with his sleeve, but he didn't have long to rest. His head snapped up when he heard the fast slaps of footsteps approaching, and Blaise came barrelling around the corner, dragging a rather flustered and bruised Lovegood with him.

"Go, Draco!" shouted Blaise. "Run!"

"What the-

"Death Eaters — lots of them — heading this way," he panted. "Move!"

The three of them sprinted down the hallway, and Draco could hear the horde of Death Eaters now, catching up to them. They took a left, then another left, finding themselves near one of the library doors, but they kept going until Blaise tucked himself into a niche yanking Lovegood in with him, and Draco followed. Safely concealed in the hollow, the trio waited, too breathless to speak, their chests aching with the effort to remain as quiet as possible. Blaise cautiously poked his head out, inspecting his surroundings for a moment before he released a loud and laboured sigh.

"Must've lost them," he breathed, turning to Lovegood and tilting her chin. "You alright?"

"I'm fine, thank you," she replied politely, leaning up on her tip-toes to peck his cheek.

"Good. Right, we need to find Miles and the others."

"Wait a minute," said Draco. "I still need to get Granger."

"You didn't find her?"

"Does it fucking look like I did?" he snapped, incredibly irritated that Blaise had successfully managed to locate his witch while he remained empty-handed. "I barely left the third floor! Have you seen her anywhere?"

Blaise shook his head. "Sorry, mate."

"Fuck!"

Balling his hand into a tight fist, he smashed it into the wall once, twice, feeling the pain slide up his fingers, across his knuckles, until his whole hand was throbbing. But it wasn't enough. He wanted to punch it again. He was still high on adrenaline, practically vibrating with it. The combination of his unspent energy and his devastating frustration bred in him a volatile desire to just...destroy something. Whether it was his fist or the wall, something would have to break eventually, and he didn't really care which. Ignoring the sticky sensation of blood squelching between his fingers, he pulled back his fist again.

"I saw Hermione."

The shock of Lovegood's comment made him stutter on his own breath and his hand fell to his side. "What?"

"I saw Hermione," she repeated casually. "About five or ten minutes ago."

"Where?"

"Fifth floor. She was looking for Harry with Ron. She was heading upstairs."

Had Lovegood not been...well, Lovegood, he might have thanked her, or hugged her, or done something as equally bizarre because he was just so relieved. So relieved that the throbbing in his hand stopped and his heartbeat was in his ears. Finally he had something to work with; confirmation that Granger was alive, or at least had been five or ten minutes ago. But what if — No. He clenched his eyes shut to clear the dark thoughts that came with the final part of the realisation. He didn't want to consider that possibility at all. Refused to. He needed to get upstairs.

Spinning on his heel, he ran out into the corridor without even checking if it was safe to do so.

"Wait!" called Blaise. "Draco, just wait!"

"I need to go!" He kept running. No more hindrances.

"Stop!"

Draco felt a tug on his midriff where Blaise had snatched the back of his shirt, jerking him backwards to a sudden halt that very nearly made him fall. Nearly. Swinging his body around, he shoved Blaise with his shoulder, but the tenacious hold on his shirt remained and the urge to punch something — specifically Blaise's sodding face — returned. The blood on his hand felt warmer than before.

"Hey, just calm down for a moment," said Blaise before Draco could even open his mouth to shout. "You're being too careless."

"What the hell do you want?"

"We're going to come with you."

He huffed out an impatient breath. "No, I have been slowed down enough-

"Look, it's better if there's a group of us. Also, if any of the Order sees you, they're going to question your reasons for being here. If Luna and I come with you, she can vouch that your loyalties are with the Order now." He glanced over his shoulder at her, "Can't you, Luna?"

"Oh, yes," she nodded absently. "I'd be happy to let anyone know that you're not a Death Eater trying to kill them, Draco."

He stared at her with dull eyes, fighting the compulsion to roll them. "Brilliant," he mumbled, flicking his attention back to Blaise. "You two will slow me down."

"Not as much as a member of the Order will if you run into one," Blaise reasoned. "Be sensible about this, not senseless. You can't afford to be."

A growl rumbled in Draco's throat, but he threw up his arms in submission. "For fuck's sake, fine!"

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Two flights of stairs and three stunned Death Eaters later, Hermione and Ron charged down the hallway of the seventh floor, almost tripping each other in their haste.

Taking a corner, Hermione squinted against the glare of a wild but small fire in the corridor, feeling the heat of it tingle her cheeks. She hated seeing Hogwarts like this; falling, burning, dying. It was like watching her home collapse and crumble, and it physically pained her to have to witness it. Waving her wand, she extinguished the flames, wondering if it was pointless when there were probably hundreds of fires blazing throughout the castle, and she wished she had the time to extinguish them all.

But she didn't.

There was no time.

She carried on, pushing it to the back of her mind as she and Ron swerved around another corner and then, there he was.

Thank Merlin, they'd found Harry, and the smile that stretched up her cheeks felt so wonderfully out of place. She actually laughed with relief.

Harry and Ginny were holding hands, lingering beside the wall that separated them from the Room of Requirement, their conversation too far away for Hermione to grasp. She watched Harry pause mid-sentence when he spotted her and Ron racing towards him, and she felt a little guilty for interrupting whatever sentimental moment the couple had been sharing. Hermione estimated it had been almost ten months since they'd last seen each other and Godric knew they deserved something. Just a small piece of time to call their own amongst this hell.

Just a little whisper of love amongst all the angry noise.

Her heart panged for Draco, but she was grateful he wasn't here. She didn't know if she could do that; if she could bear to run around Hogwarts, constantly fretting about his whereabouts, wondering if he was okay. Wondering if he was alive. No, she had too much to focus on right now. Duty could so easily become distorted when love became involved and there were already too many of her loved ones here. Far too many.

"Where have you been?" asked Harry once they were close enough. "I've been looking everywhere for you!"

"We've been looking everywhere for you!" said Ron, turning to his sister. "Gin, mum told you to stay in the room."

"She needs to be out of there," explained Harry. "Just for a little while so we can go in." He fixed her with a pleading look. "But you stay right here, okay? And when we come out, you go straight back in."

"Oh, for heaven's sake," she huffed, "I'm not a child!"

"Ginny, please-

"Yeah, yeah, I'll go back in when you come out. Bloody hell, you'd think I was nine."

"Is anybody else in the room?" asked Hermione. "Or were you on your own in there?"

"Just me," she said, and then her eyes widened with recollection. "Oh, wait! Something weird did happen though. Tonks came through the tunnel-

"Tonks is here? Remus told me she was staying at home."

"I guess she changed her mind," Ginny shrugged. "Anyway, that's not the weird part. The weird part is she came with..."

Ginny trailed off when the castle began to quake again, more violently this time, like the very foundations of Hogwarts were trembling with fear. Steadying herself against the wall, Hermione released a small shriek of surprise and covered her ears when an explosion blasted apart the wall at the other end of the corridor, perhaps fifty feet away from where they standing. As the spray of stones and rubble scattered across the floor and the shaking subsided, she urgently tugged Harry's sleeve, catching his eyes and hoping he understood.

"Right," he muttered. "Right, we don't have enough time. I-I'm sorry, Ginny, but-

"It's okay," she sighed, grazing her thumb across his cheek. "Good luck with...whatever it is you're doing."

Harry hurriedly kissed her lips, and Hermione had the decency to avert her attention, while Ron quietly grumbled Bloody Hell behind her. After guiding Ginny to conceal herself in one of the abandoned niches several yards away, Harry returned to Hermione and Ron and they began the familiar Room of Requirement routine. After their third pass, the door materialised and they stepped inside.

Once they'd cleared the threshold and the door had closed behind them, all the bellowing noise and turmoil of the battle dwindled into a jarring silence.

Hermione's eyes went round as she surveyed the enormous room and its contents, darting from left to right and trying to make sense of it all. The room itself was a similar size to the

Great Hall, but stored between the four walls were towering stacks of furniture, books, ornaments, and thousands of other obscure items that she'd never seen in her life.

"This is going to take a while," she murmured. "Are you sure it's in here, Harry?"

"Pretty sure," he nodded. "I spoke to Helena Ravenclaw, and she confirmed that Riddle spoke to her about the Diadem. Plus, when Luna took me to see the replica on the statue, I knew I'd seen it before and I'm sure I saw it in here on some bust of an old guy wearing a wig."

Hermione frowned, scanning the room for something that sparkled. "It's almost too obvious; hiding something in the Room of Hidden Things."

"I know, but he thought he was the only one who knew how to get in here."

Ron scoffed. "Bloody arrogant idiot, isn't he?"

"Hey, how did you know I would be here?" asked Harry, as they slowly began to meander through the tenuous piles of trinkets.

"We bumped into Luna," Hermione explained. "She said she'd seen you speaking with Helena's ghost and talking about hidden things. She also said you were heading upstairs, and when Ron mentioned the Room of Requirement, we guessed you'd be here."

"And where did you go before that? When I came back to get the others, you two weren't-

"Merlin! How on Earth did we forget tell you?" She reached into her bag, removing a couple of the Basilisk fangs and resting them on the flat of her palm so Harry could see. "We went to the Chamber of Secrets and got these to destroy the Horcruxes. It was Ron's idea!"

"That's genius!" exclaimed Harry, grinning at Ron. "Fair play, mate."

"Don't you start," said Ron, prodding at a statue. "If either of you call me a genius again tonight, I'm testing you for Polyjuice."

Hermione was about to smile at his comment, but she accidentally bashed her elbow into one of the tall stacks of items, and it swayed and creaked forebodingly for a few seconds before going still again.

"Come on, let's just find it," she said, raising Bellatrix's wand. "Accio Diadem!"

"Really?" drawled Ron. "Because that spell worked so well on the other Horcruxes?"

Her eyebrows snapped together with irritation. "It was worth a try."

"It's okay, Hermione," said Harry, leading them deeper into this maze of discarded things. "I think I remember where it is anyway."

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"No, Draco!" shouted Blaise, tightening his hold on Luna's small hand. "Not the Grand Staircase!"

Draco paused in his sprint, scowling at his friend as he came to his side. "But it's the closest!"

"It will be hectic."

"Yes," nodded Luna. "It was quite a mess earlier. Pity really. That was my favourite staircase."

Draco absently wondered if Lovegood was oblivious to the gravity of the situation, but he paid her ridiculous comment no heed, keeping his eyes locked on Blaise. It really was just easier to ignore her.

"Then how the hell do you suggest we get upstairs?"

"Keep going, we'll use the South staircase," said Blaise. "That's the one I used and I only came across a few obstacles."

They carried on, scaling the stairs Blaise had suggested and Draco took them two at a time. He felt like he was soaring now, surging onwards like a runaway train with no control, powered by desperation and adrenaline. The intense combination was racing with his blood, streaming through his veins, and he almost felt drunk with it; light-headed and vigorous.

When they arrived at the seventh floor, Draco thought his senses became heightened and more sensitive to his environment. The air felt humid up here, like it was thick enough to choke. His nostrils flared to accommodate the invasive scents of smoke, rain, and blood, and the harsh mixture of them found its way to his tongue, making his mouth dry and his throat scratchy. Even the sounds of the battle seemed louder on this level, but he couldn't decide if it was a trick of Hogwarts' acoustics or a trick of his mind.

He'd stopped in the corridor to regain his composure and contemplate which direction to take, but now he felt frozen. Stuck. He absently stared at some ashes floating nearby, fluttering like dying moths caught in a breeze, but Blaise's voice fortunately cut his trance short.

"Which way?"

Draco blinked, turning his head from left to right, and then back to the left. "This way."

Perhaps he was allowing habit and his memory to guide him. After all, he had spent the majority of sixth year up on this floor, consumed with his task to ready the Vanishing Cabinet for the Death Eaters' invasion of Hogwarts. How things had changed. Here he was on the seventh floor, fighting for the opposite side, and somehow feeling less frightened now than he had then, despite all this carnage. This War.

The two Death Eaters saw Draco before he saw them, and he had a split second to think shit before there was a spell charging towards him, the heat of it prickling his skin by the time he even realised it. The dazzling ball of red light blinded him, forcing his eyes shut, and he waited for the impact.

But all he felt was something shove his shoulder, and he heard Blaise call out a *Protego*. He opened his eyes just in time to see the Death Eater's spell rebound off the Shield Charm and the heat from it diminished, replaced by Hogwarts' cold air.

The icy sensation spreading across his face was oddly comforting, galvanising, and it jolted him back into action. Raising Andromeda's wand, he fired a *Stupefy*, but it was deflected. Beside him, Blaise was also casting spells and he thought he heard Lovegood recite a few incantations, too.

Draco thought he heard one of the Death Eaters say, "Isn't that Malfoy's kid?" and for some reason the words infuriated him.

Rearing back his wand arm, he cast a non-verbal *Oppungo* and several bricks that had littered the floor launched themselves at one of the Death Eaters. One scuffed the side of his head and Draco released a yell of exertion as he fired an *Impediment Jinx* to successfully knock him out. Much to Draco's quiet surprise, it was Lovegood who immobilized the other one with a well-aimed *Petrificus Totalus*, and then Blaise used two *Incarcerous* spells to bind the fallen men.

"That was Crabbe's father," muttered Blaise, approaching one of the unconscious men and nudging him with his foot. "He's better with a wand than his son, but I guess that's not saying much. Nice trick with the bricks, by the way."

"Come on, let's go," said Draco, anxious to continue the search for Ganger. "They won't be out forever."

With Blaise and Lovegood close behind, Draco pressed on, keeping Andromeda's wand in his fist, ready for whatever was lurking behind the next corner. And he didn't have to wait long. Barely two minutes later, there was a loud cry, followed by the sounds of a scuffle and three or four voices quarrelling. Towards the end of the corridor, he could make out Percy and Fred Weasley duelling with three Death Eaters, and not fairing too well by the looks of things.

The younger of the Weasley brothers had a nasty looking gash on his cheek, his red hair mingling with the blood staining his face, while Percy clumsily fumbled with his wand, barely able aim a spell.

For the second time in a few minutes, Lovegood surprised Draco. She ran ahead a few paces and fired a spell, striking one of the Death Eaters' backs and sending him into the wall. Draco heard the sound of bones crunching as the man slid down the wall, unconscious. Blaise lifted his wand then, catching the second Death Eater with a *Stupefy* that knocked him out cold, and the final Death Eater was taken out by Fred with a powerful spell that took him off his feet and flying out of a window.

"Stupid — sodding — Death Eaters," panted Fred, trying to catch his breath. "Thanks, Luna. We were..." His voice faded when he realised who she was with and he narrowed his sour eyes at Blaise and Draco, scrutinising them with distaste. "What the hell are you doing with these two?"

"Oh," said Luna innocently. "Blaise is my boyfriend, and Draco is my friend."

It took a great deal of control for Draco to keep his mouth shut and remind Lovegood that they were far from friends, so he simply clenched his jaw and folded his arms across his chest, chewing the inside of his mouth and conceding that disputing her statement would hardly help. He waited for the inevitable questions and scepticism, and he could hardly blame the two Weasleys for their doubtful expressions and cautiously raised wands. If Lovegood had told him that the sky was blue, he'd probably question it.

"But they're Death Eaters," said Percy. "Or at least fighting for them. Didn't Malfoy let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts last year?"

Draco bit his tongue. Hard. Tasted iron.

"Yeah," nodded Fred. "Look, Luna, you're too trusting. I don't know what they've told you, but they're lying-

"They haven't told me anything-

"Come on, Luna. Get away from them-

"No, Fred," she tried. "Listen to me-

"Luna, don't be silly now."

"Hey, don't talk to her like she's a child," Blaise interjected, his tone sharp. "She's telling the truth. We're on your side."

"Sure," scoffed Fred, pointedly aiming his wand at Blaise. "And Voldemort's just a misunderstood ballerina who ended up with the wrong crowd."

Draco rolled his eyes. "You said you and your girlfriend would save me time," he mumbled to Blaise. "This is not helping in any way."

"Just give her a minute," he bit back. "She knows what she's doing."

"Come on, Luna, I'm serious now," said Fred, extending his hand for her to take. "Come away from them."

"But I don't-

"They've lied to you."

"No, they-

"And they can't be trusted."

"They're on our side. If you would just listen-

"Luna, I won't tell you again-

"And I won't tell you again, Fred Weasley!" she shouted unexpectedly. Completely unexpected because this was Lovegood, and Lovegood did not shout. "Blaise and Draco have been living in a safehouse for months! They're not Death Eaters and they are here with me! Remus and Tonks can both verify that if you don't consider me reliable enough! Hermione, Harry, and Ron can, too!"

Draco's eyebrows rose high on his forehead and he eyed the back of Lovegood's blonde head with barely-concealed shock. Never had he heard her raise her voice, let alone shout, and judging from the looks on the others' faces (excluding Blaise), neither had they. Settling his eyes on the Weasley brothers, he studied their conflicted expressions charily, silently willing them to believe her so he could recommence his hunt for Granger.

Again, he was being unnecessarily stalled, and the brittle threads of his temper were beginning to break, fraying at the seams.

"Luna," said Fred slowly. Warily. "Are you sure?"

"Oh, yes. I'm positive," she replied, her voice back to its customary wistful tone. "Very much so."

"But their parents-

"We are not our parents," Blaise stated stiffly, entwining his fingers with Luna's. "So if you're finished with your interrogation, we'll be on our way."

"Hold it," warned Fred. "I'm still not convinced. You might have used the Imperius Curse on Luna for all I know."

"For fuck's sake," Draco snarled through his gritted teeth, taking a few steps away from the others. "I don't have time for this. Sod the lot of you."

"Oh, are we going now?" asked Luna, also turning to leave and tugging Blaise along. "Yes, we really should keep looking for her."

"Wait!" called Fred. "Who are you looking for?"

"Hermione," she replied. "Have you seen her?"

Draco slowed his steps a little to listen to his response.

"No, but mum asked us to try and find Ron and Lee said Ron was with Hermione. He saw them up on this floor."

Sighing privately to himself, Draco carried on, relieved that he was apparently on the right track.

"We'll go with you then," Fred continued. "Might as well if Ron and Hermione are together. Plus, I still don't trust these two" — he gestured to the Slytherins — "So we can keep an eye on you this way."

Blaise's growl was slightly louder than Draco's.

Slightly.

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Hermione held the gorgeous headpiece in her hands, gazing thoughtfully at the sparkling sapphire that winked at her when it caught the light. Gently gliding her fingers across the engraving — Wit Beyond Measure is a Man's Greatest Treasure — she couldn't help but feel a little attached to the item, admiring what it had once represented.

"Hm," she mumbled, frowning. "Do you guys realise how important this artefact is? I remember reading somewhere that this sapphire is one of the largest in the world-

"Probably not the best time for a history lesson, Hermione," muttered Harry.

"And you know, people believe that anyone who wears it will be gifted with wisdom-

"You have enough wisdom," remarked Ron. "Come on, let's just destroy it and get going."

She chewed her lip. "Seems a shame to destroy something so beautiful."

"It needs to be done."

"I know," she sighed, handing the Diadem to Harry and removing one of the fangs from her bag for him to take. "Go on then, Harry. You do it."

As her best friend placed the Horcrux on the floor and knelt down beside it, Hermione withdrew Bellatrix's wand from her pocket, listing various spells in her head should anything happen. The Diadem felt different to how Helga's Cup had felt; somehow more sinister and tainted, like the Dark Magic had been beating against her fingertips when she'd held it.

"Why do you look so fidgety?" asked Ron quietly.

"I have a bad feeling about this one," she said. "I just feel like I should be prepared."

Ron shrugged just as Harry swiftly stabbed the fang into the Diadem, and Hermione grimaced as she watched it shatter into four pieces with black, blood-like liquid leaking out of the sapphire. There was a tense second of silence, followed by a gust of howling, screaming wind that rushed upwards from the Diadem, sending her and Ron staggering back a few steps and Harry falling flat on his back.

"Shit," spat Ron. "Duck!"

All of the unstable towers of heaped objects rocked and wobbled, and Hermione had the breath of a moment to cast a Shield Charm large enough to protect the three of them before the first one came tumbling down. And then another fell. And another, until there was a sea of books, ornaments, and everything else surrounding their safe, impenetrable dome of magic. Waiting until the sounds of raining objects had ceased, she cast a quick spell to clear a path, and the trio crawled their way out of the pile.

"Okay," mumbled Ron sheepishly. "You might have had a point about being prepared."

"Yeah," nodded Harry. "Thanks, Hermione."

"It's fine. Can we just get out of this room before something else falls on us please?"

"Absolutely."

Hermione shoved open the door and yelped when the Headless Hunt stormed past, the mouths on their decapitated heads wide and roaring like madness, their horses galloping like thunder. As the last of them rushed by and Ron and Harry joined her in the corridor, she gaped at the mess. There were more fires now, blazing furiously, scorching her skin. A carpet of rubble lined the floor, and the walls were broken up with large, yawning holes so big she could make out the stifled glow of the moon behind the clouds outside.

"Merlin," she said. "How long were we in there?"

"Apparently a week," mumbled Ron. "Blimey."

"Shit, where's Ginny?" Harry blurted, frantically searching the area around them. "I-I asked her to wait right there! Where the hell did she go?"

"Harry, I'm sure she's fine-

"Hermione, look at the state of this place! Anything could have happened to her!"

"You know how smart she is," she assured him, grabbing his face so he'd meet her eyes.

"Look, we've got one Horcrux left. Just one. We're so close to ending all of this."

"But we don't know where Voldemort is," said Ron. "Shit, I forgot I can't say his name-

"It doesn't make a difference anymore," Harry interrupted. "He's already here, and people are probably saying his name every two seconds. But you're right. We don't know where he is, which means we don't know where Nagini is."

"But you can look inside his head, Harry," said Hermione, offering him a brief but encouraging smile. "You can do it. Look inside his head."

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Draco's muscles tensed when two more Death Eaters came into his line of sight. He recognised the unsightly face of Thicknesse, slightly shielded by the shadow of his hood, but the other was a stranger with black eyes and crooked teeth. Softening his footfalls and quietening his movements, Draco edged closer with his wand outstretched intending to catch them unawares, but their tagalongs shattered that possibility.

"Hey, Perce!" exclaimed Fred, and the Death Eaters' heads snapped in their group's direction. "Look, it's your boss!"

"Ex-boss," said Percy, launching a jinx at Thicknesse.

Draco only needed to cast one spell; within a matter of minutes both of the men were outdone and blacked out on the floor. The nameless Death Eater had gone down quickly, courtesy of a swift and precise Petrificus Totalus from Blaise, but the Minister had managed to hold his ground for a short while. With five against one, Draco had fired a Diffindo and sliced a gash into the man's face, and then the Weasley brothers had hammered him with a barrage of Stunning Spells until he'd fallen.

"I know everyone thinks their boss is an arsehole," said Fred, wiping the sweat from his brow. "But yours really is a massive arsehole, Perce."

"Agreed."

Fred nodded, but then he slanted his eyes over to Blaise and Draco, still dubious and untrusting. "By the way, just because you helped, it doesn't mean we believe you now."

"Piss off, Weasley," sneered Draco. "You think I give a shit about-

"Oh, look," mumbled Lovegood, who was standing a short distance away at the junction of another corridor, pointing at something the rest of them couldn't see. "There's Harry, Ron, and Hermione."

What?

Draco rammed Fred out of his way and ran to where Lovegood was standing, following the line of her pointed finger...and fuck. Fuck his flimsy soul, there she was. Right there. There with Potter and Weasley, perhaps sixty yards away at the other end of the corridor; too far to

make out the familiar specifics of her features or even what she was wearing. The shape of her was blurry and distorted with the smoke clouding the air, stinging his eyes, but it was definitely her.

By the time the bedlam in his brain had calmed and the realisation had sunk in, Blaise and the two Weasleys had ambled over to join them, but he didn't notice. Didn't care. All he saw was her.

"There he is!" shouted Percy. "Hey, Ron!"

Draco dashed ahead, channelling all his energy into his legs, his feet barely touching the floor and his arms swinging to propel him forward. Fast, frantic, and unstoppable.

Ten yards closer and he called out her name — "Granger!" —but the echo of it was drowned out when a blast of wind pushed him sideways, compromising his balance. Gracelessly skidding to a halt, he glanced at the cavernous hole in the wall to his left, feeling a few raindrops kiss his cheeks. He readied himself to continue running, but a sudden flash in his peripheral vision made him hesitate, and he snapped his head to the side.

His eyes went wide but his pupils shrank beneath the glare of it. The spell was one of the largest he'd ever seen, and it was heading straight for them.

He blinked when Fred darted past him, and he instinctively reached out, grabbing the collar of his shirt and yanking him backwards, simultaneously lifting Andromeda's wand.

"Malfoy, what the-

"Protego!"

The spell hit. Draco's Shield Charm wasn't strong enough to neutralise it, but it did protect him and the others from the full force of it...it was so powerful, though. Powerful enough that Draco felt the floor collapse beneath his feet, and then he was falling. Plummeting.

The sound of the explosion was ferociously loud, bashing his eardrums, but he still heard Granger's scream. It sliced right through him, like the cold swing of an axe.

He was vaguely aware of Lovegood reciting a spell, and then he stopped falling.

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Hermione had no idea what happened.

She'd been talking with Harry about what he'd witnessed in Voldemort's mind when she could swear someone had yelled her name. Yes, she was sure she'd heard her name — her surname actually — and she'd been turning her head to find the source of the voice, glimpsing the outlines of a few blurry silhouettes, but then the world had jerked forward with a deafening bang.

One second she was standing and the next she was flying.

Her body smacked sideways into the wall first and then her head was bouncing off it. She never really felt the impact, only heard the thump of her skull colliding with stone and it sounded like a gun firing right by her ear.

As she slid to the floor, Hermione felt light and numb, like she was suspended and detached from herself, floating above the situation like a ghost. Her eyes were watering, black dots speckling her vision, and there was a prolonged stretch of nothingness, only filled with a dull ringing that seemed to buzz like flies all around her.

"Hermione?"

She inhaled sharply, her lungs expanding until her chest hurt, and then her head was pounding. Pulsing. Sweet Merlin, it was painful, but she forced it away into a separate room of her mind as she carefully pulled herself up to sit, groaning with the effort. She could taste blood on her tongue and she spat, frowning at her red saliva as she brushed the dust and debris off her clothes.

"Hermione!" shouted Ron, coming to her side with Harry. "You okay?"

"I think so," she mumbled. Nothing felt broken or out of place. "Are you two okay?"

"We're both fine," said Harry. "Shit, you're bleeding."

She knew she was; she could feel the warmth of it dripping down her temple and some on her chin, but the boys were also bleeding. Harry had a jagged cut dissecting his cheek while Ron sported an ugly graze on his forehead, like someone had grated away a few layers of skin, and the thought of that made her wince.

"You're both bleeding, too," she told them, climbing to her feet with their help. She studied the scene around them, her eyes lingering on the huge hole in the wall and the destruction cluttering the hallway. "That was a big spell."

"I know," nodded Harry. "Hey, did you see Fred down there?"

"You saw him too?" asked Ron. "I thought I imagined it! I think Percy was with him but I couldn't see properly. Looked like there were some others, too."

"I thought I saw some people but I didn't get a good look," said Hermione, trying to recall those short seconds before the explosion. "I definitely heard someone call my name, though. It must've been Fred if you guys saw him."

But Fred would never call me Gra-

"Do you think they're alright?" Ron questioned anxiously, staring down the corridor. "And where did they go?"

"It looked like they were turning around," muttered Harry. "Maybe they saw it coming. I'm sure they're fine, Ron."

"Maybe we should split up and try to find them? And Ginny-

"No," Hermione interrupted, her voice firm. "I'm sorry, I know you want to look for them but we need to find the snake so we can finish this. Now, Harry, you said Voldemort was at the Shrieking Shack?"

"Yes."

"And Nagini was with him?"

"Yes, but he has some magical barrier around her," he explained, staring at his fidgeting hands. "He was telling Lucius Malfoy to find Snape."

Hermione willed the muscles in her face to remain still at the mention of Draco's father. Draco's Death Eater father. "I can't believe Voldemort's not even fighting. It's so cowardly."

"He thinks I'll go to him. He knows we're looking for the Horcruxes and if Nagini's with him-

"So you can't go then," said Ron. "He's expecting you. I'll go-

"No," Harry cut across him, "I'll use the Cloak-

"I know the most spells," reasoned Hermione. "It makes more sense if I-

"No!" the boys barked in unison.

"Oh honestly, this is hardly the occasion for sexism!"

Hermione was preparing to argue her point further when two masked Death Eaters appeared, one raising his wand. As the Killing Curse burst out the tip, she pushed Harry out of its path, feeling the green breeze of it rush past her ear, like it stroked her hair before it struck the wall. Ron fired a spell, successfully stunning one of the Death Eaters, but then three more emerged from the smoke, and Harry grabbed her and Ron, dragging them to the stairs as fast as he could.

As more spells from the Death Eaters skimmed past their bodies, missing them by mere inches, Hermione shouted the first spell she could think of — "Glisseo!" — and the stairs flattened into a slide beneath their feet.

They plunged down without any control.

Down, down, down.

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Draco grunted, struggling to breathe.

He concluded from the bizarrely comfortable texture of the rubble beneath him that Lovegood had cast a Cushioning Charm before they'd landed, but there was a heavy pressure on his stomach and something prodding at his ribs. Dazed and disorientated, he lifted his head, blinking away the thick crust of dust in his eyes to discover a mop of red hair against his chest.

"Weasley," he growled, "Get your fucking arse off me!"

Fred popped his head up, his eyes confused and incredulous. "You...you just saved my life."

"Get off me, or so help me-

"But you-

"Get the fuck off me, you stupid tosser!"

Fred shifted, poking his elbow even harder into Draco's ribs and ramming a knee into his gut as he clumsily clambered to his feet. With the wind knocked out of his lungs and dirt clogging his windpipe, Draco coughed and sputtered as he pulled himself up to stand, clutching his aching side. After a couple of stretches to work out the cricks in his limbs, he looked around, scowling when he realised Fred was still staring at him with awe.

"What the hell is your problem?"

"You saved my life," repeated Fred.

"No, I didn't."

"If you hadn't grabbed me, that spell would've killed me."

"Shut up!" Draco barked. "You're giving me a headache."

Blaise wandered over to his side, his expression somewhere between surprised and smug. "You know," he said quietly, so only they would hear, "You actually did save his-

"Don't you fucking start," he snarled. "It was an accident. You think I give a shit about him?"

"No, I don't think you give a shit about him, but I think you're decent and human enough to save someone's life when it's in your power."

"Sod off, you sound like an idiot," he grumbled, eyes rolling. "Make yourself useful and levitate me up there so I can see if Granger's still there."

Silently casting the Mobilicorpus, Blaise elevated Draco into the air, up to the hole in the ceiling until he was high enough to survey the scene on the seventh floor. "Well? See anything?"

"No, they're gone," he sighed, unsuccessfully attempting to hide his disappointment as Blaise lowered him back down. "Fucking hell. Now what?"

"Ron's not up there either?" asked Fred.

"Excuse you," said Draco spitefully. "Private conversation and you're not invited."

"Well, if you're still looking for Hermione she'll be with Ron. We should stick together and-

"Stick together? What, you trust us now?"

Fred shrugged. "I don't think you'd save my life if you were a Death Eater, Malfoy."

"Don't encourage me to consider rectifying that, Weasley," he mumbled coldly. "Go away."

"Maybe sticking together isn't a bad idea," Blaise offered, subtly glancing in Lovegood's direction with a hint of worry. "The Death Eaters seem to be moving in groups. We'd be better off with more of us."

"Exactly!" nodded Fred. "Hey, just out of curiosity, why are you looking for Hermione anyway?"

Draco threw his eyes over to Blaise, frowning at the knowing grin that reached up his friend's cheeks and the amused tilt of his chin. But then something was streaking past the edges of his vision; fast and sudden, and Draco turned his head just in time to witness Terry Boot slam into the wall. Even from twenty yards away, Draco heard the loud and blunt snap of the Ravenclaw's neck upon the impact, and he could do little but stare as the body sank to the floor, a lifeless deadweight, his head bent at an unnatural angle.

Before the echoes of Boot's broken neck could even finish ricocheting around the corridor, a chuckling pack of Death Eaters swarmed into the hallway, their masks shimmering like scales in the dim light. Percy was the first to angle his wand and fire a spell, then Blaise, and then Draco. It was all so fast and intense; a blur of activity and flashing lights, and the only thing that Draco could focus on was the repetitive drumming of one word in his head.

Survive, survive, survive.

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"NO!"

Hermione's fear was replaced by anger. That hot, raw sort of anger that needs to be burned away with action or yelling, or in her case, both. The spell that jetted out of her wand was strong and volatile, catching Fenrir in his side and sending him backwards, but she barely noticed the sound of him colliding with the wall. All she could really see was Lavender's still and eerily pale body, blood seeping out of the bite-shaped hole in her throat. Even when Ron yanked her out of the way of a crumbling pillar, her eyes lingered on Lavender's blue lips.

A giant's foot stomping only a few yards away diverted her attention, and she, Harry, and Ron dashed onward, trying to avoid its heavy steps as it punched a hole into one of Hogwarts' upper floors. She watched Ron's expression seize up with horror as six Acromantulas scuttled by, perilously close to where they were, carrying someone with them.

Hagrid.

Harry must've noticed because he ran towards them, screaming Hagrid's name and waving his wand, but they were much too fast. He followed them anyway, and Hermione dragged Ron after them, refusing to lose Harry amongst the pandemonium.

All around her were people she knew: professors, students, even many of the Death Eaters were recognizable from past skirmishes, and she watched the hexes fly between them, illuminating the night like one of Flitwick's firework shows. Her heart had never pounded so hard in her life. Keeping her eyes on Harry, she deflected a spell intended for him, and then another that would have hit her, all the while catching glimpses of familiar faces in the haze of the battle. Lee, Dean, Cho, Fleur; all of them zipped past the corners of her sight, and for the briefest of moments, she thought she'd seen Theo.

Deciding that was impossible and continuing in her pursuit for Harry, she ran down the front steps, sighing when Harry finally came to a stop, but then she realised why. The giant that blocked Harry's path was huge and hideous, bellowing like a horn as it swung its club, the ground quaking with its movements. Hermione had her wand ready to disable the beast, but a series of loud thuds disrupted her concentration and Grawp came trudging over, sizing up the larger giant. Both roared and charged at each other, wrestling and grappling savagely, and Hermione hoped that her friends avoided being trampled beneath their enormous feet.

A jinx whipped past her head and she was running again, pulling Ron with her towards Harry. Even at a distance, she could make out the dejection on his features, evidently affected from watching Hagrid being hauled away by the spiders. As cold as it sounded, she hoped Harry had the discipline to detach himself from it and keep going. They needed to carry on. They needed to finish this.

"Harry!" she called, but he didn't acknowledge her. "HARRY!"

He twisted his head, frowning at her and Ron, his lips pursed with the effort to keep all his frustration and despair bottled up, and Hermione wanted to hug him. But she didn't. Something exploded nearby and the wind turned hot, the rain like acid, and something slashed her arm. Shaking it off and snatching Harry's sleeve, she yanked him and Ron into the darkness, trying to steer them away from the erratic lights of clashing spells.

"The Whomping Willow," said Harry. "I can see it. Head for it."

Hermione blinked away the rain in her eyes, watching as the temperamental tree thrashed and writhed, its branches wildly twirling like it was just as distressed by the War as everything else on Hogwarts' grounds. Stopping short of its brawny, swinging branches, Hermione absently thought of Crooks as Ron levitated a twig to jab at that spot near the roots, rendering the Whomping Willow motionless.

"Nice," she nodded approvingly. "Okay, let's go."

"Wait," whispered Harry. "You two should stay here and-

"Oh for heaven's sake, Harry," groaned Hermione. "Seven years later and you still think we're going to let you go alone?"

"Yeah, seriously, mate," said Ron, pushing Harry forward. "Shut the hell up and go in. We're right behind you, as always."

Ducking down into the dirty tunnel, Hermione followed Harry, crawling her way through the tunnel, earth gathering beneath her fingernails. With the light of Harry's Lumos guiding their way, it didn't take them long to reach the end, but she grabbed Harry's ankle before he could get to close.

"Wait," she whispered, reaching in her bag to remove the Cloak. "Put this on."

He did, but his feet were visible, and she watched the soil shift as Harry wriggled himself near the tunnel's exit, which seemed to be blocked by something. Low voices leaked into the passage and the trio stilled, quietening their breaths to avoid detection. The scratchy, hissing tone of Voldemort harassed her ears, but she couldn't grasp enough of the other male voice to recognise the owner, assuming it was one of his Death Eater henchmen. The voices were too muffled for her to distinguish the crux of the discourse, so she simply waited, listening intently, only catching the odd word here and there.

"Disappointment."

"My Lord."

"Harry Potter."

"Elder Wand."

"Dumbledore."

"True Master."

Staring at Harry's disembodied feet, Hermione frowned when she saw the tips of his shoes swell, like he was curling his toes. She resisted the urge to tap him and ensure he was okay, knowing that he might jump and give away their hiding spot, triggering a premature confrontation with Voldemort and whomever he was talking to. She would admit that she was hardly patient at the best of times, but confined to the claustrophobic, underground passageway and knowing that people were probably dying back at the castle made the wait unbearable, and she had to force her breathing to remain quiet.

There was a thump above her head followed by a scream, and Harry flinched, catching her off-guard and very nearly causing her to gasp, but she stopped herself, biting her tongue. Footsteps hit the floorboards, slowly travelling out of earshot until there was nothing but silence, and Hermione nervously tapped Harry's shoe, whispering his name.

She heard him mumble a spell and whatever had been blocking the trapdoor shifted to the side, allowing them to shuffle their way up into the room. Her eyes immediately fell to the fallen and crumpled figure on the floor, draped in his usual black robes and suddenly they seemed so fitting. Fixated on the blood pouring out Snape's throat, Hermione felt a genuine stab of sadness and regret as she watched his life literally gush out of him. Beside her, Harry removed the Cloak and Snape's eyes widened a fraction, but all that left his mouth was an awful, gurgling sound that made Hermione's gag reflex spasm.

"What happened to him?" asked Ron.

"Nagini," replied Harry, edging closer to Snape and dropping to his knees. "Voldemort thought that Snape was the master of the Elder Wand because he killed Dumbledore."

Hermione eyed Harry's conflicted features closely, knowing what turbulent thoughts would be running through his head. Despite her telling him that Snape was a spy for the Order, Harry understandably regarded Snape with uncertainty; he had, after all, witnessed this man killing Dumbledore. And now this revelation that Voldemort might have mastered the Elder Wand...it was a wonder Harry wasn't tearing out his hair.

Looking back to Snape she gasped when she noticed an odd, glittering, blue-white substance leaking out of him. It cascaded out from his ears, eyes, and the hole in his throat, randomly reminding Hermione of stars caught behind clouds, barely twinkling in the dark.

"T...Take it," stuttered Snape, his voice weak.

Thinking quickly, she conjured a flask and thrust it into Harry's hand, watching him use his wand to transfer the substance until the container was full. Hermione hadn't realised she was clutching her hands tightly in front of her until her thumbnail pierced the skin of her palm. Taking a step forward, she crouched down a little, chewing her lip when Snape's dying eyes slanted over to her for a brief moment.

"We know you weren't bad," she told him softly, thinking she sounded almost childlike. "And we'll make sure everyone else knows when this is over."

His expression flickered, turning into something indefinable; something between resignation and peace. Staring at Harry again, he reached out, seizing the scruff of Harry's shirt and

pulling him closer, locking their eyes. The final traces of life seemed to leave Snape quickly as all the colour drained from his face, but he parted his lips, swallowing heavily before he spoke.

"Green...eyes..." he rasped out. "D-don't look away...from me."

Hermione held her breath as the final puff of Snape's left him, misting Harry's spectacles.

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Draco wasn't doing too well.

These Death Eaters were experienced and quick, Dark Magic spilling out of their wands so effortlessly, and Draco had suffered some damage as a result. He was fairly certain his left shoulder was dislocated, at least two of his ribs were bruised, possibly broken, and his lower lip had split, blood staining his teeth and trickling down his chin.

Dodging a vicious Curse, he retaliated with a Disarming Spell, but then he felt something stab his midriff and he sucked in a harsh breath, clutching his injured side. The wound wasn't particularly deep or worrying, but it burned like there was an unseen hand rubbing salt into it and his legs trembled as the pain swam around his body. With a groan vibrating in his windpipe, he pushed it all away, forcing himself to stay steady and focused. A few yards away, Blaise was also struggling to fend off the Death Eaters, frantically trying to defend not only himself, but also Lovegood; the Weasley brothers didn't seem to be faring too well either.

Draco lifted Andromeda's wand, aiming it at one of the Death Eaters attacking Blaise, but then there was a scratching, icy voice in his ear, practically spitting against his neck. It was Voldemort's voice speaking to the castle again, and everything and everyone went still.

"You have fought valiantly. Lord Voldemort knows how to value bravery. Yet you have sustained heavy losses."

Draco shared an anxious look with Blaise.

"If you continue to resist me, you will all die, one by one. I do not wish this to happen. Every drop of magical blood spilled is a loss and a waste. Lord Voldemort is merciful. I command my forces to retreat immediately."

Turning his attention to the group of Death Eaters, he scowled at the disappointment that stole their features, but they slowly began to back away.

"You have one hour. Dispose of your dead with dignity. Treat your injured. I speak now, Harry Potter, directly to you..."

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Hermione watched the horror flash across Harry's features and she yearned to console him, but she felt frozen, routed to the spot as Voldemort's voice continued to harass the night.

"...You have permitted your friends to die for you rather than face me yourself. I shall wait for one hour in the Forbidden Forest. If, at the end of that hour, you have not come to me, have not given yourself up, then battle recommences."

Hermione furiously shook her head at Harry.

"This time, I shall enter the fray myself, Harry Potter, and I shall find you, and I shall punish every last man, woman, and child who has tried to conceal you from me. One hour."

"No, Harry," she said sternly. "Don't even consider it."

"You heard what he said," he murmured helplessly. "More people will die if I-

"You think Voldemort will actually spare people if you go to him?" asked Ron. "Come on, Harry, he's hardly trustworthy. He plans to kill everyone anyway."

"Ron is right," Hermione nodded. "Look, there's no way you're going. We only have the snake left, remember? It will be fine. We should head back to the castle and try to think of a new plan now he's in the Forest." She reached forward to hold his hand, pulling him towards the tunnel. "Come on now. We'll figure something out."

Glancing at Snape's blue-ish face before she dropped down into the underground passage, a wave of guilt rippled through her, and the urge to return to Snape's side to lower his lids to hide his dead eyes pulled at her stomach, but she resisted. They had to get going. They only had one hour. One hour.

She could feel Harry shaking behind her as they crawled their way back through the tunnel, but she didn't comment on it, too preoccupied with wondering what was waiting for them back at Hogwarts.

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His shoulder was throbbing and he didn't dare try to move his arm, simply gritting his bloody teeth and following the Weasleys in silence.

Blaise was limping alongside him, his arm slung around Lovegood's neck for support, telling Draco that the injury to her leg wasn't as bad as it looked. Ahead of them, the Weasley brothers carried Terry Boot's body, his shoes scraping across the stone floor, making a noise that sent shivers down Draco's spine. The castle was unnervingly quiet now, and as they walked by the bodies of two Death Eaters, Draco felt dread swarm in his chest as the scent of death hit his nostrils. With still no sign of Granger, he was beginning to panic a little.

"Where the hell are we going exactly?" he asked harshly.

"I'm guessing everyone's gathering in the Great Hall," replied Fred. "The medical wing would be too small to treat the injured."

Smothering a retort, he carried on, and it took them a good fifteen minutes to reach the ground floor from the sixth floor, hindered by blocked staircases and fallen debris. Along the way, they crossed several more bodies, including Ritchie Coote and Mandy Brocklehurst.

"Any chance one of you three can carry them?" asked Percy.

"No," said Lovegood. "Blaise and Draco are too wounded and I doubt I could carry them by myself. I could levitate them, though."

"No, they should be carried," mumbled Fred. "We'll come back and get them, or tell someone where they are."

When they reached the ground floor, the sounds of turmoil rushed up the corridor to greet them: screaming, sobbing, shouting; just every plausible heart-wrenching noise made by human or beast, all mangled into one piercing racket of trauma. Draco slowed his steps, suddenly alarmed and tentative about entering the hall.

But he carried on, needing to know.

The doors were already open, and when he caught sight of the scene within the room, he stilled, his eyes going round, his pupils dilating. Blaise and Lovegood had also stopped walking, studying the setting with slackened jaws. Draco never imagined in his lifetime that he would see Lovegood appear so affected by anything, but her face was alive with sorrow.

"Merlin," she mumbled, her tone fragile, yet still somehow wistful. "Do you suppose this is what the Muggles mean when they talk about Hell?"

Chapter End Notes

Okie doke, hope this was okay. I have borrowed a few of the lines from the original text, mainly Voldemort's and I think of couple of Snape's are similar, but hopefully it still has some originality to it...hopefully. Hope this was okay and Ill have the next chapter as soon as possible. There's about three left to go and I want to have Isolation done by Christmas, so I'll be getting them up quicker hopefully. Apologies for the wait on this one, I got called to an interview in London with one day notice so I was a bit befuddled and busy for a week. Thanks for all your lovely reviews and messages! You have no idea how much they mean to me!

Thanks

Bex

Amort

Chapter Notes

Just the usual song recs! Barcelona - Get Up and Jay Brannan - Zombie. Huge thank you to my Beta, Maeghan (averydramionechristmas on tumblr) for betaing this chapter! Hope you like it!

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

Draco thought it was bizarre how a room full of screaming people could seem so quiet and empty.

All the noise just seemed to glide over him in muffled waves, like vibrations rather than noise, tingling his ears, but never quite reaching them. Never quite registering. He frantically scanned the room, searching for Granger, pausing at a couple of girls with wild hair similar to hers, but he couldn't see her. As his eyes darted from one person to the next, he absorbed it all speechlessly, taking in the familiar faces of the people crowding the room.

Many were bleeding, pressing their palms into their wounds, or casting Healing Charms. Most were standing in groups, mumbling to each other or trying to help a companion, but there were several people wandering around the room alone, staring blankly at nothing or crying. Some people were standing, some sitting, and the rest were lying down, separated into two lines on opposite sides of the Hall. It took Draco a few moments, but he realised that one line was for those injured too severely to stand, and the other line was for the dead.

Pomfrey rushed past his line of sight to aid a screaming victim, but all he could focus on were her red hands; gloves of blood fumbling with potions. She pushed her hair out of her eyes, smearing the red across her forehead, and Draco averted his eyes as she bent down to attend to a large wound slicing across Ernie Macmillan's chest.

The noise hit him then, and he gritted his teeth against the shrill, bellowing roar of it.

His eyes swept the room again; perhaps Granger had been crouched down and he'd missed her, or perhaps the sweat in his eyes had compromised his vision. He lingered on a mane of ginger hair, thinking it might be Weasley, but it was the other twin, George, calling out to his brothers, who had walked into the room ahead of Draco, Blaise, and Luna.

Carefully placing Boot in the line of the fallen, Fred and Percy made their way to the corner of the room with George, joining the other Weasleys. Except for Ron, and Draco never thought he would be disappointed to not see Ronald Sodding Weasley with Granger nearby, but today was apparently a day of firsts.

And lasts for some people.

He was momentarily fixated on Professor Sprout fixing Stephen Cornfoot's fractured collarbone when Blaise and Luna stepped forward, entering the Great Hall, hand in hand. Numbly following them, his eyes shifted from one gory scene to the next, staring at a girl with a mangled, battered face, her Hufflepuff tie hanging loosely around her neck. He didn't recognise her; her face was so damaged that it didn't look like a face at all. His attention drifted over to the Patil twins, one of whom had a broken arm and a shard of bone poking out of her skin. Her sister held her hand as Trelawney cast Healing Charms. He turned his head to the line of the dead then, but a loud voice stopped him before he could glance at one pale body.

"Hey! What the hell are you two doing in here?"

Draco's groan rattled around his dry mouth. "For fuck's sake, what now?"

He didn't need to look to know that whoever had yelled was shouting at Blaise and himself, but he did anyway, meeting the aggressive glare of Seamus Finnegan. Others in the room lifted their heads, their expressions tightening with anger when they spotted the Slytherins, and an odd sense of shame crept in, settling heavily on Draco's shoulders. Beneath the hot and uninhibited hatred in their eyes, he felt very much ostracized. Where was Tonks when he needed her?

"I asked what the hell you two are doing here!" Finnegan shouted again, his accent harsh and spitting. "You don't belong here!"

"They do belong here," said Lovegood, like it was obvious. "They're with us."

"Get away from them, Luna."

"I swear to Salazar," muttered Blaise, so only Draco would hear. "If one more person implies that I am her kidnapper instead of her boyfriend, I'm going to start breaking jaws."

"Luna," said Seamus, stepping towards her. "Come away from them."

He reached out to grab her arm but she snatched it back, holding Blaise's hand a little tighter as she frowned sadly at Seamus. The thirty or so people nearby who had stopped to observe — mostly Gryffindors and Ravenclaws — eyed Lovegood with confusion, some of them warily raising their wands. Draco glanced around the room, searching for his cousin in the hopes that she might intervene, but, like Granger, she was nowhere to be found. He reached into his pocket for his wand.

"Don't," Blaise stopped him. "It won't help."

"Luna," called Cho Chang this time, "They're on Voldemort's side. You know that."

"No, they're on our side."

"Come on, Luna, stop messing around!" growled Seamus, aiming his wand decisively. "And you two, get out!"

"Look, she's telling the truth," said Blaise. "We've been staying in a safehouse. We're fighting with the Order."

Seamus' mouth twitched. "You know, if it was just you, I might believe it," — he narrowed his eyes at Draco — "But not you. We all remember what you did last year."

"For fuck's sake, Finnegan," said Draco. "Do you think I would be here if I was fighting for Voldemort?"

"You're obviously trying to trick us. Voldemort probably sent you here to get information-

Draco scoffed. "Oh, please. Do all you Gryffindors gather together on weekends to think up stupid shit to say, or does it just come naturally to you?"

Blaise shook his head. "You're not helping by insulting them."

"Well, honestly, these morons make it so bloody easy-

"Shut up, you tosser!" barked Seamus furiously. "You two, leave! Right now!"

"Or what?"

"Or we'll make you!"

"Fuck off, Finnegan!" spat Draco. "I am not leaving! Just find Tonks and she'll tell you!"

Seamus' expression darkened a little. "You are a sick, twisted bastard."

Draco's brow furrowed. Something about Finnegan's disposition suddenly seemed off, but he didn't know the Gryffindor well enough to know how or why. He twisted his head to see if Blaise had noticed, but before he could glimpse his friend's eyes he felt the searing stab of a spell striking his bad arm and he yelled out in pain.

"You wanker!" he snarled at Seamus.

"I told you to leave! Now go, or we'll remove you, you slimy piece of-

"That is quite enough Mr Finnegan!"

McGonagall meandered her way through the crowd, pushing down several of the wands aimed at Draco and Blaise as she approached. Draco absently thought to himself that he'd never seen the Headmistress look anywhere close to dishevelled, but her usually tidy, fixed hair was messy and loose around her face, and her robes were dusty and torn. Despite her rumpled appearance, she still carried that formidable air of authority, ignoring the confused looks of the students as she stopped by Finnegan's side.

"What is going on here?" she asked.

"They're up to something," said Seamus, pointing an accusatory finger at Draco and Blaise. "They're saying that they're fighting on our side."

"That is correct."

Seamus balked. "Wh-what?"

"Mr Malfoy and Mr Zabini have been staying in a safehouse with Andromeda Tonks for several months," she explained, her tone clipped and matter-of-fact. "They are on our side."

Draco managed to conceal his surprise, deciding instead that a cocky smirk in Finnegan's direction would be more effective. The look on his face, and the faces of the others who had challenged them for that matter, were brilliantly flabbergasted.

"B-but..." stuttered Seamus, "They're Slytherins."

"Integrity and bravery are not traits exclusive to Gryffindors, Mr Finnegan," said McGonagall. "You will find members of every Hogwarts House here, which should tell you that well enough. Now, go and assist those that require care."

With a final disbelieving glance at Draco, Seamus pivoted on his heel and disappeared, blending into the mass of people like a raindrop in a bloody river. Blaise stepped forward to thank the Headmistress and Draco stole a moment to examine the room again, hunting for any indication of Granger, but again, he found nothing.

"...believe I saw Mr Bletchley, Miss Davies, and Miss Bulstrode with Professor Slughorn near the back of the room," McGonagall was saying to Blaise and Lovegood. "They appeared to be perfectly fine."

"And Granger?" Draco rushed out. "Is she here?"

The creases in the Headmistress' face deepened with her frown. "I...have not seen her, but I'm sure she will turn up shortly with Mr Potter and Mr Weasley."

"What about Theo?" asked Blaise. "Theodore Nott. Have you seen him?"

"I'm sorry, no. We have several groups out searching for injured people and I'm sure there are others still making their way here. Try not to worry until you know anything. Worrying does little but burden already busy minds."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" asked Lovegood. "I'd be happy to check the room for a Nargle infestation."

McGonagall blinked slowly. "I'm sure that's not necessary, Miss Lovegood, but thank you for the offer. I can see that you all have some injuries that need healing. There's a bit of a wait, but Madam Pomfrey, myself, and most of the other Professors are dealing with injuries. If you come and find me in about fifteen minutes, I should have finished aiding those with more severe wounds. In the meantime, we have food, water, and blankets. Keep yourselves warm and hydrated. It seems likely we will be battling again soon."

"Thank you, Professor," said Lovegood.

McGonagall hesitated to leave, her thoughtful eyes flitting between Blaise and Draco. "I commend you both for being here," she told them gently. "I understand your circumstances can't have made the choice easy. The right decisions are often the hardest to make."

Draco cleared his throat uncomfortably as the Headmistress returned to the bedlam, joining Pomfrey near the line for the wounded. Ignoring the unfriendly stares of a group of nearby Gryffindors, he clutched his bad arm a little tighter, flinching as the ache intensified with his movement. The pain was the sort that throbbed at steady intervals, travelling from his shoulder all the way down to his fingertips, but it was bearable. Just.

"We should find Slughorn and the others," suggested Blaise. "They might have seen Theo. I doubt anyone else would have cared enough to note his presence."

"Actually, I'd like to speak with Professor Flitwick," said Lovegood. "Will you be okay walking without support, Blaise?"

"Yes, of course. Come and find us when you're done. And keep an eye out for Theo."

Feathering a kiss against his cheek, Luna left the boys alone, disappearing amongst the sea of students within seconds. Blaise and Draco began to walk, moving deeper into the thick of the aftermath. The air was so rich with the stench of blood and sweat that Draco had to swallow back a gag or two. He slowed his pace to accommodate Blaise's limp, and whether by accident or morbid curiosity, his eyes drifted over to the line of the dead.

They were close enough that Draco could recognise and distinguish the features of their still, grey faces, and he absorbed them all silently. This side of the Great Hall was unsettlingly quiet, like an invisible, muffling wall had been erected to protect their unhearing ears and leave them in peace. One by one, he put names to the faces he knew; Terry Boot, Lavender Brown, Lisa Turpin, Gabriel Tate, Nick Alas, and so many others that he thought he might recognise, but had never taken the time of effort to learn their names.

As unfeeling and cruel as it sounded, he felt no sympathy for them. He'd never known or interacted with these people beyond exchanging glares in the corridors, but that's not to say he was unaffected by them.

Death leaves imprints on your mind; stranger or friend, witnessing it scars memories, and while some scars are smaller than others, none really heal.

He felt disturbed more than anything, particularly when he saw a Hufflepuff girl with wide, dry eyes, her jaw still agape from her final scream. All the others had seemed somewhat serene and calm, but this girl looked like she was stuck in time, reliving the horror, trapped in purgatory. He wanted to direct his attention elsewhere, but decided to sweep his eyes across the remaining corpses, just to ensure Granger wasn't among them. He knew McGonagall would have informed him, but the need to check was too niggling to ignore.

No, Granger definitely wasn't amongst the fallen, but...

"No," murmured Draco, stopping dead in his tracks. "No, no way."

"What?" asked Blaise, following Draco's line of sight. He sighed sadly and shook his head. "Shit. How the...Shit."

Towards the end of the line was a shock of red hair and Draco recognised it instantly. Without really being aware of it, he edged closer, taking in Tonks' dead features. Her skin was moon-white, her lips blue and slightly parted, but the brilliant, vibrant shade of her hair was so alive, and that somehow made it worse. It was only when he'd almost reached her that he realised Remus was lying beside her, his complexion also tellingly pallid and his shirt peppered with browning bloodstains. Draco frowned when he realised their hands were touching; Tonks' fingers softly grazed Remus' palm, as if intentional, and he absently wondered if someone had placed their hands like that, or if gravity and fate had gently pulled Tonks' hand to rest against Remus' so perfectly. So tragically.

A couple of paces behind him, Blaise was talking to Trelawney, but he was too distracted to pick up on what was being said. The emotion that was trapped somewhere between his throat and his chest was indefinable and completely foreign to him. It was neither anger nor grief, but more an awareness that something was missing and could never be retrieved. It was like there was a hole in him where he'd always assumed there'd been a hole anyway.

But then that's what death is: a puncture in the status quo.

His relationship with his only cousin had been far from amicable, but she had entered his life at a time when everything had been changing for him, and he had become somewhat accustomed to the possibility of her being present in his future. Not even in a particularly profound way, but certainly...there. And now she wouldn't be, and the closest emotion to which he could think to compare what he felt was disappointment.

When Blaise came to stand beside Draco, his knuckles were as white as Tonks' skin.

"She was an Auror," he muttered. "How could-

"Bellatrix," interrupted Blaise. "Trelawney said Bellatrix killed her."

Draco clenched his eyes shut and sucked in a breath through his gritted teeth. Now he felt angry. Furious, actually. "I really fucking hate that woman."

"Andromeda's going to be devastated."

"Fuck."

Fuck.

His Aunt had barely finished mourning her husband, and now her daughter had been slaughtered by her sister. Exactly how much was one person expected to take before they crumbled? Cracked? And shit, what about Granger? She adored Tonks like a sister. He suddenly felt helpless, knowing that he couldn't protect both Andromeda and Granger from the reality of Tonks' death, and although he had no idea why, he felt like it was his responsibility to do so.

Pinching the bridge of his nose with his fingers, he exhaled heavily, trying to soothe his racing thoughts. But it was pointless. He was surrounded by death and destruction, and it was all he could see, hear, smell, and taste. It was overpowering, consuming, and he didn't know what to do.

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Despite the smoke scratching them, Hermione's eyes danced, roaming the ruined courtyard and lingering on the enormous, motionless corpse of a giant. Strewn across the ground were countless bodies, some in Death Eater robes, some in school uniforms, and it took everything she had to keep walking. Her knees felt brittle, her legs wobbly, but Harry was marching intently towards the castle and she needed to keep up.

She couldn't quite believe they had been in this very spot perhaps twenty minutes ago. Everything had been so loud and bright then; a constant explosion of noise, light, and heat. Now everything was cold and silent except for the wind, howling like the dying, and she shivered with that morose thought.

"It's so quiet," said Hermione. "Where is everyone?"

"They must be inside," replied Ron, his voice strained. "Come on, Hermione."

She could tell he was studying each body, searching for ginger hair. Harry, on the other hand, seemed fixated on his feet and the path to the castle, hardly lifting his head, and she could practically feel the guilt radiating from him. She considered saying something to try and comfort him, but what words could she offer him that might do anything to alleviate his conscience?

As they entered Hogwarts, the distant sounds of voices journeyed down the corridor and Hermione breathed a sigh of relief. Yes, logic had assured her that there would be survivors, but hearing them was so reassuring that her heart pounded a little slower.

"The Great Hall, I reckon," said Ron.

The trio followed the voices, their footsteps quickening the closer they got until they were jogging. The doors were wide open, but they stopped before they could pass the threshold, taking it all in. Hermione didn't know where to look, but she caught herself watching Pomfrey, who was tending to a nasty burn on Firenze's flank and thigh. Ron dashed forward and she tracked him as he joined his family at the far side of the room. She did a quick head count, sighing when she realised all the Weasleys were accounted for, aside from Charlie, who she knew was still in Romania.

Thank Merlin.

Taking a better look at the chaotic room, she slowly dragged her eyes from the right side to the left, her heart sinking when he spotted a row of unmoving bodies, laid out neatly like fallen dominos. But then there was a spark of something familiar just out of focus; a flash of white-blond hair. She honed in on it, on him, knowing but not quite believing, because he couldn't possibly be here.

But he was. Even with his back to her, she knew it was Draco.

"Oh my God," she whispered to herself, her heart in her throat. "Oh my God."

She recognised his height, his build, the slant of his shoulders; all of him. She was frozen — not even daring to breathe — for exactly five seconds, and then she was bolting forward, like lightning.

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"...the only family she has left," Blaise was saying. "You should be the one to tell her-

"I am hardly family, Blaise," sighed Draco, unable to completely tear his eyes away from Tonks and Remus. "I've known Andromeda for a few months and that's it."

"You're still her nephew."

"You know it's more complicated than that."

"Yes, but..." Blaise trailed off, his mouth tweaking at one corner with a half-there grin as he spotted something over Draco's shoulder. "You might want to look behind you, mate."

"What?"

"Just look."

Narrowing his eyes with confusion, Draco began to twist around, barely managing to turn halfway before he had the wind knocked out of him. The body was petite, but it slammed into him with such force that he almost lost his balance. Almost. A pair of arms locked around his neck like a noose, so tight that he choked, and he could feel wet hair pressed against his cheek. Shifting his eyes to the side, he couldn't see the face buried into the sway of his unharmed shoulder, but her drenched, coffee-coloured curls gave her away.

Granger.

She was shaking slightly, her fast puffs of breath tickling his throat, and he could feel her heartbeat hammering against his chest. Draco was still for a long moment, static with disbelief, but then his good arm slowly snaked its way around her waist, drawing her closer. Her fingernails stabbed into his back and shoulder blades, but the pain was oddly comforting, like it somehow confirmed her presence. Dipping his head with relief, he had exactly one second — one second — to inhale her familiar scent and thank Merlin for finally gracing him with some good luck, but then she was tearing herself away from him. And then she slapped his chest.

"Ow!" he spat. "What the fuck-

"What the hell are you doing here?"

Draco stared at her face, noticing first her split lip and the deep, purple bruise by her temple, and he ignored the urge to reach out and rub away the dried blood on her chin. It was hardly the first time he'd seen her swollen and bleeding but it infuriated him anyway; yet it was her expression really stole his attention. Her eyes were wide and shiny, glistening with the glaze of tears that had yet to fall, and her lips were parted, baring clenched teeth; the closest thing to a snarl she could probably manage.

He listed in his head the emotions he found in her eyes: anger, sadness, awe, excitement, and at the core was the faintest hint of happiness. With her balled fists trembling at her sides and her chest heaving with laboured breaths, she looked completely conflicted, like she was torn between punching him and kissing him. Apparently she reached a decision.

She slapped his chest again.

"Shit," he hissed. "Stop doing that!"

"I asked what the hell you're doing here!" she demanded furiously. "You're not supposed to be here!"

"What the fuck is wrong with you? Calm down!"

"You're supposed to be somewhere safe!" She began to cry then. "I wanted you to be safe! It's too dangerous here! People are getting hurt and...and killed-

"I know that!" he yelled. "What, you thought I was just going to wait at home and wonder if you were one of those people? You thought I wouldn't give a shit? Fuck, Granger, of course I came here!"

"I am not leaving here with you! I am here to fight!"

"I know you're not going to leave with me! I am not here to ask you to!"

"Then why the hell are you here?" she asked again, roughly swiping away her tears. "Because I...you can't be here just for me! You can't just-

"I'm not here just for you!" he blurted, sucking down a calming breath. "Look, I'd be lying if I said you weren't the main reason, but I..." He growled with frustration. "Do you remember

when you told me I'd need to choose a side?"

She swallowed heavily and nodded her head once. "Yes, I remember."

"Well, this is obviously my bloody choice, isn't it? Evidently all your nagging paid off, because here I am!" — he scowled accusingly at her but continued his rant — "And I knew damn well before I came here that there was no way I would convince you to leave because you're that fucking stubborn, but I came anyway!"

Hermione actually felt all the anger drain out of her body, leaving behind only wonder. "So you're...you're here to fight with the Order?"

"Don't take this for something it isn't because — Granger, don't look at me like that," he warned. "This isn't some heroic statement. If you weren't here, I wouldn't be here, and believe me, I am very tempted to stun you right now and Apparate us both out of here-

"Don't even think about-

"But I want Voldemort dead, and I want to see it happen," he carried on, lowering his voice and looking her dead in the eye. "So yeah, I came to fight, alright? And I came here to fight with you because you're..." He hesitated and sighed, grasping at words, "You're just it for me. I have other reasons for being here, but you're the reason. You're the reason for everything, for fuck's sake! Do you understand? Am I making any sense at all?"

She nibbled her swollen lip. "Yes, but I...I just wanted you to be safe-

"If you say that one more time, I swear I'll Stupefy you. What about your safety? What the hell did you think was going through my head?"

"But I-

"Granger, just come here," he sighed, exasperated. "I didn't come to Hogwarts and hunt the entire damn castle to find you for an argument. I came here to...Just come here."

Draco thought he saw her mouth curve into a sad, forlorn smile, but she was rushing towards him again before he could really pay it any heed. She crashed into him, flinging her arms back around his neck and desperately smashing her lips against his. It was one of those impulsive kisses where your teeth clash upon impact, but it's fine because it's raw and intense; the realest of kisses. Draco looped his arm around her, just as he had before, and held her tight against him, anxious to gather her as close as possible lest she decide to slap him again, and he wouldn't put it past her.

"I'm" —kiss — "sorry," she mumbled. "I am glad you are here, but" — another kiss — " at the same time I'm worried that-

"I know."

Kiss. "I love-

"I know."

He softened the pressure of the kiss when the cut on his bottom lip started to sting, and he felt her relax a little, exhaling contentedly, moving her hands to hold his face and caress the bruises freckled across his cheekbones. His lips were chapped, his mouth as rough as sandpaper, but he kept kissing her. Needed to keep kissing her, and she was just as reluctant to stop, but when he heard a few gasps somewhere to his left, he frowned and lost the moment.

He pulled away from Hermione with a frustrated growl rumbling deep in his throat, despising the interruption, but unable to ignore it. Slanting his eyes to the side, he glowered at the prying group of Gryffindors and Ravenclaws, including Finnegan and Longbottom, watching and pointing indiscreetly in their direction. He certainly hadn't forgotten that he was in a room brimming with people that might deem his relationship with Granger unfeasible and gossip-worthy, but he'd apparently forgotten to care.

"We have an audience," said Draco, rolling his eyes. "Your moronic friends are staring at us, Granger."

"I don't care."

"Their ugly faces are putting me off."

She laughed softly; not with amusement but with relief. She doubted he could comprehend how much it touched her that he was here with her. For her. There was something indescribably blissful and terrifying about having someone walk willingly into danger's path just to stand at your side, and that was essentially what Draco had done.

As she looked at him now, noting all the changes he'd made since that first day in her room, the pride and love she felt for him was a warm and wonderful sensation in her chest. Yes, she wished he was far away from this War, because that's what love is; love is the shift of someone's life taking priority over your own. But a dormant, selfish part of her wanted him here. Just to see him, really. Just to have him within reaching distance.

"Hey!" Draco snapped at the onlookers, severing Hermione's reverie. "Can we help you? This isn't a free show, you know!"

"Draco," she groaned. "Just ignore them. They're obviously going to have questions. I'll talk to them later."

"You might want to tell them that it's rude to stare, and that they — Finnegan, I will break your finger if you point it at me again!"

Pursing her lips with irritation, Hermione gently nudged Draco's shoulder to bring his attention back to her, oblivious to his injury. He released a loud bark of pain, following by a hissed list of profanities as he clutched his wounded arm, clenching his eyes shut and inhaling through his teeth. Salazar's grave, it hurt. His whole left side was throbbing.

"What happened?" asked Hermione, her tone inevitably concerned. "I barely touched you."

"Shoulder...dislocated," he rasped out.

"You let me slap you when you're injured?"

"I didn't let you slap me," he replied drolly. "Evidently, it's just a habit you have regardless of whether we're in a relationship or not. Charming, by the way."

"How did you dislocate your shoulder?"

"Folk dancing."

"Draco."

"Fighting bloody Death Eaters. Obviously."

Hermione's eyes narrowed inquisitively. "Wait, you've been fighting? How long have you been here? And how did you get to Hogwarts?"

"I've been here about two hours," he explained, "And I came with Blaise and the others. Tonks brought us..."

His voice faded, his pain disregarded. He suddenly felt quite numb. Shit. How could he have forgotten that Tonks' cold, lifeless body was lying only a few feet from them? From Granger. He needed get to her away. He didn't want her to see.

"Oh, that makes sense," said Hermione. "Ginny said she saw Tonks, but then I-

"Granger," he interrupted, gripping her elbow and trying to position himself between her and Tonks. "Come with me for a second."

"Where is she? Have you seen her? "

"Granger-

"Would you stop pulling me?" she frowned, searching her surroundings. "I'm trying to find her."

"Hermione, don't."

"Draco, stop that!" She ripped her arm out of his grip, still inspecting the Great Hall, her expression anxious and fretful now. "Where is she? Where's Tonks?"

Draco grimaced as Hermione's eyes drifted perilously close to where her friend lay like a tattered ragdoll, and he could pinpoint the precise moment she found her. Her brown eyes darkened with horror and recognition and her jaw dropped a couple of inches, prepared for words or screams that she couldn't yet conjure. Squinting and blinking several times, as if she was trying erase the image of Tonks through sheer will, she began to shake her head frantically as tears spilled down her cheeks.

Draco's hand shot out, cupping her face and stroking away one of them with his thumb. He hated to see her cry now. Despised it. It did inexplicably terrible things to his insides, like each tear was a jab to his stomach. Studying her intently, he could see the outburst building

up inside of her, piecing itself together bit by bit, and he didn't know what he could do to comfort her. He felt helpless.

"Granger," he whispered as softly as he had probably whispered anything in his life. "Stop looking at her-

"Th-this can't be happening," she stuttered. "Sh-she's just had a baby-

"Granger, look at me, don't look at her."

She kept staring past him. "No, no, no, no, no." She started to tremble. "This is impossible-

"Granger-

"NO."

She made to move past him, but she stumbled, collapsing into Draco's ready and steady arms. Bunching the fabric of his shirt in her hands, she gave up and stayed there, burying her face into his chest before she let it go. Her scream was muffled against his skin, but the shudders of it, and her, ran through him like ice, and all he could really think to do was wrap his arm around her, absently stroking her back with his fingertips. She choked it all up; every sob, every whimper, and every cry felt by him. Absorbed by him.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled, because it was all he could think to say. Not that it did anything to console her.

So he did nothing. When it comes to death, sometimes nothing is all a person can do.

Chapter End Notes

Hello! Thanks for reading and I hope this was okay. I cut this chapter in half because it was getting way too long, but on the bright side, the next chapter is already half done so it shouldn't take me long to update. I hope this was okay and that you like the song recs! Thanks for all your WONDERFUL reviews and messages, I am forever chuffed and in awe.

Also, HUGE thanks to Juliana for publishing in article in Meld Magazine about Iso! You have no idea how amazing it was to read, so thank you SO much for putting Dramione out there like that! If anyone wants to read it, there's a link on my tumblr blog.

Read and Review and thanks for being lovely!

Bex

Dying

Chapter Notes

Just the usual song recs! Aqualung and Lucy Schwartz - Cold, The Fray - Be Still and Mumford and Sons - Timshel. Huge thank you to my Beta, Maeghan (occupymalfoysbed on tumblr) for betaing this chapter! Hope you like it!

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

Hermione had stopped crying ten minutes ago.

After wailing into Draco's chest for less than sixty seconds, she had abruptly stilled, pulled away from him, and then roughly sleeved away the evidence of her tears, like she was ashamed. She'd then squared her shoulders and heaved in a deep breath; a soldier's determination. Draco had asked her if she was alright and she'd replied, "Now is not the time. I should be helping." And then, with a final heartbroken glance at Tonks and Remus, she'd walked away and had barely spoken a fistful of words since.

Draco had wanted to tell her that no one would begrudge her some mourning time, and that she could scream into his shoulder for as long as she needed, but he didn't. He'd considered offering her some form of consolation, despite his discomfort with affectionate gestures, but she'd assured him she was fine when he'd tried to place his hand against her back. She'd shrugged him off, reiterating that she was fine, even though she evidently wasn't.

Had it not been for the crowd, he had a feeling he'd have been tempted to bait her into reacting, like he had after she'd Obliviated her parents. While some people coped well with bottling up all their angst, himself included, he knew Granger did not, but he couldn't provoke her here. There were too many eyes on him; most of them untrusting and hostile. And, no, he didn't give a shit about their curiosity as to why Granger was willingly at his side, but he doubted causing a scene would benefit the situation.

So he just let her be.

He just let her carry on, like everyone else.

The Great Hall was like a factory crossed with a funeral. Everyone in the room seemed to be divided into two categories: the mourners and the workers. Near the entrance of the Great Hall, not too far from Granger and himself, Draco could see Blaise and Lovegood's heads bobbing above the crowd as they helped with cleaning up some of the debris blocking the double doors. Millicent, Tracy, and Miles were working with Lee Jordan and Dean Thomas to hand out blankets, and countless other students were contributing in any way they could. Then there were the others, lingering by the fatality line, immobile with shock and sorrow.

But they were all mourners, really. Some were simply better at shutting the pain out and getting on with what needed to be done. Like Granger.

He and Granger were sat near the line for the wounded now, and she was keeping herself busy treating small cuts and abrasions on the victims and ensuring that they each had a supply of water. It was hardly arduous work; most of the people didn't care enough to have their minor injuries healed, but at least she had something to focus on. Draco couldn't understand how she could bear to be here, though.

The line for the wounded was so much worse than the line for the dead.

Almost all of the healing potions had been exhausted a while ago, before Draco had even entered the Great Hall, according to Slughorn. There was no Skele-Gro, no Blood-Replenishing Potion, no Wound-Cleaning Potion, and as all of the potions required a minimum of three hours brewing time, they wouldn't be available anytime soon. Pomfrey and the professors were trying to aid the victims, but Healing Spells and a half-empty tin of Burn-Healing Paste could only do so much.

The fighters with the most severe injuries simply had to wait in agony, delaying death if they could, and their whimpers and moans were a constant, haunting drone. In the past ten minutes alone, eight people had been carried into the Great Hall by the recovery teams; four had immediately been placed in the line for the dead, two were waiting to have treatable injuries tended, and the final two had died slowly. Painfully. Loudly. Barely twenty feet away from where Draco and Hermione were sat.

In reality, the line for the wounded was also a line for the dying.

Hermione lifted her head when Oliver Wood entered the room with the ninth recovered casualty slung over his shoulder, heading straight for the fatality line. Following her line of sight, Draco only saw a tuft of blood-matted, mousy hair and a Gryffindor tie swinging from side to side, but he didn't recognise the body from his angle. He turned to study Granger, watching her features tighten a little as she paused in her task to observe Wood carefully place the body alongside the rest of the fallen.

"That's Colin Creevey," she muttered. "He's underage. And a Muggle-born."

Draco frowned. "Granger-

"He shouldn't have been here. He should've left with the others."

Uncertain what he could or should say, Draco remained silent as Hermione resumed filling water bottles. Unwittingly, he reached out and tangled his fingers in some of the stray curls that had slipped out of her ponytail, coiling them around his thumb, grazing the back of his hand against her back as he did so. He wasn't sure what he'd been expecting her to do, but he'd hoped for a reaction of some sort; perhaps a sigh or a shiver, but she didn't move. Had it not been for the subtle rises and falls of her chest, he would doubt she was even breathing.

He studied her closely, taking in her unsettlingly grey complexion, swollen eyes, and chapped lips. She looked ill. Very ill.

He was about to say something. What, he had no idea, but it was irrelevant. Someone was calling his name before he could mumble hers.

"Mr Malfoy," said McGonagall, wading her way through the students towards him. "My apologies for the wait, but I can fix..." she trailed off and her expression softened. "Miss Granger."

Hermione's head lifted, but she stared at the Headmistress with blank eyes. "Professor."

"My dear, you don't look well at all."

Hermione glanced at the line of the dead and swallowed hard. "I'm fine," she lied. "I'm just...I'm fine."

Draco frowned and pressed his palm against the small of her back. Her skin was cold through her jumper.

"All of us are fine, but no one is," said McGonagall quietly. "Keep yourself steady, Hermione. That's all you can do for now."

"Yes, professor," she nodded. "What were you saying to Draco?"

"Oh, yes. Mr Malfoy, I can heal that shoulder for you now, if you're ready?"

"Alright," said Draco, rising to his feet. His limbs felt like tree branches; rigid and creaking. The pain in his shoulder had slowed to a dull, thudding ache that he had forced himself to ignore for the last thirty minutes. As he made to follow McGonagall to the back of the Great Hall, he felt a small, clammy hand gently tug his fingers. When he turned around, Granger's face was different; still sullen and lost, but also thoughtful.

"Do you need me to come with you?"

Draco paused. In all honesty, no. No, he didn't need her to come with him. But he wanted her to. And perhaps she needed to come with him. Perhaps she needed the distraction. Perhaps even both of them did.

"Yes," he said finally.

They walked side by side to where McGonagall was waiting, perched on a stool at the far end of the Great Hall. Draco took a moment to look around, noting the Weasley family not too far away, talking amongst themselves. Just behind McGonagall, Slughorn was healing Eddie Carmichael's mangled ankle, and his Head of House shot him an almost appreciative glance, like he was grateful for Draco's presence.

"Take a seat," directed McGonagall, waiting until Draco was settled on the stool besides hers. "This shouldn't take too long, but it might be quite painful. We have run out of Pain-Relief Potion."

"Brilliant," mumbled Draco.

As Hermione came to sit at his side, he stared solely at her as McGonagall cast a spell to rip the sleeve of his shirt, exposing the blue, bruised skin of his shoulder. When Hermione offered him her hand, he took it without hesitation, twining their fingers and gripping it tight. He stared at her hard, examining her features closely. He hadn't really had the chance to look at her recently. Really look at her.

As bizarre as it sounded, an intense wave of...something washed over him. One of those emotions that neither one word nor a hundred can ever really describe, but it's in your head, your heart, your stomach, everywhere. She looked so... captivating to him at that moment, despite her ashen skin and bloody lips. If ever he was interrogated and forced to reveal the inner-most secrets of his soul, he would say it was this moment — this precise moment — that confirmed how he felt about Granger.

And there was no particular reason for it. It was just there, inside of him, like a new organ; beating and warm. As real and as present as he was. As she was.

"What?" asked Hermione.

"Nothing," he said. "I just-

"Okay, Mr Malfoy," interrupted McGonagall. "Ready?"

He nodded but kept his eyes on Granger, trying to keep his muscles relaxed as the heat from the Headmistress' wand began to tingle his skin. Hermione squeezed his hand, and then his shoulder was burning. Scorching. He squeezed her hand back and clenched his eyes shut, grinding his teeth as his shoulder slowly slotted back into place with a loud and excruciating snap.

"Motherfu-

"Thank you, Mr Malfoy," said McGonagall flatly. "I understand it's painful, but I don't like bad language."

Draco was about to retaliate with a few of his favourite expletives, but then the burning suddenly stopped, and everything felt normal again. Testing his shoulder, he rolled it a couple of times and stretched out his arm, satisfied that it was indeed healed.

"There," smiled McGonagall. "All done. That wasn't so bad. Certainly not worth swearing over."

"Let me set your arm on fire and see if you keep your language clean."

"Draco," Hermione frowned. "Say thank you."

Reluctantly, he forced out a grumbled, "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Now if you'll excuse me, I need to check up on a few things."

Waiting until the Headmistress had disappeared, Draco checked his shoulder again. "Not bad. She could've repaired my shirt, though."

"Don't be petty," scolded Hermione, but Draco didn't mind. At least she was speaking now. At least she was more like her. "Does it still hurt?"

"No, it's fine."

She rubbed her lips together pensively. "What were you going to say to me before she started to heal you?"

"What? Oh. I just..." He tried to find the right words. "I was just looking at you and I...I couldn't-

"Hey, Malfoy!"

Draco growled under his breath as another familiar voice severed his speech. And this voice in particular was not one he wanted to hear calling his name. Weasley approached them with a slight limp and looking more rumpled than usual with his shredded clothes and mussed hair. Draco rolled his eyes as his long-time rival stopped in front of him.

"Look, Weasley, I'm not in the mood to argue with you right-

"Fred told me what you did," said Ron. "He told me you saved his life."

Draco's mouth closed. Beside him, he felt Hermione jerk with surprise.

"I came here to say..." Ron continued awkwardly. "Um, I came here to say...thank you. Thank you for saving my brother. My family is grateful."

Draco licked his teeth with discomfort. "Right...well...okay then."

"Yeah...so, thanks," he said again before he turned to Hermione. "Have you seen Harry anywhere?"

Hermione slowly dragged her round, bewildered eyes from Draco to Ron. "I'm sorry, what, Ron?"

"Have you seen Harry?"

"Oh. No," she replied. "I assumed he was with you."

"No, but I'm sure he's around here somewhere. He's probably helping the others bring in the injured or something. I'll have a look for him."

With that, Weasley turned and left them alone, and Draco could feel the pressure of Hermione's inquisitive gaze on the side of his face. When he twisted his head, he met her smiling gaze.

"Granger," he warned. "Don't look at me like that. It wasn't like I-

"You saved Fred's life?"

"Technically, yes, but I-

She cut him off with a swift kiss, pressing her hands against his cheeks and digging her lips into his rather forcefully. Exhaling into his mouth, she seemed to release all of her anguish into him, and he thought he felt her lips sway into a small, relieved grin against his own.

It was one of those need kisses; all about how hard you can push your face into someone else's face, and hold them as tight as you can without breaking them or yourself. One of those kisses that hurt, but you do it anyway because it's a good kind of hurt. The kind of kiss that reminds you you're human.

She pulled away, but kept him close, resting her forehead against his.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"What for?"

"I'm not even sure. Just...being here, I guess. Being here with me."

Her tone was scratchy and broken, like she was crying, but he couldn't find any tears falling down her face. He frowned at her, stroking her arms with his fingertips.

"Where else would I be?"

He wasn't sure why, but his response apparently pleased her; the muscles in her face seemed to soften and she gripped his hands tight, stabbing his palms with her fingernails. Her smile stretched up her cheeks before she kissed him again; just a brief, sweet kiss to seal the sentiment. Again, he was aware of a few nearby Gryffindors and Ravenclaws firing confused glances their way, but he really didn't care. Not in the slightest. In all honesty, he was just relieved to see her being...her again. There was still sadness folded in between each line of her face, but at least she wasn't completely and utterly consumed by her grief anymore. At least she was animated and speaking again. At least she was...present.

Severing their eye contact, Hermione swept her eyes over the Great Hall, drinking in the mess and madness of it all. Her gaze returned to the fatality line, and Draco watched her face closely, half-expecting her to revert back into herself when she found Tonks. But the longer he looked at her, the more he thought that her expression actually looked somewhere between contemplative and conflicted, like she was seeing the chaotic room for the first time and trying to process it all with the logical side of her brain.

"Do you think we can win?" she asked suddenly.

"Granger," he said carefully. "You know I'm not the best person to answer that question."

"I'd still like you to. Please."

Hesitating to respond, he sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I don't know, Granger. It's not looking great. That being said, Weasley and I just had an almost civil exchange, so perhaps anything's possible. Maybe if they..." His voice faded out when realised she was smiling at him.

"What?"

"I expected you to just say no," she said. "Some of your cynicism seems to have melted away."

His mouth twitched into a half-there grin. "Well, we can indisputably blame you for that."

She smiled, breathed out, and leaned her head against his shoulder. He felt rather than saw some of the tension seep out of her muscles as he turned his head to kiss her temple, leaving his lips to remain against the soft skin by her hairline. Draco decided both of them needed this; just a stolen moment of peace to rejuvenate and calm the thoughts pounding in their heads.

Even when a distant voice shouted, "We've found a survivor!" Draco didn't move. He barely acknowledged it. Similar declarations had been echoing around the room every five minutes or so, and were as normal to him now as the sound of the wind. The familiar sounds of a commotion (as people rushed forward to see who had been recovered) drifted up from the front of the Great Hall to the back, where he and Granger were seated, but still; neither of them lifted their heads.

It was only when Draco thought he heard someone calling his name that he glanced towards the far side of the hall.

He caught sight of Millicent rushing by, shoving aside the people in her way to get to the line for the wounded. A small cluster of five or six people seemed to be crowding around something there, and among them he could see Madam Pomfrey, Miles, and Tracy, all shifting and fidgeting restlessly.

Something felt wrong; something was wrong, and suddenly his instincts were on fire. Uncertain why, but feeling the urge to do so, he scanned the room for Blaise as dread welled up inside of him, unable to find his friend anywhere.

He heard his name being shouted again — "Draco!" — and he recognised Blaise's voice, coming from where the others were gathered. The panic was so loud and raw in Blaise's tone that Draco felt like it rocketed across the room and smacked into him, until all he could feel was panic, too. A cold and cruel shiver of comprehension shot down his spine and he jolted out of his seat, straining his eyes across the hall to try and see what had his fellow Slytherins so rattled, although he thought he already knew.

"Draco," said Hermione, standing up beside him and trying to follow his line of sight. "What is it?"

He didn't hear her, but he unintentionally answered her question anyway; he muttered one name to himself so quietly that it sounded more like a breath than a word.

"Theo."

Blaise's booming voice reached him again. "Draco!"

His body dashed forward before his mind even told it to do so, like two strong, invisible hands had pushed him towards the other side of the Great Hall. Heat rushed to his head.

Swarming. Sweat was pooling on his back and blood was pumping everywhere else. His heart was hammering so fiercely, so wildly, that he could feel the beats in his toes. Thumping. Drumming. He felt sick with fear and concern; could actually taste vomit on the back of his tongue, scorching his taste buds and nostrils.

Don't be Theo, don't be Theo, don't be Theo.

He thrust himself into the crowd, surging forward like a wrecking ball and knocking two Hufflepuffs to the ground. Behind him, Hermione was shouting questions, but he just kept on running, whipping around the obstacles in his path as fast as he could. The Great Hall felt longer than it had ever felt, seemingly stretching on for miles.

Please don't be Theo.

Why wasn't Blaise calling his name anymore? What had changed?

He was almost there, but he didn't slow down. He couldn't slow down. He was too frantic. Too urgent. Too fucking frightened of what he might find.

When he reached the huddled group of his fellow Slytherins, he skidded to a graceless halt, crashing into Miles and Millicent. Elbowing them aside, his eyes dropped to the floor, and then he lost his balance, staggering back two steps when the full extent of the damage registered. Miles reached out to steady him, but he was oblivious to it; his attention was completely focused on the scene before him, absorbing it all in stages. Slowly. Disbelievingly. In shock. He wasn't even sure where to begin.

The reason he'd been unable to locate Blaise in the Great Hall was because he was on his knees. On Blaise's lap rested Theo's head, tipping to the side and so misshapen that Draco initially thought it didn't look like Theo at all. But perhaps he could blame that on denial. Or hope. Weren't they the same thing anyway?

Theo's face was a colourful, broken mess. Both of his eyes were swollen, bulging out of their sockets and bruised a deep shade of purple with spots of sickly yellow at the edges. One of his ears was bleeding, the blood trickling into his hair and down the side of his face. There was blood dribbling from his mouth, too, and his lips were bared, displaying red-stained teeth; too dark and too thick to simply be from a split lip. Scratches and bruises decorated his skin like morbid scribbles and inkblots, slicing into his lifeless expression, and he was so pale he was almost blue.

Theo's body was in a similar state; all scarred, battered, and beaten. Gashes and grazes marred every inch of exposed flesh, mingling with more bruises, but they weren't what alarmed Draco most. The bottom half of Theo's once white shirt was drenched with blood. Completely sodden and saturated, and so...red. Dark red. Almost brown, like rust.

The obvious source was a thick and long wound near Theo's stomach, visible through the tear in his shirt, and Draco couldn't stop staring at it. It appeared to gape back at him, all wet and oozing, and so, so bad. The longer Draco looked at it, the slower everything else seemed to get; the people around him, the sounds, his heartbeat. He felt trapped by it. Stuck in a

moment as realisation slowly seeped in, his brain refusing to function until he'd processed it all.

And when it finally sank in — when he understood — he felt scared. Scared and angry.

Scared because didn't know what to do, and angry because he didn't think there was anything he could do.

Everything shifted back into motion. Everything carried on. Draco's heartbeat accelerated, roaring in his ribcage now, thumping so fast it felt like it might force its way out of his mouth. The last time he'd felt like this was when he'd seen Granger after she'd been tortured by Bellatrix; that sick feeling of helplessness.

Reaching out, he placed his hand on Theo's arm, grimacing when he registered how cold Theo's skin felt beneath his fingertips. In an almost childish manner, he nudged his friend, waiting for a reaction that never came.

"Theo," he said, but his voice came out so much quieter than he'd intended. He tried again. "Theo."

Nothing.

He flinched when a warm hand settled on his back between his shoulder blades. He didn't need to look to know it was Granger, and she was speaking to him, but he didn't hear a word of it. Finally ripping his eyes away from Theo's wound, he turned to Blaise, who was holding Theo's head in his lap with such care and caution, like an egg that was already cracked. His normally calm expression was scrunched up with desperation and fear, and never, ever could Draco recall a time when Blaise had looked so lost. So terrified. And that made it so much worse.

Because Blaise was the logical one in their dysfunctional Slytherin trio. The soothing voice of reason. If Blaise was panicking, then there was good reason to panic. If Blaise was scared, the whole world should be scared, too.

Draco carried on staring at him, trying to focus on the words coming out of his mouth. Blaise was speaking — or rather pleading — with Madam Pomfrey, who was stood nearby, looking completely overwhelmed and flustered, still sporting bloodstains on her face and clothes. Willing his head to steady itself, Draco forced away the static muffling his ears and concentrated hard on their voices.

"...internal damage, Mr Zabini. The loss of blood-

"You must be able to do something!" he shouted. "The potions-

"Even if I had any potions, it's unlikely..." She sighed. "It's too late. He has...minutes. Perhaps an hour, tops. He's dying-

"And you're doing nothing about it!"

"There is nothing I can do. I'm sorry." And she really was sorry, but apologies can only do so much. Sometimes they do nothing at all.

Draco watched the exchange mutely, wanting to contribute, but unable to. Relevant and syntactical sentences refused to form in his head or on his tongue. Only idle words seemed to register, like dying, and pain, and Theo, Theo, Theo. Draco's hands began to shake.

"Fuck you and your apology!" snarled Blaise. "You call yourself a Mediwitch?"

"Blaise," whispered Lovegood. "It's not her fault."

"I'm not saying it is, but she should be able to help! That's your job! What the hell is the point in you being in here if you can't help?"

"I'm doing what I can, Mr Zabini-

"Well, it's not fucking good enough!"

Pomfrey closed her eyes and massaged the bridge of her nose. "Mr Zabini, I am sorry. I really am. There is nothing that can be done. If it's any comfort, he will probably remain unconscious and pass away peacefully."

"Just go away," said Blaise, his tone defeated. "Just leave us alone."

With a final apology muttered under her breath, the aging Matron left the Slytherins alone, heading over to another victim. Blaise heaved in a shuddering breath and then shifted his dark, sunken eyes to Draco, opening his mouth to say something. Draco's lips were slightly agape, too, ready with hundreds of questions, but they were both interrupted before they could speak.

"Sh-shows what she fucking knows."

Everyone looked down at Theo as he slowly peeled back his lids, his eyes narrow, weak slits, peering up at them from the floor. He swallowed and then choked, more blood leaking out of his mouth and spilling down his chin. His breathing was uneven, wheezing with every inhale, and his chest bobbed up and down with unhealthy jerks.

"Remain uncon-unconscious, my arse," he stuttered. "McGonagall better dock her p-pay."

"Theo," said Draco, moving closer. "Theo, you okay?"

It was a stupid question, but Draco didn't realise how stupid it was until it was out there.

"Oh, yeah," replied Theo, still managing to sound sarcastic. "Bloody sp-spiffing."

Horror flashed across Blaise's features. "Theo, did you hear what else Pomfrey said?"

"About me dying? Yeah, th-that part was pretty loud and clear." He somehow managed to tweak his mouth into a pathetic smirk. "F-fucking typical that I have to look at your two ugly faces on my deathbed."

"Now is not the time your sodding jokes, Theo!" blurted Blaise, suddenly furious. "You're fucking dying! Do you understand that?"

"T-technically, we're all dying," he said, somehow nonchalantly. "I'm just going to b-beat you all to the finish line, which is p-pretty decent considering I've never won anything before. D-do you think I'll get a medal?"

"Stop it!" spat Blaise, and his tone reminded Draco of the day Blaise had destroyed apple trees when Lovegood had been missing; rage and grief intertwined. "Stop trying to be fucking funny! This is not funny!"

"Blaise," Luna interjected. "Calm down."

"No, I will not calm down!" He glared sadly at Theo. "Didn't I tell you? Didn't I tell you not to go after your father? Didn't I-

"I k-killed my father. My father didn't do this to me." He tilted his head to regard Draco. "Yours did."

Draco thought he was going to be sick. His body rocked forward a little and his spine went so stiff he thought it might fracture, or snap, or whatever it is spines do. Balling his hands into tight fists and trying to contain his temper, he glanced down at Theo's abdominal wound again and smothered a gag.

"My father did this to you?"

"D-don't get all fucked up about it. I think it was...I think it was an accident. I heard him cast a spell, and I think it got d-deflected. The wall fell..." He choked again, but he tried to cover it with a grin. "There go my d-dreams of becoming a river dance champion."

"Theo, stop it," hissed out Blaise. "You shouldn't be making jokes about this."

"Were you expecting some dramatic and touching last words?" he asked. "Because I-I left my speech in my other pocket. Not my l-lucky day, apparently."

"Theo," tried Draco. "Stop it."

He was still smirking. "F-fucking hell, you pair are miserable. Who died?"

A brief, but very present silence fell upon their little group like a wet blanket; heavy and suffocating. Draco felt Granger's hand press harder against his back, rubbing her thumb over one of the dents of his spine, futilely trying to soothe him. He didn't respond to the gesture. He was too trapped by the silence and the situation, anxious to escape one or both of them, but uncertain how. He didn't know what he could say, what he should say, or if he should say anything at all. Apparently Blaise was also at a loss because his lips formed around various words, but none left him, and his eyes darted from Theo's face to his wound, wide and petrified, like a child.

But it was Lovegood who kicked aside the silence. Leaning forward so she could better see Theo, her expression remained distant and her tone naive as she spoke.

"Are you scared?" she asked, sounding so eerily innocent.

The mirth drained away from Theo's expression like rain skimming down a window pane. He looked grave now; his brow furrowed and the muscles in his jaw fixed and tense.

"N-no. No, I'm not scared."

Luna frowned. "Why not?"

"I'm just d-done," said Theo, feebly shaking his head Blaise's lap. "I'm just...just sick of it."

"Sick of what?" asked Draco.

"Of this...this p-pathetic excuse for a life. I'm sick of it. I'm sick of being unhappy, but doing nothing to try and be ha-happy. I'm sick of crying out for help and then rejecting anyone who t-tries to help me. I'm sick of w-wanting things and doing nothing to get them. I'm sick of feeling dis-disappointed, and I'm sick of being a disappointment. I'm sick of not feeling passionate, or excited, or f-fucking anything about anything. I'm sick of being angry, and af-afraid, and sad. I'm sick of pretending that I'm okay. I'm sick of pretending that I un-understand. I'm just s-sick of it all, because all of it's nothing. And it's my fault it's nothing."

"Your fault?" echoed Blaise. "What do you mean?"

"It's like...my life is this c-cage, and from my cage I can see you all being happy, and living, and just being...n-normal. I just sit in my cage and watch you...wondering what it's like. And every now and then, someone will hand me a k-key to unlock my cage, but I never do. Because it's my cage. Even though I detest it, it's mine. And people keep giving me keys, and I keep throwing...throwing them away. I'll always throw them away, and I don't even know why." He coughed, spraying blood across Blaise's shirt. "Th-there's your speech, arseholes."

One small, stubborn tear slid down Blaise's cheek. "You had us."

"N-not enough," sputtered Theo, his voice weaker. "N-needed more. Needed my own reason...Never got it. N-never close."

Draco shifted closer again, carefully placing his hand on Theo's shoulder. "Does it hurt?"

"No," said Theo, stifling a whimper. "No, no. It doesn't h-hurt. Just...tired really."

Theo blinked heavily, and when he reopened his eyes, they were round and terrified, like he'd finally grasped the severity of his condition. His hands shot out, grasping the scruff of Blaise's shirt with clawing, desperate fingers. His breathing accelerated, leaving him in fast, irregular gasps, and he began to cry. Tears poured down his face in streams, splashing against Blaise's knees.

"P-please don't let them bury me with my father," he begged, his voice small and broken now. "N-not with any of my family. Please."

Blaise adjusted himself, cradling Theo's head in the crook of his arm, his face softer now. "Okay. Shh, calm down. It'll be okay."

"Please ask 'Dromeda if I...if I can be buried by T-Ted. I think sh-she'd be okay with that. You think she would b-be okay with that?"

"I'm sure it'll be fine," nodded Blaise.

"You p-promise me you'll ask."

"I promise."

Theo made an awful groaning sound deep in his chest, but he pushed past it and tugged at Blaise's shirt again. "I-I know after our parents got married, we refused to call ourselves b-brothers, but you were the closest fucking thing I ever had to one."

"I know," sighed Blaise.

"E-even if you are a dick."

Draco wasn't sure if Blaise laughed, or sobbed, or both to that last comment.

"Draco," said Theo, twisting his head. "I'm glad you...you're not a Death Eater prick trying to k-kill us all. I'm glad you sorted your...yourself out. I'm g-glad we're...we're..."

"Friends," supplied Draco.

"S-something like that, yeah."

Draco shut his eyes; he was doing everything in his power to keep himself contained and composed, but it was difficult. This was the first time he'd ever really lost somebody he considered...significant, and the weight in his chest was devastatingly heavy and so uncomfortably swollen that it was pushing up into his throat, strangling him. Restricting him. Something was in his eyes; tears or sweat, he wasn't sure, but they were stinging like hell. Burning.

Theo released a long breath and leaned back into Blaise's lap, his lids drooping. "P-proper tired now."

"No, wait!" yelled Draco. "Hang on for a bit. Maybe when the potions...Something might work."

"No, I think I'm d-done. Think it's just going to ha-happen now."

"No, no, no, Theo, just hold on. Come on, mate. Tell us some shit jokes or something."

"A j-joke?" he whispered. "Here's one: Th-there were three Slytherins...Three f-fucked up Slytherins. The first f-fell in love with...with the Gryffindor's P-Princess and became g-good. The second fell in l-love with Ravenclaw's An-Angel and became good, t-too. The third...the third did...n-nothing...b-but...but he tried..."

There was a prolonged moment of stillness and silence, and then Theo's head lolled lifelessly to the side, hanging over Blaise's arm. His hair fell across his forehead, partially shielding his

open eyes as they stared at nothing. The only thing that seemed to move at all was the blood still dribbling down Theo's chin, slithering down his throat before gathering in the hollow of his collarbone.

But the rest of Theo was completely still. Locked in time. Dead.

Dead.

Draco sat on the cold floor, gawping at Theo, waiting for him to blink and say something like, "Did I fool you?" or "You two should see your faces." But nothing happened. Nothing. And then, as Draco slowly began to grasp the reality of what had happened, he realised that Theo would never do anything again, and for some reason, that thought killed Draco.

Theo would never be there again. He wouldn't be anywhere. There would just be a space occupied by his absence. Just a hole without a voice, or a face, or fucking anything signature to Theo. Theo was gone. Permanently. Always. And something in Draco snapped.

As Blaise gathered Theo's body close to his chest and bowed his head, Draco shot up to his feet, charging out of the Great Hall. The world was a cruel blur around him, carrying on like nothing had changed, even though everything had changed. Everything had gone so horribly wrong. Everything was broken.

He burst into a sprint, rushing by Wood and Longbottom, hauling in another corpse. The corridor felt like a vacuum; airless and empty. He couldn't breathe, but he kept running. At some point, he must have removed Andromeda's wand from his pocket because it was clutched tightly in his fist, ready and waiting. For what, he didn't know.

"Draco!"

Granger's voice, but he didn't stop. He tried to go faster when he realised her thudding footfalls were catching up to his. He didn't want her to reach him. She would stop him from doing something stupid, but he needed to do something stupid right now. He needed to break something. He needed to watch something explode. He needed a fucking orchestra of chaos to drown out the chaos in his head.

"Draco!"

Shit, she was getting closer. On any other day, he would have easily outran her with his long strides, but he was disorientated and breathless. He kept going, ignoring the ache in his limbs, but then he felt a hand latch onto his elbow and pull him backwards, slowing him down. He tried to shake her off, but her grip was firm.

"Draco, stop!" demanded Hermione. "What are you doing?"

"Get off me!" he yelled, refusing to turn and look at her. "Let me go!"

"Where are you even going? Don't tell me you're thinking about going into the forest and finding the Death Eaters."

Was he? He wasn't even sure himself.

"I don't know! I need to get the fuck away! I need to...I need to do something!"

"Draco, look at me!" she shouted. He didn't. "I said look at me!"

When he still refused, she yanked his elbow again with surprising strength, twisting his body around, and then she grabbed his face, forcing it to angle towards hers. She held him there, her fingers digging painfully into his chin, but he didn't care. Keeping his eyes low, he realised just how shallow and erratic his breathing pattern was, and he doubted his sprint was solely to blame. No, it was something else entirely. It was rage. He could feel it in his expression, in his blood, everywhere. He felt like he was flammable, and he was simply waiting for something to provide a flame.

"Get off me," he ground out between his clenched teeth.

"Draco, talk to me. I understand."

"That's the fucking problem!" he barked, batting away the hand holding his face. "Everyone understands! Everyone here has lost someone! Perhaps more than one person! And that means no one understands!"

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"How many friends have you lost today, Granger? Ten? Twenty?" He shook his head furiously. "I can count the number of people I give a shit about on one hand! That's all I have! That's all I'll ever have! And now one of them is gone!" He paused and clenched his eyes shut. "He's gone. He's just...gone."

"I'm sorry Theo died," said Hermione. "I'm sorry your friend died, Draco."

Something about her words weakened him, like they'd punched him in the gut and abandoned him on the floor. It all caught up to him then. The lack of sleep, the fighting, the stress...all of it. He was tired. He was just so bloody tired. In the past few hours, he had felt too many things; from elation when he'd found Granger, to complete and utter devastation barely two minutes ago, and every other conceivable emotion in between. He'd experienced them all, and he felt burdened by them, like he could actually feel the weight of them pressing down on him.

He was exhausted. Exhausted from experiencing too many emotions and having to carry on with all of this.

He finally glanced at Granger, and he didn't know if he wanted to lock her in his arms or run in the opposite direction. So he did neither. He stayed where he was. He could feel her concerned eyes on him, studying him closely before she began to approach him, her movements slow and cautious. When she was close enough, she reached up and touched his face, gently brushing her fingers against the ridges of his cheekbones, stroking her thumbs across his lips. He didn't respond in any way. He just let her touch him, feeling every feather-soft graze of her skin against his.

She was warm, and soothing, and calming, each glide of her fingers like a sedative. Her breath kissed his face, tingling and cooling, and he felt all that hot, volatile anger slowly seep out of him, but it was replaced with something so much worse: grief. He knew how to cope with anger, but grief was completely different and a complete stranger to him. An invasive stranger, and it felt like it was swallowing him whole.

"Is this what it feels like?" he asked, his voice quiet now. "Is this...what it feel like to lose someone?"

"Yes," she replied, still touching his face. "This is what it feels like."

"When does it stop?"

Hermione sighed and leaned up on her tip-toes, kissing his unresponsive mouth with her frowning lips. When she pulled back, she said, "I'm not sure it does stop, Draco."

Her words smacked him right between the eyes and his head started to hurt. There was a pounding at the back of his eye sockets, making his eyes water, or maybe it was the water in his eyes that was making his head pound. Either way, they were coming. Tears. Stupid fucking tears. And, Merlin, they were burning, trying to force their way out. Lowering his attention to the floor, he closed his eyes, desperate to force them back inside, or at least hide them.

"Draco," said Hermione, tilting his chin again. "If you want to cry, just cry."

"I will not fucking cry," he growled, keeping his eyes shut. "What does it accomplish?"

"Absolutely nothing. But lots of people cry when they lose someone. There's no shame in it."

He briefly wondered why Granger wasn't telling him that everything would be okay, but he was glad she wasn't. He didn't think he could bear that. He wanted her words to mean something. He wanted her honesty. He wanted her experience, because this was all new to him, and he didn't know what to do.

Inhaling sharply through his nose, Draco could honestly say he fought with everything he had to prevent the tears from falling. His mistake was opening his eyes and looking at Granger. Had he resisted doing that, he might have saved himself some dignity.

"I won't tell anyone," whispered Hermione. "If you need to cry because your friend died, then cry."

And it just burst out of him. He buried his face in Hermione's shoulder and coughed it all out like a sobbing, frightened little boy. He cried for the war. He cried for Granger and himself, because they were here, watching people die. He cried for his father, because he didn't know if he had a father anymore. But he cried most for Theo. He cried for his absence. He cried for the faceless hole.

He cried until he stopped, but Theo was still dead.

It had accomplished nothing.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know, I'm massively shit. I have a job and shit now. Life's a bitch. And I really am very, VERY sorry this has taken me so long. But please don't send me threats or rude demands to update in my reviews. That's not cute. And that's not what the reviews are for. They're for feedback. And funnily enough, people being rude to me doesn't make me update any quicker. It just pisses me off. So stop that. To the people who have shown continuous support and provided genuine feedback, THANK YOU.

There's not long left to go. Two more chapters (I think), and an epilogue. So yeah...almost finished! Wehey!

Oh, and I should probably say sorry for this chapter...because...well...Theo. I've had this chapter planned from the beginning so I hope it was okay and realistic...death scenes make me nervous and I find them hard to write. But yeah, I have my reasons for Theo's death. It's not just a random thing done to piss people off or anything like that. It has a purpose, which will probably be more obvious next chapter, but if people want to ask questions, I'll happily answer them. But yeah...sorry!

Thanks for reading! Read and review please!

Bex

Harry

Chapter Notes

Just the usual song recs! Paper Route - Calm My Soul, Mumford and Sons - I Gave You All, and Air Traffic - Empty Space. I'm going to say right now that the majority of Voldemort's lines in this chapter are taken from the actual Harry Potter books and are not mine. Huge thank you to my Beta, Maeghan (occupymalfoysbed on tumblr) for betaing this chapter! Hope you like it!

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

"Do you want to help me carry him to the other line?" asked Blaise.

Draco blinked and lifted his head.

He'd been lost in a world of his own then; a dark world which wasn't too far removed from his current reality. The Great Hall was the same dismal, cold, and haunted room it had been before he'd watched Theo die, but now he felt so much more sensitive to the chill in the air and the bleak atmosphere. Had it been up to him, he wouldn't have returned to the Great Hall, but Hermione had insisted, and where else would he have gone? After he'd calmed down, he'd scrubbed at his face furiously, determined to remove any evidence of his tears. His face was now red and sore, but at least it wasn't wet.

He didn't want anyone else but Granger to know.

She'd left him alone for the moment, trying to find Potter and also get some tea to, as she put it, "make him feel better", but he wished she'd stayed. He hadn't asked her to, but he wished she'd stayed. He thought too much when he was alone, and none of his thoughts were comforting. He would prefer not to think at all.

"Draco," said Blaise. "Did you hear me? Do you want to help me carry Theo?"

He nodded, not trusting his voice. Following Blaise, he returned to the same spot in which he'd watched Theo die, and Theo was still there; bloody, ashen, and unmoving. Miles, Tracy, and Millicent were still stood nearby, sullenly shifting their weight, uncertain what to do. Someone had clearly moved Theo; his body was straight and flat on the cold floor, his head resting on Miles' blood and ash-stained jumper.

Draco's footsteps faltered and he inhaled sharply, fighting very hard to keep his composure. As he crouched beside Theo, the stench of blood invaded his nostrils, but he suppressed the urge to gag. Carefully, he and Blaise pulled Theo up, each draping one of Theo's arms across their shoulders before they stood up and slowly began to walk towards the fatality line. Theo was so heavy, a deadweight, but Draco refused to allow his stature to be compromised.

He would keep his back his straight. If nothing else, he would keep his back straight.

"Blaise," said Draco, his tone croaky. "I think...I think we should put him near Tonks and Remus."

Blaise simply nodded. Apparently, his voice had given up on him, too.

When they came to where Tonks and Remus lay, they gently lowered Theo down beside them on a stretcher. Stepping back on his shaky legs, Draco stared at the three bodies despite his desire not to. Tonks and Remus seemed paler to him now; more dead, somehow. But Theo...Theo's expression still seemed to have some life in it; his brow was still furrowed in pain and there was still some pink in his cheeks.

"Do you think he knew that we gave a shit?" blurted Draco. "Do you think he knew that...that he was important?"

"Yeah, he knew."

"But I never-

"You didn't need to."

Silence again. Everything is always broken up by silence. Punctuated by silence. Silence is nothing, but it's everything, because we hunt for words in silence. We think in silence. Our minds work hard in silence. And yet it's awful. It's empty. It's lonely. Necessary nothingness.

Blaise sighed and rubbed his eyes, staring hard at Theo. "I keep expecting him to open his eyes, jump up, and say 'You two are so gullible', or something. Seems like the kind of shit he would pull."

Draco nodded. "He always did have a twisted sense of humour."

"I feel like I should say something, but I don't know what to say."

"He wouldn't have cared for anything sentimental anyway. He would have laughed at you and told you to grow some balls."

Blaise chuckled. "True. Nevertheless..." The humour fell from his face like rain. "I will say this to him: Goodbye, Brother."

Pain tugged at Draco's stomach. He felt sick again, unbalanced, like he was trying to walk steady on a rocking boat. It was hard. Greif was new to him, but it was all he could feel now. It was at his core, and it was consuming. Even in the spare seconds his mind managed to drift to another topic, the grief was still there, like a dark voice constantly whispering in his ear. He wanted to say things; wanted to apologise for things he wasn't even sure he'd done. He wanted a conclusion; an ending that was in his control. He wanted to say goodbye, but he couldn't. Blaise had done it, so why couldn't he?

"Where's Granger?" asked Blaise.

"She and Weasley went to look for Potter. Apparently someone saw him talking to Longbottom or something."

"I'm going to find Luna. Maybe try and help with all this... mess. You coming?"

"No, I want to stay here for a moment," he replied. "I'll come and find you in a bit."

Blaise hesitated for a second and appeared to stop himself from asking Draco a question before he quietly left Draco's side and disappeared into the crowd. And then Draco was alone. Well, perhaps not alone. Are you considered alone in the company of corpses? That question plagued him until he became aware of Hermione's comforting presence beside him.

"Did you find Potter?" he asked.

"No. Can't find Neville either, but Oliver said he was helping him bring in the injured, so I'm guessing Harry's doing the same. I don't think he would..." she paused and lowered her eyes.

"You don't think Potter would what?"

"Nothing," she sighed. "I managed to find us some tea."

"I told you, I don't want tea."

"But it will-

"I don't want the tea, Granger."

"Then what do you want?" she asked, frowning. "Tell me what I can do to make this easier for you."

Draco sighed. "Just...keep speaking to me."

"What do you want me to say?"

"Anything."

Hermione chewed her lower lip with thought. "When I was nine and my Grandmother died, my Mum told me that she was in a better place. I remember thinking about that better place and wondering...if it really is better, then why doesn't everyone just go? Why do people stay in this place if there is somewhere better?"

Draco slanted his eyes so he could see her. "And?"

"Well, I think I decided that people say things to make you feel better when you lose someone. Sometimes they work and sometimes they don't, but there's comfort there anyway, isn't there? That someone will lie or invent scenarios to try and help you cope. It shows that people care, and that's all anyone wants, really."

"But someone's still dead."

She flinched and glanced at Tonks. "Yes, but you can't do anything about it, and that's probably the hardest part to deal with. But it gets easier, Draco. I promise you, it does."

Draco clenched his eyes shut. Something else was tugging at his stomach now; a different emotion that he couldn't quite place, but he felt like he was unravelling slowly. Something was pushing its way out of him, like a confession. Opening his eyes, he took a deep breath, and as he exhaled, the words poured out of him.

"Theo was my first real...friend, I guess. Well, before you really know what friendship is, you form these bonds with people by accident, don't you? Theo and I just clicked. Neither of us had any siblings or relatives of a similar age, so...it was just us, really. I didn't meet Blaise until First Year, and Crabbe, Goyle, and Pansy were acquaintances that I knew of, but I didn't really know them until Hogwarts."

He coughed to clear an itch in his throat.

"Theo and I used to play at each other's houses all the time. In hindsight, our fathers were probably taking in part in Death Eater meetings or something, but I would see Theo often; maybe once a week. We would muck around, get in trouble, you know, all that silly shit you do when you're young. When we were about eight, we were messing around in his house and I broke some ornament of his father's."

He stopped again and shifted his weight.

"Even when I was that young, I knew that Theo was terrified of his father. I could just sense it. Anyway, I broke this thing and Theo's father was furious. Theo took the blame for me. I don't know why, he just did. His father beat him so bad he had to spend a week in St. Mungo's. He told everyone that Theo had nicked his broom and had an accident, but I knew it was bullshit. Theo and I never talked about it; he never explained why he'd taken the blame, and I...I never said thank you, or anything."

"Sometimes friendship means not having to say anything. Thank yous and apologies can sometimes get lost, but it doesn't mean they're unexpressed," murmured Hermione. "So what happened? I mean, I always remember you being with Crabbe and Goyle. Not Theo so much."

"I think when Theo came to Hogwarts, he was so relieved to be away from his father that he just kept his head down and got on with it. He didn't want to get expelled and have to go home. And you remember what I was like in the younger years. I was always getting into trouble. Theo still came to my house in the holidays, though. And Theo and Blaise were the first people I sought out when Crabbe and Goyle's stupidity got too testing. At the end of Fifth Year when Voldemort...well, you know. When I was getting ready to take the Mark, I guess Theo knew and didn't want anything to do with it, and we just stopped talking. I was too busy fucking everything up to really notice."

"Draco, I know this may sound quite... ineffectual, but at least you two had the opportunity to reconcile. At least you resolved your differences."

He cleared his throat again and averted his eyes to the floor. "Granger, as much as I envy and sometimes loathe your ability to find the positive in everything, I don't...I don't think I'm there yet."

"Then where are you?"

"I don't know," he mumbled, shrugging. "Some...quiet place between denial and anger."

Hermione moved around to stand in front of him and then pressed her body into his, wrapping her arms around him in a hug so tight it forced the air out of his lungs. One of his arms slowly looped around her back to pull her closer, and the other held the back of her head, crushing her face against his chest while his fingers toyed with her hair. He wondered if she needed this just as much as him; they'd both lost people today and it had certainly taken its toll.

They were both exhausted, too. He estimated it was almost four in the morning and his lids felt heavier than they'd ever felt before. The temptation to simply close his eyes and sleep away the last few hours was remarkably strong, especially in Granger's warm and consoling embrace.

But no.

There would be no peace tonight. Not for anyone.

The chillingly familiar hiss of Voldemort's voice clawed at Draco's and Hermione's eardrums like it had earlier.

"Harry Potter is Dead."

Hermione gasped and her body jerked out of Draco's hold. With a wide and petrified stare, she scanned the Great Hall, locating Ron and Ginny near the main doors. The siblings looked as shocked and scared as she felt, and she met Ron's panicked eyes across the room. Everything went silent. Everyone had stilled, abandoning whatever they'd been doing to listen intently as Voldemort continued to project his words across Hogwarts' grounds.

"He was killed as he ran away, trying to save himself while you lay down your lives for him. We bring you his body as proof that your hero is gone. The battle is won. You have lost half of your fighters. My Death Eaters outnumber you, and the Boy Who Lived is finished. There must be no more war. Anybody who continues to resist, man, woman, or child, will be slaughtered, as will every member of their family. Come out of the castle now, kneel before me, and you shall be spared. Your parents and children, your brothers and sisters will live and be forgiven, and you will join me in the new world we shall build together."

Hermione stood there, open-mouthed and frozen to the spot. Her heart was drumming so fast and loud that she could feel and hear it in her head, pumping behind her eye-sockets. She must have swayed on her wobbly legs because Draco's hands shot out to grip her shoulders and when she looked up at him, his expression was creased up with concern.

"It can't be," she muttered. "No...Harry wouldn't...It's a mistake. A bluff."

"Granger, calm down and-

"It's a mistake."

The conviction in her tone was so loud that Draco very nearly believed her. Nearly.

Grasping his hand, Hermione dragged him along as she rushed to where Ron and Ginny were stood, now discussing something with Luna while Blaise stood quietly at her side. Ginny looked completely tormented and bereft, like she'd actually witnessed Harry's death at Voldemort's hand, and Ron bore the unsettled expression of a man trying to keep himself in line. With one arm draped across Ginny's shoulders, Luna appeared to be offering the siblings vain words of support, but there was sadness and worry in her demeanor.

As Hermione shoved her way through the crowd, tears clouded her vision; blurring and burning. Godric, she was scared. And her heart...Her heart. Her best friend...It had to be a mistake.

Please let it be a mistake.

"Ron! Ginny!" she shouted as she neared them, her voice lost amongst the roaring questions of everyone in the Great Hall. Everyone seemed to be saying Harry's name. It was all she could hear.

Harry, Harry, Harry, Harry, Harry.

"No," she hissed to herself, pushing harder against the crowd to reach her friends. Almost there. "Ginny! Ron!"

"Hermione!" cried Ginny.

The youngest Weasley rushed forward and Hermione released Draco's hand so she could meet her and envelop her trembling body in a tight, desperate hug. She locked eyes with Ron over Ginny's shoulder and she hated how hopeless he looked; slumped shoulders and an absent, glazed-over stare, like he was watching the world crumble without actually seeing it. Stretching out her arm, she gently cupped his cheek, frowning as one of his tears trickled across her fingers.

"It's a mistake," she whispered against Ginny's hair. "It has to be."

Ron sniffed and rubbed his lips together. "What if it's not?"

"But, Ron-

"What if it's not, Hermione?"

Hermione's mouth opened and closed, forming around fickle words of reassurance that she couldn't voice. What if...what if? What if her best friend was dead? What if they'd lost the War? What would happen to them all? The questions ruthlessly ricocheted around her head and she couldn't find answers for any of them. She was speechless. Twisting her head, she looked at Draco, and his face was tellingly furrowed with concern as he silently regarded her.

Ginny slowly peeled herself out of Hermione's arms and sleeve away the tears beneath her eyes with a harsh swipe of her arm. "Hermione's right," she said firmly. "It has to be a mistake. Harry would never run away, trying to save himself-

"I don't believe that," interrupted Ron. "Voldemort's probably just saying that so we doubt our loyalty, but...but Harry might be...I think he's-

"There's not much sense in maybes," Luna rushed out. "We need to find out what's happened. It looks like people are starting to head outside."

Hermione swept her gaze across the Great Hall. People were indeed moving, heading towards the doors and still murmuring Harry's name between them as they walked; some crying, some offering optimistic encouragement, and others hard-faced and furious. McGonagall was at the front, closely followed by Pomfrey, Trelawney, and Slughorn. Behind them marched Kingsley and the Weasleys, and Ginny and Ron fell into step beside their family, exchanging a meager handful of words with their somber parents.

Hermione hesitated to follow; a part of her wished to remain behind, uncertain if she was prepared to discover if Voldemort's announcement about Harry's death was true. But then Luna reached out and softly squeezed her shoulder, and Hermione began to numbly walk with the others in an almost catatonic state. She felt so small in that moment, like one raindrop in a raincloud. Everyone was speaking, but their voices were so hushed and quiet that they simply sounded like waves of breath rippling between the stone walls.

They were an army; a defeated army. An army of fear, dread, and doubt.

She felt a warm, comforting hand settle against the bottom of her back and she glanced to the side to find Draco studying her closely, his mouth twitching with the urge to say something.

"Granger," he started uncertainly. "Are you...are you-

"I'm frightened," she blurted.

The muscles in Draco's face softened for a moment and he pressed his hand slightly harder against the sway of her back. "You're allowed to be."

"Are you frightened?"

"More...nervous, I think," he replied, sighing. He bent his head so she could better see his eyes and know his next words were honest and sincere. "I won't let anything bad happen to you. Do you understand? I won't let them hurt you."

She tried to smile, but her lips couldn't quite lift at the corners. "I won't let them hurt you, either. I won't let them near you."

The fervour and force in her voice knocked Draco speechless for a second, but then he sank his fingers a little deeper into her skin, ghosted a kiss against her forehead, and whispered, "I know you won't."

They continued to walk with the crowd and Hermione absently listened to the constant hum of their shoes thudding across the floor. Or was it her heart thudding in her chest? Were everyone's hearts thudding as loud as hers? She was so frightened. When she looked inside of herself, all she could find was fear. It was everywhere; in every vein, every cell, every fiber of her being, and she wanted it go away. She wanted to be brave and face all this with a high, bold chin, but she was so tired and so, so scared.

The distance from the Great Hall to Hogwarts' main entrance was barely a distance at all, but it felt like a mile-long, uphill stretch. As the crowd leaked out of the castle and into the courtyard, Hermione was first struck by the acrid scent of charred wood and smoke. She wasn't sure how'd she'd missed it before (when she and the boys had returned to Hogwarts from the Shrieking Shack), but the air was hazy and choking and her mouth became dry. The sun was rising in the backdrop and its rays pierced through some of the damaged castle's crevices, the light turning grey as it hit the smoke. As she walked with the others, she felt like there was a certain sense of clarity to the crispness of the atmosphere, but there was no comfort in it. None at all.

As she side-stepped a piece of rubble, someone shouted out, "Look over there!" and silence swept across their group as everyone stretched their vision to the far side of the bridge. From the dark clothes, Hermione knew it was the Death Eater Army and she could just make out the distant hum of their trampling feet. Behind them, four or five giants followed, their footsteps pounding against the ground and making it tremble. But among the Death Eaters, a figure stood higher than the rest, sticking out of the throng, and Hermione recognised Hagrid's height and the silhouette of his wild hair. The Death Eaters drew closer and then she could see Hagrid was carry something — no — someone in his arms.

"No!" screamed McGonagall, and it was only then that Hermione realised her fears had been confirmed.

Ginny called out. Then Ron. Then her own scream tore out of her throat like cutting knives.

"Harry!"

Her body lunged forward, but she barely made it two steps before a steel arm clamped around her waist and prevented her. She was yanked backwards, colliding with Draco's strong chest. She struggled in his hold, but then she felt his lips press against her ear.

"Calm down," he whispered. "Keep yourself steady, remember?"

"He's my b-best friend!" she sputtered, trying to break free from his hold. "They killed him!"

"I know you want revenge, but this is not the time-

"They killed him!"

"And they will kill you if you charge at them now," he hissed quietly, still restraining her. He wondered briefly if he might be hurting her, but he refused to slacken his grip. "They will kill you. And what the hell would I do then? What the hell would I do without you? I did not come here to watch you commit suicide."

"But I...they-

"They killed my friend, too, Granger. And you stopped me from doing something stupid. You can fight me all you like, but I am not letting you go. Would you have let me go?"

Hermione stopped struggling and bowed her head, watching her tears fall and turn patches of the dirt darker. She sucked the smoky air in through her teeth and forced tension into her muscles. The grief she felt was suffocating and she struggled to catch her breath, but, slowly, she gathered her wits together and straightened her posture.

"Okay," she said, swallowing back the knot on her throat. "Okay, I...I won't do anything. Not yet."

"Not yet," echoed Draco, hesitantly unwinding his arm from around her waist, but he guided her to stand at his side, watching her closely.

As Hermione came back to reality, she realised Dumbledore's Army was shouting now, hurling abuse at Voldemort and the Death Eaters, who had spread out into a line. The roars of outrage echoed across Hogwarts' grounds, coming back louder and angrier. The castle itself seemed to quake with their incensed voices.

"SILENCE!" bellowed Voldemort. He raised his wand and there was a blinding flash of light and a crash of noise.

Their mouths continued to move, but only the faintest of hushed murmurs pushed past their lips. They watched on with furious eyes as Voldemort ordered Hagrid to place Harry on the floor at his feet. All of Hermione's grief was forgotten and in its place came this fiery, hot rage.

"You see?" said Voldemort. "Harry Potter is dead! Do you understand now, deluded ones? He was

nothing, ever, but a boy who relied on others to sacrifice themselves for him!"

"He beat you!" yelled Ron, the silencing spell broken, but Voldemort repeated it and shut them all up again, encasing them in a barrier.

Suddenly, Hermione was aware of Lucius and Narcissa pushing past the other Death Eaters to the front of the line, stopping not too far from Voldemort. Snapping her eyes Draco, she knew he was watching them. He was completely transfixed on them; his lips pursed and his eyebrows low. To anyone else who thought to look, Draco appeared poised and collected, but she could see the trepidation clouding his eyes.

On the other side of the courtyard, Lucius seemed to whisper Draco's name to himself, but Voldemort must have heard because he glanced back at his ally and then scanned Dumbledore's Army until his cold, serpentine eyes settled on Draco. Something dark and unsettling crawled its way up Draco's spine as Voldemort's mouth stretched into a crooked, evil grin, but he tilted his chin high, defiantly. He was determined to confront the man who had wanted him dead with some semblance of pride.

"Well, well," sneered Voldemort. "Look who came back from the dead. The young Draco Malfoy."

Draco could feel everyone's eyes on him, Death Eaters and Dumbledore's Army, but he kept staring ahead, flicking his glare between Voldemort and his father, trying to gauge the latter's temperament. Granger had been right when she had spoken of his parents back at Tonks' house; Lucius looked fragile and withered, evidently suffering the toxic effects of torture. He had aged a decade in the year Draco had been apart from him.

But.

But Draco could tell his father wasn't as mentally damaged as he'd assumed he would be. There was still arrogance in his stance, a certain stoicism in his expression, and, most importantly, there was awareness in his eyes. Lucius knew where he was and what he was doing, which meant whatever he chose to do (once Draco revealed his loyalties laid with Granger and the Order) was his decision, and it would be a decision made with a sane mind. And that made it so much worse.

As Lucius studied him from the Death Eaters' line, Draco searched him for any indication of concern, relief, or the slightest hint of paternal compassion, but he found none. All he could identify in the familiar face, so similar to his own, was an odd combination of suspicion and displeasure.

"You appear to be confused, young Malfoy! You're on the wrong side!" mocked Voldemort, drawing Draco's attention back to him. "Come now. I will not harm you. You have my word. Come join your parents and stand where you belong."

Draco didn't move an inch, but he felt Hermione's trembling hand swiftly grasp his and clutch it so tightly that he heard his knuckles crack. Twisting his head, he met her worried, questioning eyes and he frowned down at her, half offended and half bewildered as her fingers gripped even tighter into his hand, crushing it.

"Did you honestly think I would leave now?" he asked, his voice hushed because of Voldemort's spell.

She dragged her teeth across her bottom lip. "Perhaps I just needed to hold your hand."

A small, barely-there smile twitched at the corners of his mouth before he lowered his head to peck a brief kiss against her lips. A quiet murmuring of surprise and approval rippled across the crowd, but Draco didn't hear it as he squeezed Hermione's hand back. Reluctantly, he returned his attention to his father, who looked ready to split in half with shock and indignation. The sly grin on Voldemort's face stretched a little and he cocked his head to eye Lucius with amusement.

"It would appear your son has made some new friends, Lucius! Mudbloods and Blood Traitors!"

Draco stared hard at his father, so hard he thought his eyes might bleed.

Shaking his head, Lucius' expression shriveled up into harsh scowl, his teeth bared with disgust. "He is no son of mine," he spat. "Blood Traitor."

Draco felt something in his chest shatter. That final, fighting delusion that his father just might accept his relationship with Granger gave way like a wall that had been crumbling for years. And it wasn't just his relationship with Granger that Lucius was refusing to accept. Draco knew that his father — his own flesh and blood — was denying him.

The new him.

The better him.

He forced himself not to react. He'd never cried in front of his father before and he'd be damned if this moment would be the tipping point. He didn't flinch. Didn't blink. Didn't move. But he felt the pain and betrayal all the same. It hung, unexpressed, in his chest; heavy and hurting, pounding like a pendulum in his heart, but he ignored it.

"That's that, then," said Draco simply, feeling Hermione's thumb rub soothing circles against his hand.

He couldn't look at his father anymore. He thought if he did he might shout out or his facade might falter. His eyes fell to his mother and the pain weakened slightly as he took in her softer features. Had any of the Death Eaters been paying attention to Narcissa, they might've seen the emotion in her expression, the longing to go to her son, or her mouthing the words, "I love you" to Draco across the courtyard. But no one was looking at her. Not even her own husband.

Draco gave her the subtlest of nods, ensuring the gesture was hardly noticeable so she would remain safe and free of suspicion. For now.

"Yet another member of your family to turn traitor, Lucius," goaded Voldemort. "You must be so proud."

"Draco might not have his father's pride," said McGonagall, breaking the silencing spell again. "But he has our pride."

Draco glanced appreciatively at the headmistress and made a mental note to express his gratitude should he survive this day. Dumbledore's Army had begun to shout out and jeer at the Death Eaters again and Voldemort paced back and forth a few times, frustrated about losing control.

"Enough!" yelled Voldemort, recasting the silencing spell and then pointing to Harry's body tauntingly. "Returning to the matter at hand, I think it's only fair you should all know Harry Potter ran away, trying to save himself, and I..."

There was movement in the crowd; Draco and Hermione turned their heads just in time to see Neville burst through the magical barrier, his wand out. He barely made it a few feet before he was disarmed and thrown to the ground by Voldemort.

With her hand still tightly clasping Draco's, Hermione listened with baited breath as Bellatrix informed Voldemort of Neville's identity, cruelly mentioning his parents with a callous chuckle. Neville climbed to his feet, standing courageously in the no-man's-land between the two armies, and Draco never thought he would find himself so impressed by something Longbottom had done.

"You're a pureblood," said Voldemort, "And you show bravery and tenacity. You would make a fine Death Eater."

"I'll join you when hell freezes over!" shouted Neville, and a loud cheer erupted from Dumbledore's Army, breaking the spell yet again.

"Very well," said Voldemort. "Neville here is now going to demonstrate what happens to anyone foolish enough to continue to oppose me."

Hermione turned cold as she watched Voldemort raise his wand. Her body rocked forward and she bent her legs, ready to sprint forward and do what she could to help Neville. But when Voldemort flicked his wand, Neville remained unharmed and standing. Instead, she heard a low whistling sound, like something was flying through the air, and she could only watch with confusion as the Sorting Hat soared over their heads and landed in Voldemort's hand.

"There will be no more Sorting at Hogwarts," Voldemort addressed the crowd. "There will be no more Houses. The emblem, shield, and colors of my noble ancestor, Salazar Slytherin, will suffice for everyone. Won't they, Neville Longbottom?"

Voldemort aimed his wand at Neville then, and Hermione watched her friend's back go stiff and straight. With a fording twist of his wrist, Voldemort levitated the Sorting Hat, and it landed on Neville's head, almost covering his entire face. McGonagall, Dean, and Lee were slowly edging themselves forward, step by step. Hermione reached into her pocket to withdraw her wand and she was aware of many in both Dumbledore's Army and the Death Eaters' Army doing the same.

Her hand remained fixed in Draco's, just like the night they'd run through the Forbidden Forest before she'd sent him to Andromeda's house. There were moon-shaped dents in his skin from her fingernails, but she refused to relax her grip. She knew this was the build-up to the inevitable chaos and she wanted to maintain the contact with him for as long as possible.

An eerie silence had settled in the courtyard. It was too quiet and too still; that deceptive moment of peace before anarchy invades. Voldemort took a step forward, twisted his wand, and rendered Neville completely still with the Body-Bind Curse. And then, the Sorting Hat burst into flames atop Neville's head.

It took approximately two seconds for Hermione to comprehend what had just happened, but Neville's scream slashed through the air like a dart, and all of Dumbledore's Army seemed to surge forward like one furious wave.

But then a different sound joined the courtyard. Several different sounds, actually.

A racket of new screaming voices and stamping feet echoed across Hogwarts' grounds, coming from the boundary of the school; out of sight, but approaching quickly. As Hermione whipped her head around to try and establish from which direction the stampede was coming, she saw Grawp, trudging his way around the ruins trying to get to Hagrid. Voldemort's giants howled and ran at Grawp, and then Hermione heard hooves cantering across the ground, combined with the snapping sounds of bows and the hiss of arrows soaring through the air. The centaurs aimed their arrows at the Death Eaters, and Hermione watched as four black-robed figures collapsed, dead, while the others panicked and dispersed.

During all of this mayhem, most of Dumbledore's Army had stopped in their tracks. Hermione and Draco were perhaps thirty feet away from the Death Eaters — still hand in hand — watching everything unfold with wide eyes.

Amongst the ear-shattering noise and chaos, Hermione's attention was again drawn to Neville when he suddenly shifted, breaking the Body-Bind Curse. The Sorting Hat fell from his head and Hermione squinted when something silver inside caught the light and glistened. Now everyone seemed to be staring at Neville as he held up the Sword of Gryffindor and swiftly lunged forward, decapitating Nagini with such a quick slice that Hermione wondered if it had been a trick of the light.

Voldemort's deafening cry ricocheted around Hogwarts like a siren as Nagini's detached head spun in the air and then landed with a thud near his feet. Enraged, he aimed his wand at Neville, but Hermione watched dumbfounded as the spell rebounded off a Shield Charm, which she knew Neville hadn't cast himself.

Then Hagrid's voice rose above the pandemonium — "HARRY. WHERE'S HARRY?"

Hermione's eyes snapped to where Harry's body had been, only to find an empty space with no indication that he had ever been there at all. Frantically, she scanned the courtyard, hunting for him amongst the scattered Death Eaters, but he was nowhere to be seen.

"Where is he?" she mumbled to herself.

"What?" asked Draco. "Where's who?"

"Harry. Where is he?"

Her voice was blanketed by the sounds of beating wings as Buckbeak and a flock of Thestrals swooped down from the sky, pecking and kicking at the Death Eaters. A spell flew past her face, the wind of it grazing her cheek, and it jolted her back into action. Raising her wand, she began firing jinxes and curses at the Death Eaters, and she could see most of Dumbledore's Army doing the same, including Draco, but the warring giants were forcing everyone to retreat back to the castle.

"Come on, Granger!" shouted Draco, yanking her with him.

"But where has Harry gone?"

"We need to stay with the others!"

Death Eaters and Dumbledore's Army alike headed back into Hogwarts, shoving and ramming each other, launching spells at their enemies, and many tumbling to the floor. The crowd was so thick and frantic that Hermione found herself wedged between several sets of shoulders as she and Draco approached Hogwarts' main entrance. She could feel Draco's hand slowly slipping out of hers as they were buffeted in different directions by the horde, but she kept holding on, stabbing her fingernails deep into his skin to get a better grip and his nails stabbed her back.

But she knew they were going to be ripped apart.

Lifting her scared eyes to meet his, they managed to steal a fleeting moment of eye contact and understanding before she felt his hand slide out of hers. She watched with horror as Draco fell down, lost amongst the sea of people in an instant.

"Draco!" she called, but there was too much noise. "DRACO!"

Futilely, she tried to push her way backwards, still screaming his name, but the crowd carried her into Hogwarts and to the Great Hall.

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Draco grimaced as the crowd passed over him, their shins and knees knocking his body and face and their feet stamping on his hands. He'd managed to land on all fours, but it was impossible to push himself up, so instead he tried to crawl, bearing the brunt of countless kicks as he sought space. Somehow, he found room to move, and as the sea of legs eased, he pushed himself up, leaning against a wall to catch his breath. Ignoring his bruised abdomen, he tucked himself into a shallow alcove and examined his surroundings.

"Granger!" he yelled, but he couldn't see her anywhere. "GRANGER!"

There were barely any people left in the courtyard now; the giants continued to wrestle with Grawp and the thestrals, the vibrations of their thunderous quarrel shifting the dirt. From Draco's hidden position near the main entrance, he could hear the battle continuing in the Great Hall and see flashes from spells dancing across the walls. The fight itself was out of sight, but Draco waited for the final, straggling Death Eaters to disappear inside before he headed towards it.

But as he rounded the corner and caught a glimpse of the anarchy contained within, his eyes were drawn to the side, and they clashed with a cold, grey pair of eyes that were almost identical to his own. Lucius had apparently been lingering in the shadows, waiting for him, and Draco tightened his fist around his wand.

Chapter End Notes

(a very long) a/n: Yeahhhhh. So I'm really slow at updating...I'm really sorry. It's been a busy few months. But on the bright side, the dramione meet-up was AWESOME. So hello to Anu, Wirda, Erika, and Ashley and thanks for being so lovely and cool and I hope we can meet up again soon! And thanks to the people who watched our videos and liked our pictures etc.!

Thank you for the AMAZING response to the last chapter. I have no words to express my gratitude and I am so happy most of you seem to love Theo as much as I do! I posted on my blog that (after iso is done) I will be doing an iso-related fic about some of the other characters' lives and thoughts in iso, and Theo's character will be explored some more in that.

Yeah as I said in the first a/n, most of Voldy's lines in this aren't mine and are from the original text. And you've probably noticed this chapter REALLY closely follows the chapter in the book, so I hope it wasn't boring...Also, I've decided I want to add a couple more scenes to iso, so I'm adding another chapter, so there will be two more chapters after this one, and then the epilogue, so yeah...my prediction about how many remaining chapters there would be was wrong.

Sorry for the long author's note and I hope you enjoyed the chapter! And again, really sorry about the slow update.

Bex

Mercy

Chapter Notes

Just the usual song recs! The Dear Hunter - Son and Father and Barcelona - Response. Huge thank you to my Beta, Maeghan (occupymalfoysbed on tumblr) for betaing this chapter! Hope you like it!

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

Hermione could only watch as Madam Pomfrey and several others carefully levitated the dead and ushered the injured to the antechamber behind the High Table, out of harm's way. As the final body, Colin Creevey, disappeared behind the door, the wave of Death Eaters flooded into the Great Hall and began attacking anyone and everyone they could. It was then she noticed Charlie Weasley, Madam Rosmerta, and Ambrosius Flume nearby, and as she scanned the room, she noticed hundreds of other new fighters, mainly family members of her fellow students and the residents of Hogsmeade. And then, from the entrance hall, a swarm of House-elves stormed in, led by Kreacher.

The Death Eaters were outnumbered now. There must have been at least three Hogwarts defenders to each Death Eater, but victory was far from certain; their repertoire of Dark Magic was an issue. Dark spells erupted and crackled all around her like rogue fireworks. Regardless, Dumbledore's Army appeared to have the upper hand, and even Voldemort himself seemed to know this, his serpentine features stretched with panic and his eyes darting around the room. But still, he fired curses in every direction possible, bringing down two Hogwarts defenders with one awful blast of his wand.

In her peripheral vision, Hermione saw a shift in the room; McGonagall, Slughorn, and Shackbolt all seemed to change direction at once and move through the crowd towards Voldemort. Lifting her head and trying to make sense of the bedlam in the hall, she noticed Ron, Neville, and Katie Bell at the back battling Dolohov. Nearby, Lee and Seamus were tackling Goyle's father, and not too from them she could see Blaise, Miles, and Dean fighting with Rookwood. As her eyes scanned the area, she locked eyes with Narcissa on the other side of the room, but the older witch looked away to recommence her duel with Macnair. Some Hogwarts defenders close by glanced at her with mixed expressions of surprise and respect, but everyone was too busy fighting for their lives to pay her too much heed.

"Watch out, Hermione!"

She ducked instinctively, and a hot curse singed the tips of her curls. Spinning around, she aimed her wand and stunned Jugson before he could try again. Turning, she nodded her head in thanks to Fred for warning her, but then he and George were preoccupied with defeating Rowle.

Hermione looked this way and that, overwhelmed by all the duels going on around her. Where should she begin? Which Death Eater should she attempt to tackle first?

Behind her, there was a grunt of pain, followed by the unmistakable, sinister chuckle of Bellatrix. Hermione whipped around to see Luna wiping blood off her chin and raising her wand at Bellatrix, who was also dueling Ginny. With a smug look on her face, the dark witch shot a curse at Ginny and then another at Luna. Both managed to deflect the spells, but Bellatrix was so quick that they barely had a chance to retaliate with offensive magic.

Hermione didn't hesitate; she maneuvered through the crowd toward them. That ever-present voice of reason in her head warned her that using Bellatrix's own wand against her would be problematic, but, for once, she ignored that voice. Her friends needed help and, although she might deny it if asked, there was a tug of revenge in her gut pulling her towards Bellatrix. Fuelled by resentment and loathing that had been festering inside of her since the night Bellatrix had tortured her to within an inch of her life, Hermione could feel the heat of her anger in her cheeks.

She lifted Bellatrix's wand as if it was her own and narrowed her eyes, battle-ready.

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Draco tapped Andromeda's wand against his leg and cocked his head to the side.

He hadn't realised it until now, but at some point he had grown taller than his father. Perhaps he had revered his father so much that he had just always seemed bigger and more impressive. Draco had also never perceived his father as old, but there was silver stubble lining Lucius' jaw and hints of grey streaking through his blond hair now. He looked very different, but it didn't make it any easier. A small part of Draco just wanted to turn and run and avoid this confrontation altogether.

Lucius remained silent. He was eyeing up Draco like he was a stranger who had wandered into his territory, with suspicion and animosity. His wand was out, but, like Draco, he kept it at his side in a tight fist, ready if needed. Pacing back and forth a couple of times, but never looking away, he reminded Draco of a caged dragon, debating whether the person on the other side of the bars was predator or prey.

Draco stood still, tapping Andromeda's wand against his leg again with impatience. The distance between them was small — perhaps only fifteen feet — but it felt like so much more than that. The last time Draco had seen his father had been during his trial just after fifth year, which meant that it had been almost two years since they'd been in the same room together.

And it felt like two years. More, in fact. Draco felt like he had experienced enough in two years to fulfill a lifetime.

In those two years, Draco had almost murdered a man, been presumed dead, hidden away from the world to avoid being killed, battled his prejudices, fallen in love with a one-time enemy, met family members he had never known before, fought in an ongoing war, and watched his friend die.

It was no wonder Lucius was regarding him like a stranger; he was one. Even his fifteen-year-old self would never be able to comprehend who he had become in the last two years. How could Lucius even begin to grasp the choices he had made? And, in turn, how could Draco ever begin to grasp the choices that Lucius had made?

They were miles apart. There was no loyalty, no empathy, no love...not even the faintest hint of understanding on either side.

However, there was a niggling, persistent tug of nostalgia pulling at Draco, but it was quiet and fading. All he could truly connect with was the ever-growing bitterness, swelling up inside of him like a tumor. His mother had managed to find a way out and assist the Order, but Lucius had never even tried. That was what pained Draco the most. A father should always fight for his son, but Lucius had not tried. He had just stood there like a passive bystander, accepting whatever Voldemort had demanded or inflicted without any attempt to fight it.

And he had killed Theo.

He had killed Theo.

When Lucius finally spoke, Draco was certain that he had bruised his leg from tapping Andromeda's wand against it so much.

"You're supposed to be dead."

"Sorry to disappoint you," said Draco calmly. "Your welcome home party is shit."

"Shut up!" growled Lucius. "What the hell do you think you are doing, boy?"

"Do not call me boy! You have evidently made the decision that I am no longer of any consequence to you. Why should I tell you anything?"

"You owe me an explanation-

"I owe you fuck all!"

"Don't you dare use that kind of language with me, boy!"

"I am NOT your boy!" yelled Draco furiously. "I am not your anything anymore! You made that call about ten minutes ago in front of everyone! Remember?"

Lucius inhaled sharply through his nostrils, his nose wrinkled with disgust. "What the hell did you expect when you showed up here with that...thing and kissed it in public like it's acceptable?"

"Her name is Hermione Granger."

"Spare me the repulsive details."

Draco clicked his tongue and looked his father up and down. "So, what the hell happened to you? You look like shit. You've obviously been tortured by your oh-so-wonderful leader-

"I was punished for the mistakes that you made!" he shouted. "The Dark Lord had to punish me because you failed to accomplish-

"Had to punish? Are you — Do you even hear yourself? How fucked up is your head?"

"My head? You disappear for a year and then come back from the dead with that vermin attached to your arm and fighting for the bloody Order, and you have the nerve to question my sanity?"

"Her name," hissed Draco, "Is Hermione Granger."

"So that's where you've been for the last year? Living in a fucking Muggle house with that-

"No, I was here! I was at Hogwarts, and then I stayed with Andromeda-

Lucius' dry, dark chuckle cut him off. "Ah, that explains it. Your mother's mental sister. Should have guessed it was one of her unfortunate relatives that brainwashed you."

"She was a better parent to me in a few months than you have been in the last few years!"

"Don't be so dramatic. Grow up!"

"I have grown up and you took NO part in it!" Draco's voice bellowed so loudly it hurt his own ears. "Did you not even think to question Voldemort after you found out he had threatened to kill me? And mum? Did you try to find out what had happened to me after you heard I was dead? Did you, for one sodding moment, give a fuck?"

Lucius switched his wand to his other hand and Draco watched the gesture intently. The battle roaring in the Great Hall had distracted him a couple of times; several familiar raised voices had caught his attention and the grip on his wand had slackened slightly. He needed to stay alert. His father's movements and behaviour were too erratic for him to be careless.

"My son died," said Lucius crisply. "I did my mourning. As far as I'm concerned, my son is still dead."

Each word was like a dart, but Draco didn't flinch. "Then what the hell am I?"

"You are nothing," he spat. "No son of mine would touch a Mudblood."

"Her name is Hermione Granger!"

"I know her fucking name! I was the one who identified her at the Manor!"

Draco clenched his jaw and stole a second to compose himself. He was nearly shaking with fury. But no. No. He had an advantage: information.

"You didn't help Granger." It was a statement, not a question.

"Of course I didn't."

"But mother did. Mum tried to help Granger."

Lucius didn't even attempt to conceal his shock. "What are you talking about?"

"You heard me. I've got news for you, father; both your son and your wife are here fighting with the Order. And she tried to help Granger-

"You're lying-

"She used Legilimency on Granger and saw us together and she tried to help her at the Manor. And then, when she realised I was alive, she went to Snape — who was also working for the Order, by the way — and asked to help-

"Narcissa would not-

"And she knew that I was with Granger and she didn't care. Your own bloody wife abandoned you because she knew how deranged you'd become!"

Lucius' left eye twitched. "No, I would have known-

"You would have known nothing! You are oblivious, father!" He paused to catch his breath; his chest was heaving. "Don't you get it? You. Are. Alone."

"Shut up!"

"I WILL NOT!" screamed Draco. "Mum left you because she knew you would disown me when you found out about Granger! She knew you would turn your back on your own flesh and blood, all because of your mindless devotion to that fucking creature you call a Lord!"

A fleeting look of panic flashed in Lucius' eyes. "She would never betray me," he whispered to himself.

"You sure about that? You don't look sure." Perhaps it was cruel to taunt, but Draco was beyond caring. "Do you honestly think for a second that Mum would choose Voldemort over me? Her own son? No! Because she's not like you!"

"She wouldn't."

"Why?" snapped Draco. "Because you're her husband? Because of loyalty? Where the hell was your loyalty to us when you brought Voldemort into our lives? What the fuck were you even thinking getting us involved with that? You put him before us!"

The brief flicker of doubt that had stolen Lucius' features disappeared and in its place returned a cold, loathing expression. He was incensed, but there was also...emptiness. A chilling sort of vacancy, like any final, tenacious light inside of Lucius had been extinguished. "I don't recall hearing either of you complain."

"I was fifteen and I-

"Yes, and now you're seventeen and a Blood Traitor. And not just a Blood Traitor," sneered Lucius. "A fucking Mudblood lover."

"That's right," said Draco, nodding his head firmly. "I do love her."

"Oh please-

"And you can stand there and deny me all you want, but I am still your son-

"You are not-

"I am still a Malfoy, and the only Malfoy heir." With each word, Draco could see his father's face becoming more and more overrun with rage, but he carried on. "And I am telling you now, Lucius, that all of this Malfoy Pureblood brainwashing bullshit ends with me."

Lucius' nostrils flared and his lips peeled back, baring his grinding teeth, but he didn't speak.

"Do you hear me?" pushed Draco. "All the hatred and lies that have been passed down through the Malfoy generations are done. Finished."

Draco was so lost in his rant that he didn't notice his father's wand twitch tellingly in his trembling fist.

"And when all this is over," Draco continued, "And you're rotting in some lonely cell in Azkaban, I hope you have a fraction of your sanity left so you know that it was your son who broke the chain! And that in the outside world, I keep the Malfoy name! And that if you have any grandchildren, they will probably be Half-bloods!"

Apparently, that comment was too much for Lucius. Like a struck match, he was alive and dangerous in an instant, seething with ire and snapping out his wand arm to aim directly at Draco's chest. But Draco was quick to react. The adrenaline was pounding so hard in his ears that he didn't catch the incantation spitting out of his father's mouth, but it didn't matter; Draco raised his wand just in time to disarm Lucius with a fast Expelliarmus. His father's wand — still hot and charged — landed in his ready hand, and then he rushed forward, firing a spell to pin Lucius against the wall.

Marching towards him with long, stamping strides, Draco grabbed the scruff his father's Death Eater robes and forced their faces close, so Lucius had no choice but to look him in the eye. Draco's heart was like a stampede in his chest, loud and hammering so hard that he felt

like his bones vibrated with it. It took Draco a moment to gather himself; he was panting violently and he couldn't tell if it was from the haste of the last two minutes or because he was so furious.

"What spell was that?" he sputtered between gasping breaths. "Was that an Avada?"

Lucius snarled back at him, and Draco noticed the blood on his teeth; he looked like he was biting down hard on his tongue. Taking a step backwards, he released Lucius' robes and allowed the spell to hold him firmly against the wall. The tip of Lucius' wand was still glowing with the residue of the incomplete spell, and the fading light was green, but not the deep, thick green of the Killing Curse. With his other hand, he raised Andromeda's wand and aimed it at his father's, mumbling, "Prior Incantato."

A moment later and Draco spun back around to face Lucius with an eerily composed expression. "Really? A Memory Charm?"

Lucius remained silent.

"And apparently quite a strong one," said Draco. "Strong enough to give me brain damage and see me as a permanent resident at St. Mungo's, by the looks of it. Your wand is still warm."

Still no response.

"You were going to erase my memory completely, weren't you? You were going to erase me."

Lucius still refused to utter a word and Draco's cool facade cracked. Lunging forward, he fisted his hands tighter into his father's robes, pulled him forward, and then slammed his body hard back against the wall.

"Speak!" he yelled in his father's face. "Say something!"

Lucius grunted, but slowly lifted his head and glared at Draco with thin, terrible eyes. "Better no Malfoy bloodline at all than an impure one."

For the second time that day, Draco felt the threat of tears sting the backs of his eyes, but, unlike the last, these would not fall. They were angry, searing tears that hurt to hold in, but hold them in he did. That was it then; the final — and it really was this time — blow. No more little boy hopes for some chance of reconciliation. It was all just...gone. Lucius' sanity and rationality, Draco's respect and admiration, their relationship as father and son...all of these things were gone. For good.

But he felt no loss. No longing or hope anymore. Not a hint. Instead what punctured the surface of his being was that familiar and almost comforting bite of rage. It came to him in a calm and steady wave, warming his face and cooling everywhere else. He grasped his father's robes again. Tighter.

"Did you kill Theo?"

Lucius seemed thrown by the sudden question. "What did you-

"DID YOU KILL THEO?" he screamed.

A chilling glint of comprehension invaded his eyes and his upper lip curled back with disdain. "Theodore Nott got in the way."

Draco inhaled sharply. "In the way of the falling wall? Or you?"

"Me," said Lucius without hesitation or regret.

Draco exhaled, but his chest felt tight and constricted. For a moment he thought he was suffocating. Painful flashbacks of Theo dying on the cold Great Hall floor penetrated his mind, attacking like nightmares that had come to life and were playing out before him. His eyes clenched shut. Darkness was better than those memories.

He was sweating and trembling with the effort that comes with exercising restraint; he wanted so badly to punch his father, but there seemed no point or dignity in that. And if he punched Lucius once, he wasn't sure he'd be able to stop. His eyes opened.

"Why?"

Lucius licked his bloody teeth. "Why? Because I saw that ungrateful little bastard kill his father."

Draco felt nauseous; the acidic burn of vomit scorched his throat and his vision blurred at the sides. He didn't know what to say. Words came and went without registering, and he couldn't cling to one specific thought in his shambolic brain.

But he had known.

Somehow, on some level, he had known (or at least anticipated) that Theo's death had been intentional. An accident would have been too easy. Too fair. And, as Draco had long ago learned, things were rarely easy or fair. As Theo had once said years ago: Life's a bitch and then you die.

"Tell me," said Lucius casually, cutting through Draco's thoughts. "Do you intend to imitate him?"

"What?"

"Do you intend to mimic what he did?" he asked. "Did you two make some pathetic Blood Traitor pact together to kill your fathers? "

He thought about it. He really did. A flashback of Theo struck him like lightning; his friend sitting across the table and asking, "Do you think you could kill your father?" Draco had known the answer back then and he knew it now. He remembered he had told Theo, "I'd do what was necessary."

"No," said Draco shaking his head regretfully. "Believe me, a part of me wishes that I could, but...but I'm not like you. I'm not a murderer."

"Then what exactly do you intend to do with me?"

Draco didn't respond. Instead, he lifted his father's wand again, grasping it with both hands, and snapped it. Or at least tried to. The wood was too strong to break it in half completely, but it was cracked and splintered, hanging limply like a broken arm. Unusable. Tossing it over his shoulder, Draco returned his eyes to his father's enraged ones.

"You were right about one thing," he said slowly. "I am not your son. Not anymore."

Lucius' left eye was twitching again.

"But everything else you ever told me...about Muggle-borns and Muggles and everything, it was all lies. And you...you killed my friend..."

Draco sighed and took a few steps back, and with a flick of Andromeda's wand, he released the spell fixing Lucius to the wall. His father seemed momentarily stunned by the gesture, but his bitter, livid expression quickly fell back into place.

"If you go in the Great Hall now, you will be killed or apprehended before they send you to Azkaban," said Draco, his tone deceptively steady. "And I can assure you that should you go to trial, I will be there to help make sure that you are locked up for good-

"You snivelling piece of-

"I wasn't finished!" he barked. "I don't need you in my life. I don't want you in my life. I have people. I have Granger, and mother, and Blaise, and Dromeda. But you? You have no one, and that's exactly what you deserve."

Lucius' nostrils flared and he shifted his feet anxiously.

"I want you to leave," said Draco firmly. "I don't ever want to see you again. I want you to disappear. I want you to...erase yourself from my life."

"And where exactly do you expect me to go?" asked Lucius.

"I don't care. You're nothing to me anymore."

With one final, hard glare at the man he would never again call father, Draco spun on his heel and sprinted towards the Great Hall. Behind him, Lucius was screaming, demanding that he return, but Draco kept running. He was done. So completely and utterly done. As the sounds of the battle ricocheted around the hall and drowned out Lucius' voice, something told Draco that he would never hear his voice again.

But he didn't look back.

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Hermione was in trouble. Real trouble.

Bellatrix's wand was being far more disobedient than she'd anticipated; even casting shields was problematic. Unable to fully defend herself, she had already acquired a black eye and a few bleeding gashes from Bellatrix's relentless spells, and she hadn't even had a chance yet to attempt any sort of attack. Bellatrix was far too fast and skilled even against the three of them. With experience and power on her side, she was practically untouchable.

With a slash of her new wand, Bellatrix caught Luna right in the stomach and sent her flying backwards about twenty feet away. Cackling to herself with unmitigated glee, she then whipped around and hit Ginny with a spell that seemed to knock the wind out of her completely, and Hermione could only watch as her friend's eyes rolled back into her head before she collapsed to the ground, unconscious.

And then, in what felt like slow motion, Bellatrix turned to Hermione, flashing her jagged teeth with a depraved, sinister smirk. Hermione's breath was wedged somewhere between her mouth and lungs, choking her, but she forced herself to recover quickly. Standing as tall and proud as she could, she met Bellatrix's stare head-on and prepared herself for whatever was coming.

"Silly little Mudblood," snickered Bellatrix in that scratching, high-pitched voice of hers. "Did you honestly think you could defeat me with my own wand?"

Hermione's voice failed her between the heavy heaves of her chest and the fear she felt. She tried to resist, but her thoughts dragged her back to her final confrontation with Bellatrix back at Malfoy Manor. The Mudblood scar on her arm suddenly felt very prominent and inflamed. But still, determination kept her blood pumping, and — in what was arguably a reckless move — she fired a Stunning Spell.

Effortlessly, Bellatrix deflected it and retaliated with a curse that struck Hermione directly in her chest and caused what felt like an electric shock to course throughout her body. It hurt like hell, and Hermione released a scream as she sank to her knees. When she lifted her head, Bellatrix looked like a giddy schoolgirl, laughing with delight.

"Aw, the Mudblood fell down," she said, pouting with contrived concern. "So sad. So tragic. I wonder how poor, little Draco will react when he discovers I killed you. That was quite the show you two put on outside. I always knew he was useless."

Hermione gritted her teeth and tried to stand, but Bellatrix shot the same curse at her.

"Stay down!" yelled Bellatrix. "You will not escape from me this time."

As Bellatrix angled her wand, Hermione could only kneel there speechlessly and wait for what she assumed was the Killing Curse. Dry-mouthed and gasping, she was tempted to shut

her eyes, but she didn't, even when Bellatrix's lips began to part for the incantation. But she never managed to actually speak.

Like an eclipse, everything suddenly went dark, but it wasn't darkness at all. There was a body clothed in black robes blocking her sight of Bellatrix, standing between them like a strong, defiant wall. Craning her neck, Hermione tried to see who it was, realising first that her saviour was a woman. She thought it might be McGonagall, but she then noticed the blonde hair carefully confined in a neat bun that was only slightly tousled from today's events, and she knew it was Narcissa. Peeking out from behind Narcissa's robes, Hermione managed to catch the flicker of shock that crossed Bellatrix's warped features.

"Cissy, what are you doing?" she asked, sounding almost exasperated. "Get out of the way."

"No."

Bellatrix's eyebrows hitched up. "What do you mean, 'No'?"

"I'm not moving, Bella. You will not harm her."

"Why? Because your little darling Draco turned and found himself a Mudblood girlfriend? How fucking precious." She scoffed. "I always knew the boy was useless. Insolent, pathetic brat."

Narcissa took a daring step forward, her heel stamping hard against the floor. "Be very careful how you speak about my son, Bella," she spat through gritted teeth. "Very careful."

Bellatrix's mouth twitched with distaste. "Perhaps you should be careful about how you speak to me, Cissy."

Silence followed, and in that silence, tension crackled between the sisters like a wayward firework ready to explode. Tentatively, Hermione rose to her feet and met Bellatrix's dark, dilated eyes over Narcissa's shoulder. The Death Eater looked calmly crazed, like a stretched string on the verge of snapping, and, as futile as it was, Hermione toyed with Bellatrix's crooked wand, clenching it in her clammy palm, just in case. Something changed in Bellatrix's demeanour, and then she started laughing; a low, merciless chuckle that sounded like ripping silk.

"So that's how it is, Cissy?"

"It doesn't need to be, Bella," said Narcissa.

"Oh, I think it does." She widened her stance. "Last chance, little sister. Move."

"No."

A second later, Hermione was blinded by the shine of Narcissa's Shielding Charm. A formidable curse poured out of Bellatrix's wand trying to puncture the protection spell, and Hermione could see it cracking under the pressure. Narcissa groaned with exertion, but it was all for nothing; Bellatrix surged more power into her spell and struck her sister so hard that she was flung sideways, smacking her head against a wall and then crumpling to the ground.

With closed eyes and a small trickle blood seeping out of Narcissa's ear, Hermione assumed the worst and tried to run over to help, but she barely managed a step before Bellatrix fired a spell at her. It caught her arm and she yelped as the hot curse scorched the exposed skin just above her wrist, rousing a patch of painful blisters across the burned area.

"Stay where you are," said Bellatrix, licking her chapped her lips. "Let's continue, shall we?"

"What the hell is wrong with you?" blurted Hermione. "She's your sister!"

"I've learned not to trust my sisters."

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Draco was sprinting through the Great Hall, ducking and dodging out of the way of several hexes and curses that threatened to knock him off course. Or worse. He'd seen Bellatrix knock out his mother and that was why he had started running, but now he could see his malicious aunt taunting Hermione and it made his legs move that much quicker. He had no idea what he intended to do once he reached them; he was hardly going to be able to reason with Bellatrix, but still, he ran. He ran so fast his legs felt detached from the rest of his body and his heart felt like it was where his Adam's apple should be.

Hermione's back was to him and he could see Bellatrix sneering coldly at her, twirling her wand mockingly. Raising Andromeda's wand, Draco was ready to hurl a spell, but Bellatrix spotted him before he could even utter a syllable of the incantation. She retaliated with a quick flick of her wand, and Draco felt ropes coil around his body so tight that he was certain she had bruised a few of his ribs.

"Draco!" he heard Hermione shout.

Like a caught fish, Bellatrix dragged him towards her across the uneven floor, bits of sharp stone slicing into his skin and snagging his clothes. His foot connected with a protruding brick and he felt something near his ankle rip; a muscle or a tendon. Either way, it was agony. When Bellatrix stopped hauling him forward, Hermione appeared and knelt as his side, frantically tearing at the ropes with her hands as she mumbled incantations under her breath that seemed to weaken their grip on his body.

"Don't struggle," she said. "It'll make them tighter."

He managed to grasp one of her trembling, busy hands. "Run, Granger."

"What?"

"Run. I'll distract her."

Hermione squeezed his hand back and then released it so she could continue to rip away his restraints. "I'd rather run with you than walk alone."

"Granger, please," he groaned. "Just run. Run before she-

"Don't be foolish, Draco. She wouldn't make it two steps."

Bellatrix towered over them like a dark, dangerous thundercloud, grinning down at them with such an evil aura that Hermione couldn't suppress a shiver. She realised now that Bellatrix's black robes were damp with blood and there were red stains tucked underneath her fingernails. Hermione's mind raced, desperately trying to think of a way to escape. Bellatrix's wand was refusing to comply with any offensive spells aimed at its original owner and everyone around them was too busy combating other Death Eaters to offer any assistance. Glancing at Draco, she found his expression was so much calmer than hers, but his eyes were stormy with panic. She could tell by the bruise spreading out across his foot that he had hurt his ankle, so running was completely out of the question.

She reached for Draco's hand again, gave it a gentle pinch of reassurance, and then got to her feet, standing protectively in front of him.

"Aw," Bellatrix cooed. "How adorable. The disgusting Mud-bitch and my disappointing nephew." Her features hardened like ice. "Do you really think standing in front of him will make a difference? It just means I'll kill you first."

There was a rush of movement behind Hermione; Draco fired a curse, but Bellatrix blocked it and returned with a disarming spell that kicked Andromeda's wand out of his hand and sent it rolling in the same direction as Narcissa.

"Andromeda didn't defeat me with that wand thirty years ago," said Bellatrix. "Did you honestly believe for a split second that you would be able to?"

Draco glared at her. "I'm sure I speak for Andromeda and myself when I say fuck you."

Bellatrix ran her tongue across her chipped, jagged teeth and adjusted the position of her wand, aiming it intently at Hermione. "I'm bored of you both. Say goodbye to your girlfriend, Draco. But don't worry, you'll be joining her soon."

Hermione's eyes slammed shut. Behind her, she heard Draco scream NO at the top of his lungs so loud that she thought it must have risen above all the noise echoing around the Great Hall. She waited for something. A blow, or pain, or nothingness, but it never came. Instead she heard Bellatrix swear under her breath. Opening her eyes, she noticed the sleeve of Bellatrix's robes was singed and she had turned away, now looking over her shoulder at Ginny, who was on her feet with her wand still aimed and glowing with the residue of an Incendio.

"You vile smear of Weasley shit," growled Bellatrix quietly, outraged. She whipped her body around, drew back her wand with intent, and screamed, "Avada Kedavra!"

"GINNY!" shouted Hermione.

The Killing Curse missed her friend by a fraction of an inch, skimming past her shoulder and colliding with the floor. But before Hermione could even feel the faintest trace of relief, Bellatrix was readying herself for another go. But, from somewhere to Hermione's left, a voice bellowed out over the crowd, familiar and usually friendly, but now fierce and actually rather intimidating.

"NOT MY DAUGHTER, YOU BITCH!"

Molly Weasley charged towards them like a robust runaway train with flushed, shiny cheeks and a split lip. Hermione heard Draco mumble "Holy shit" behind her and she understood his sentiment. Never had she seen Molly look so furious. She was almost feral in appearance; a lioness protecting her cub and ready to tear off the limbs of anyone who dared to challenge her.

"Get out of the way, kids," she ordered, levelling up to Bellatrix. "You will not harm my family! Get back, kids!"

Bellatrix was chuckling again, cruelly and mockingly. Hermione took advantage of the distraction and turned to Draco, casting a hasty *Ferula* to bind his injured ankle and provide enough support for him to walk. Yanking at his shoulders, she practically dragged him to his feet and pulled him back a few yards, out of the range of Molly and Bellatrix. Ginny had also backed away and was now studying her mother with concern, evidently wanting to interfere despite her mother's demands that she didn't.

The two witches began to duel, streams of angry light jetted out of their wands like wildfire. They barraged each other with curses, but it was obvious from the offset that Bellatrix was the more skilled dueller. She avoided Molly's attacks with such ease, taunting her opponent between each curse she fired.

"Seven motherless children coming up!" she grinned coldly. "How will they cope without their dear, old, frumpy mummy?"

"You will stay away from my family!" retorted Molly.

But then she stumbled, and Bellatrix fired a quick spell to knock Molly to her knees. Chortling with triumph, she began the incantation for the Killing Curse — the final blow — and Ginny and Hermione both dashed forward to intervene. But they didn't need to. Someone else cast a spell to prevent the would-be murder.

Hermione looked around for the source until her eyes settled on Narcissa, who was now standing strong and clutching Andromeda's wand in her fist. The amusement slipped away from Bellatrix's face when she spotted her sister, and instead a callous, merciless expression stretched out across her features. Her dark eyes shifted to Andromeda's wand and her lips peeled back in a snarl.

"What do you intend to do with that, Cissy?"

"Don't you ever threaten my son," warned Narcissa. "Never piss off a mother."

"Or two," said Molly, who had quickly recovered and was back on her feet.

There was a pause, the calm before the storm. Narcissa fired the first spell, and what followed was a blur of activity and a flurry of flashing lights. No more taunts or chuckles spilled out of Bellatrix's mouth as the two mothers bombarded her with everything they had, hitting their marks. Hermione had never witnessed Narcissa in a duel and she was in awe of her skill. She had no idea why, but she had assumed Narcissa's flamboyant lifestyle in an elite family would have made her lazy, but she was almost as quick and adroit as her sister.

"Your mum's amazing," she said to Draco. "I had no idea."

"Neither did I."

Sweat dribbled from Bellatrix's forehead, and her look of contempt was now contorted with something that looked like terror. She knew what was coming: her defeat. It was just a matter of when. Hermione had no clue who cast the Killing Curse, but a spurt of the fatal green light struck Bellatrix directly in the chest.

Everything went still, including Bellatrix, and her eyes rolled back into her head before she slumped lifelessly to the ground with a blunt thump. The small crowd that had gathered to watch roared with success, and Molly and Narcissa dropped their wands, sharing a brief look of mutual understanding.

After Accio-ing back her own wand, Narcissa turned to Draco and Hermione and approached them slowly, panting with exhaustion but holding her posture proudly, though Hermione could see she was slightly nervous. That aching expression of need to hold her son — Hermione remembered that same expression from the Manor — was etched into Narcissa's face, but she didn't reach out and try to embrace him when she was close enough. She simply stood before him, staring at him like she thought she might have forgotten something about his appearance. Hermione could feel the same faint anxious energy coming from Draco. His hands fidgeted at his sides and his jaw was clenched with uncertainty about what to say.

Finally, Narcissa blurted, "I am so, so sorry, Draco."

His brow furrowed, confused. "What for?"

Her eyes strayed to Hermione for a moment, but quickly returned back to her son. "Everything."

Draco sighed deeply. "Mother, I-

A loud, ear-scratching scream cut him off, followed by a loud explosion. All the heads in the room seemed to suddenly dart towards something in the centre. Hermione turned just in time to see the blinding glare of Voldemort's blast as it tossed McGonagall, Slughorn, and Kingsley aside like ragdolls and kept spreading. Someone cast a huge Shielding Charm to protect everyone in the hall before the spell could reach its full ferocity, and then there was a prolonged period of silence.

A rumble of voices rippled across the room and then someone shouted, "HARRY! IT'S HARRY!"

Chapter End Notes

Yeah, I know, I suck balls. I was working in America for two months and I had pretty much no computer time at all and now I've started my teacher training and I'm a little busy. Sorry sorry sorry. Thanks to everyone who's been so supportive, especially the lovely people on tumblr, facebook, and twitter who are always understanding and wonderful and I could just hug you all. Maybe kiss some of you. I'd probably dry hump a few of you, too.

Also, FUCK YEAH, we have a new upcoming Harry Potter universe movie to celebrate! Cheers m'dears! Did anyone else cry? So excited! Let's raise a glass (if you're of age!) to Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them!

As before, some lines have been taken from the original text, like Molly's BITCH line. That needed to be in there!

Hope the chapter's okay! Next chapter might be the last depending on how long it gets...may have to split it in two though...not sure yet. HUGE thank you for all the reviews and favourites and follows! You guys are amazing! I will try and get the next chapter as soon as possible!

All my love

Bex

Power

Chapter Notes

Just the usual song recs! Tom Odell - Heal and Poets of the Fall - War. Huge thank you to my Beta, Maeghan (occupymalfoysbed on tumblr) for betaing this chapter! Hope you like it!

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

At the mention of her best friend's name, Hermione's heart soared up into her throat. The cheers of the crowd grew louder, and all the while she could hear people saying Harry's name, reaffirming that he was alive. She craned her neck and leaned forward on the tips of her toes, trying to see over the horde and follow their eyes to the commotion at the centre of the Great Hall, but it was futile. All she could see were the heads and shoulders of everyone else, blocking her view like a barricade of bodies. She cursed her short stature.

"I can see him," said Draco beside her. "I can see Potter."

Hermione's eyes darted to him. "You can? He's alive?"

"Yes," he nodded, and then he turned to her with the slightest of smiles. "I told you he was immortal."

"Oh my God. Really? He's really there?"

"Come here, short arse." Tugging her close, he wrapped his arms around her hips and lifted her off the ground. "See him now?"

"Yes!" she gasped. "Yes, I see him!"

Draco didn't really understand why he suddenly felt relieved and almost pleased, but he decided it was because she looked happy. And when Granger was happy, she glowed. It touched everything close to her, like the heat of sunrays, and he inevitably felt her warmth.

Glancing to the side, Draco frowned when he found his mother had moved away from his side and was meandering her way through the crowd, searching. He wondered if she was looking for Lucius amongst the collection of battle-worn witches and wizards, but Hermione spoke and he looked back to her.

"What?"

"Harry's confronting Voldemort," she said, squirming impatiently in his arms. "Put me down, please. We need to get closer. I need to see what's happening."

Draco lowered her to the floor and the moment her feet landed on solid ground she pulled his elbow, dragging him forward and meandering them through the others trying to witness what was taking place. Limping due to the lingering pain still throbbing in his ankle, he struggled to keep up with his lover as she pulled him this way and that, colliding with several people along the way. But it was working; they were getting closer and Draco could hear the raised voices of Potter and Voldemort as the crowd hushed to listen.

"Hermione, over here!"

Ron ushered them over to a platform of debris near the centre of the Great Hall where he, Neville, Ginny, Luna, and Blaise were all perched, watching the scene from their slightly elevated vantage point. Climbing up the fallen bricks and crumbled parapets, she still clutched Draco's hand, practically yanking him up there with her, stumbling with her desperation to see the exchange between Harry and Voldemort, and, inevitably, the outcome of the War.

She knew this was it. The climax. The final battle. Everything that they had been fighting for would be decided now by her seventeen-year-old best friend and this clash with one of the most dangerously powerful wizards that had ever lived. She'd never been more terrified and excited.

As Hermione and Draco found their balance atop a stable stack of stone beside Ron and the others, Draco scanned the area and did a double-take when he spotted his mother comfortably standing beside Molly Weasley and McGonagall. He thought back to his encounter with Snape, remembering his disclosure about his mother helping the Order, and he wondered if McGonagall had known. Another question to add to his list that he would ask if they won the war.

Where was Snape? Surely he would be here, just like everyone else.

Sweeping his eyes across the hall, he caught sight of Miles, Millicent, and Tracey, huddled amongst a group of Hufflepuffs. All seemed fine, which was good. Miles caught his eye and dipped his head with acknowledgement, but Draco could detect his nerves despite the distance between them. The girls looked nervous, too. He wondered if any of the masked Death Eaters hovering on the other side of the room were their parents, or if any of his fellow Slytherins had suffered a similar confrontation to the one he'd had with Lucius.

Draco thought of Theo then, who he knew had indeed had a confrontation with not only his father, but Lucius, too.

Theo should have been here.

Theo should have been standing up on this rostrum of rubble with him and Blaise. He should have been cracking inappropriate and ill-timed jokes. He should have been irritating them with unnecessary comments. He should have been here as the third member of their conflicted and complicated Slytherin trio.

He should have been here as their friend.

Hermione nudged him, and he looked down into her wide, worried eyes.

"This is it," she said.

"Yes."

He didn't know what else to say. All words suddenly seemed obsolete.

Instead he looked where everyone else was looking: the centre of the room, where Potter and Voldemort were circling each other like impatient, hungry wolves. They were speaking to each other; Potter sneered his words through gritted teeth, and Voldemort hissed his words back, spitting a little with each syllable. Despite the steadfast silence of everyone else in the Great Hall and their proximity to Potter and Voldemort, Draco strained to hear their exchange. Some words and phrases got lost amongst Hogwarts' tumbled columns, but, for the most part, he could hear their heated quarrel.

"You will not kill anyone else tonight!" shouted Potter. "It's over, Riddle! All your Horcruxes have been destroyed."

"You think yourself stronger than me?" taunted Voldemort. "You think you alone can protect these fools?"

"I already have! My love for them protects them from you, just as my mother's love protected me!"

Voldemort snorted and grinned a vile grin. "Love? Love? Did Dumbledore implant these ridiculous ideas into your simple head?"

"Why do you think none of your spells have been working? My love shields them!"

Draco felt Hermione's hand slip into his.

"You think your pathetic concept of love is stronger than me?" jeered Voldemort. "You think you are stronger than me? I am the most powerful wizard that has ever lived."

Harry shook his head. "Dumbledore was stronger than you."

"I brought about his death!"

"No you didn't," said Harry calmly. "You're wrong. You think Snape was working for you, that he killed Dumbledore for you, but you're wrong. Snape was on our side."

A burst of gasps echoed around the crowd.

"You think you and Snape planned Dumbledore's death, but they had planned it between them long before. The moment you threatened my mother he became Dumbledore's spy because he loved her."

Voldemort scoffed. "Snape had nothing more than a fleeting desire for your mudblood mother."

Draco scowled. It was strange how that word infuriated him now.

"That's what Snape wanted you to think," continued Harry. "But he loved her, and he sided with Dumbledore. So when Snape killed Dumbledore, it was planned. The power wouldn't be transferred to Snape. Dumbledore had wanted the Elder Wand's power to die with him-

"It is irrelevant," disputed Voldemort, narrowing his eyes at Harry. "Because I stole the Elder Wand from that old fool's grave. I plucked it from his cold, dead fingers. I killed Snape, and since Dumbledore's death was by his hand, the power is now mine."

Draco choked on a sharp breath and turned to Hermione. "Snape's dead?"

She nodded her head once and stuttered, "I-I'm sorry."

There wasn't really time for Draco to react to the news, but he felt his fists clench, and his chest seemed to constrict. How should he feel? His relationship with Snape had been complex to say the least, but, nevertheless, the man had ultimately saved his life in more ways than one. There lied a debt he would never be able to repay. But those thoughts, like so many others, would need to be placed aside for later.

"You're not listening, are you?" said Harry, glaring hard at Voldemort now. "Possessing the wand isn't enough! The wand chooses the Wizard, remember? Somebody else defeated Dumbledore. Somebody else disarmed him, and he became the master of the Elder Wand."

Draco's brow furrowed with confusion. He didn't really understand what Potter was saying, but he knew it was somehow important. Beside him, he felt Hermione stiffen.

"Oh my God," she whispered, snapping her head around to face him. Her eyes were wide with knowledge. "Your wand. Draco, where is your wand?"

He stared back at her, perplexed. "What?"

She reached for his pocket with jerky movements and yanked out Andromeda's wand. She studied it for a moment and then looked back to him with even rounder eyes. "This isn't your wand."

"It's Andromeda's," he explained. "What the hell is going on, Granger?"

"Where is your wand, Draco?" she asked frantically. "Where is it?"

"I don't know! I lost it, remember? Granger, what is-

"Yes, yes," she muttered, distracted. "Harry disarmed you and he kept it...and he's been using it..."

Draco frowned. "Potter has my wand?"

"Yes! And since you were the one who disarmed Dumbledore..."

They both turned back to Harry and Voldemort just as the latter lifted his wand, his arm shaking

violently with intent. Harry didn't flinch, and Hermione could never recall seeing such a fierce look of

determination on her best friend's face. Draco watched as Potter slowly lifted up the wand in his hand — his wand — and he understood.

"Draco Malfoy was the true master of the Elder Wand!" exclaimed Harry, and Draco felt hundreds of eyes shift to him for a brief moment. "He disarmed Dumbledore, and that's why it won't work for you! You may possess the physical wand, but its powers are not yours!"

"Holy shit," mumbled Draco.

When he looked up, Voldemort's piercing, shocked eyes were fixated on him, and his serpentine face was stretched back with spite. But in a second, the shock was gone, and Voldemort turned back to Potter with that even, cold expression of deranged composure.

"No matter," he said confidently. "After I defeat you, I will attend to Draco Malfoy."

Hermione tugged at Draco's arm, trying to pull him backwards, but he resisted.

"But you see," Harry went on, "You're too late. I disarmed Draco just a few days ago." He paused and aimed Draco's wand at Voldemort. "So the only real question is: does the wand know its last master was disarmed? Because if it does, then I am the master of the Elder Wand."

Hermione didn't realise how fast her heart was beating until that moment. It was roaring in her chest like a storm. She couldn't tear her eyes away from Harry and Voldemort, but a spurt of glowing, red light poured into the Great Hall through the shattered windows and forced her to squint. It was the first of the rays of sunrise, and it enveloped Harry and Voldemort in an almost Hellish, fiery light. Her eyes adjusted to the garish blur just in time to see Voldemort prepare his wand and open his mouth, and Harry did the same.

This was it. The difference between damnation and salvation was now balancing forebodingly on the shoulders of a seventeen-year-old boy and his tentative theory about a wand from a fairytale. The atmosphere in the Great Hall was curled around the occupants like a clenched fist.

"Avada Kedavra!"

"Expelliarmus!"

Green and red collided in the centre of the room with a horrendous roar, and the gust of the impact almost shoved Hermione, Draco, and the others off their pedestal. Shielding Hermione from the blast with his body, Draco closed his eyes, feeling the heat of Potter and Voldemort's clashing spells tingle the nape of his neck. Dust and sediment rushed outwards from the explosion and into the crowd, shrouding them in rubble. Swiping away the dirt in

his eyes with his sleeve, Draco blinked away the mist of his vision and looked back to where Potter and Voldemort had stood.

Only now, Potter stood alone. In his left hand, he held the Elder Wand tightly in his fist, and in his right, he held Draco's Hawthorn. Sprawled across the ground lay Voldemort; stiff, still, and silent. Dead. Definitely dead. The Dark Lord was no more. The only movement was the slight flutter of his robes, teased by a breeze sweeping in through a hole in the wall.

He heard Hermione inhale sharply as she absorbed the scene for herself, but that was the only sound to puncture the nothingness that had suddenly blanketed the Great Hall. Everyone beneath the enchanted ceiling simply stood there, staring hard at Voldemort's corpse in collaborative silent, motionless shock.

For five heavy beats of Draco's heart, nothing happened. And then the crowd erupted.

Draco had no idea how, but Hermione threw herself off the brick pile and reached Potter first, wrapping her arms around his neck and embracing him with all her strength. Weasley was right behind her, and then came the rest. McGonagall, Lovegood, Finnegan, and every other red-headed member of the Weasley clan. They all gathered around him; many cheering, some crying.

Turning his head to the side, he found Blaise, like himself, had yet to move from his spot. But there was a subtle grin on his face as he slowly met Draco's eyes. Draco's lips twitched with a subtle smile of his own.

"They won," said Draco.

"We won," corrected Blaise.

The elation and relief that flooded Draco stayed, unexpressed, in his chest, inevitably dimmed by the deaths of Tonks, Snape, and Theo. Theo. And what of Lucius? How had Snape died? So many questions to ask. But there was time now. Time to learn. They were no longer under threat. There was no augury timer counting down to their deaths. Voldemort was defeated, and with his defeat, they were all free.

Nearing Draco, Blaise patted his friend on the back, and the pair watched the scene. Their attention was diverted from the Potter parade to the side of the Great Hall. Shacklebolt and around fifteen others were surrounding the forty or so remaining Death Eaters, though most had already surrendered their wands. One by one, they removed their masks, and Draco recognised some of the faces. Crabbe and Goyle's fathers were among them, both of Pansy's parents, and then...another familiar face.

Blaise sighed and shook his head as he watched his mother raise her hands in submission. "Stupid cow," he muttered. "I wondered if she would be here."

"Are you going to speak with her?" asked Draco.

"I have nothing to say to her. Sometimes the past is best left ignored." He paused. "What about your past? I don't see Lucius down there."

Draco averted his eyes to the ground. "I saw him earlier. We talked. I haven't seen him since."

"And?"

"And nothing. He reacted how I expected him to."

Blaise nodded with understanding. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be," he replied lifting his eyes to locate his mother. She was on the other side of the room, talking with McGonagall. "I have had more support than I had initially anticipated."

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As the horde surrounding Potter began to disintegrate, and those people moved on to talk with others, Draco found himself sitting alone on a bench. To which house it belonged, he didn't know, nor did he particularly care. The professors had brought out the House benches and tables to provide some seating for the weary fighters, and he had simply settled on the nearest. He watched with half-lidded eyes as they all talked, celebrated, mourned...

It seemed apt for him to sit here; not separated and yet not fully integrated. On the outskirts, but there nonetheless.

As he became aware of someone sitting beside him, he focused on Shacklebolt and Slughorn lifting Voldemort's corpse and placing it in a small alcove, purposefully kept away from the fallen.

"What do you think they'll do with it?" he asked.

"I don't know," sighed Narcissa. "Bury it, I suppose."

"They should burn it."

"Perhaps."

When he angled his head to regard his mother, Draco was confronted with a very conflicted and tired expression. With red sunken eyes, over-chewed lips, and disheveled hair, she looked like an entirely different woman. Never could he recall seeing his mother look anything less than immaculate, even when Lucius had been sent to Azkaban. But the alterations in her appearance weren't just side-effects of the events of the last several hours. Her eyes looked like they'd been bloodshot for months, her cheeks were hollow, and there were some subtle grey hairs interwoven amongst her blonde ones.

A breath shuddered out of Draco before he shifted up the bench towards his mother, and her arms were wrapped around his shoulders before he even realised it. Burying his face into the crook of her shoulder, he felt the bob of her throat against his temple as she swallowed heavily, trying to stifle a whimper. He felt like a little boy seeking solace in his mother's embrace, but it was a comforting nostalgia, and exactly what he had been craving for a while. Over a year, in fact.

He didn't tell her that he'd missed her, and she didn't tell him that she's missed him. He didn't tell her that he'd been scared, or that he'd been worried, or even that he was so completely and utterly relieved that she was on his side. The absence of the words seemed all the more profound. He could feel it in the way she clung to him, and he hoped she could feel it in the way he clung to her.

After too short a time, he pulled away to look at her, watching one tear tumble down her sunken cheek. Guilt overtook him for what he was about to say next, but it was inevitable.

"I saw him," said Draco. There was no need to clarify who. "Just before everyone came in here, we spoke outside."

Narcissa bowed her head. "And what was said?"

"Nothing good. I don't know where he is now, but he made it clear that...well, you know." And then quieter. "I'm sorry, mum."

"Oh," she whispered, her hands covering her mouth. She cried harder, sputtering out the words. "Oh, no, Draco. I am sorry. I am so, so sorry. I never thought...I am just so sorry."

He reached out to grab her trembling hand. "I'm not angry with you."

"You should be. I am angry with myself."

Draco waited patiently for her tears to subside, holding her hand. "What about Lucius?"

"I don't know," she shrugged, shaking her head. "He's...he's not well. He hasn't been himself for a long time now, and I...I don't know. But I want you to know that you are my son, and you are my first priority. Whatever you want will be."

Nodding his head, he decided not to push the matter. A part of him wanted to curse and rant about Lucius to her, but he doubted it would do either of them any good. He had no idea what his parents had been through while he was away and, if he was honest, he really didn't want to discuss his father any longer. He had a feeling that it would be a topic brought up a lot over the next few days, and he already felt burdened with that notion. Plus, there would always be some censorship with how much he told his mother about how Lucius had so brutally dismissed him. Breaking her already broken heart was something he refused to do.

"I stayed with Andromeda," he blurted, feeling the need to break the silence.

Narcissa's eyes widened. "Okay."

"She took me in, kept me safe."

"That was...good of her."

"I like her, mum," he said. "I like her a lot, actually."

Her jaw twitched with regret. "I did, too."

Draco contemplated saying more, and then, for some reason, he thought about asking her how she felt about Bellatrix's death, but he decided against it quickly. Broken heart. Broken everything.

A blur of familiar bushy hair in his peripheral vision drew his attention back to the crowd and he saw Granger. She was speaking with Longbottom, but she must have felt his stare because her eyes met his, and she smiled softly at him. Narcissa followed his line of sight to Hermione and then looked back to him, her expression gentle and pensive.

"You love her very much, don't you?" she said.

He nodded his head once. "She's...she's just the reason. For everything. I can't explain it."

"She's...certainly a very special girl."

"She saved my life."

Narcissa watched the way her son watched the Muggle-born and felt a knot grow in her throat. Clasping her hands together tightly in her lap, she took a deep breath.

"Draco," she said slowly, bringing his focus back to her. "I'm not going to pretend that I completely understand, or that when I look at her I don't see...what I've always seen. But I promise you, I will learn. I will learn, just like you have. I promise, I will."

"I know you will," he replied.

"And I want you to know that I have never, ever, been as proud of you as I am today."

Flinging her arms around him in another desperate, seizing hug, Narcissa smiled against Draco's shoulder, and then she kissed his cheek in that firm way that mothers do. As she released him from her maternal death-grip, she lifted her hand to stroke the side of his face. Her eyes were beaming with joy that was suppressed only slightly by the glistening of tears, and her smile was fragile at the corners, but it was there nonetheless.

"We can talk about everything properly later once the dust settles, both literally and figuratively. I owe some people my gratitude, and to a great deal more, I owe apologies." She glanced back to Hermione, who had begun to tentatively approach them. "And it will allow you two some time alone."

"Thank you."

"I love you very much."

"I love you, too."

With a final cracked smile, she stood up and moved away from him, and he studied her with interest as she headed directly for Hermione. She shifted her weight nervously as Narcissa stopped in front of her, and Draco strained to hear their exchange, but they were too far away and the roar of the room drowned out anything he might have caught. After a fleeting conversation between the two witches, he quirked an eyebrow when he witnessed his mother pull Hermione in for a brief but undeniably awkward hug that looked anything but comfortable for either of them. Despite how unnatural it looked, Draco felt one of the corners of his mouth lift into half a smile.

It only lasted a few seconds, and then Narcissa was marching away, leaving behind an evidently bewildered Hermione. Noticing Draco's amused stare, she grinned back and continued to walk the short distance to where he sat, perching herself on the stool beside him. Slowly, she yanked at her sleeve and rolled it up to her elbow, displaying the clean and unmarked skin of her forearm.

"It's gone," she said, satisfied. "That Mudblood mark that Bellatrix cursed me with. I felt it disappear when she died. Blaise was right."

With almost hopeful urgency, Draco mimicked her actions and pulled up his sleeve, also revealing bare skin, unblemished by the Dark Mark that had once sat there so brazenly.

"Thank Merlin," he mumbled. "I wasn't...I didn't know if it would go."

"It's gone," she said, reaching for his arm and bringing it up to her lips to place a chaste kiss where the Dark Mark had been. "How do you feel without it?"

Cocking his head to the side with thought, he said, "I know this is an odd word to describe it, but I feel...clean."

"I know what you mean," she nodded, and then quirked a confused eyebrow at him. "What I do find odd is that you're sitting on a Gryffindor bench."

"Far stranger things have happened today."

"Like when your mother just hugged me?"

"That's certainly in the top ten," he said, leaning back and resting his shoulder blades against the table behind them. "What did she say to you?"

Hermione scooted a little closer to him, settling her hand on his knee and ignoring the unpleasant texture of his dirt-encrusted trousers. "She thanked me for saving your life."

"And what did you say?"

"I told her I didn't save your life. I told her that you did that by yourself."

Draco's brow crinkled into a frown. He disagreed with her, but the tone of her voice told him to resist challenging her comment.

"She's not completely okay with it, is she?" mumbled Hermione. "Us, I mean."

Sighing, he moved his fingers to massage the vertebra beads at the top her spine. "Not yet. But she'll get there."

"Like you did?"

"Like I did."

Dropping one his arms to drape across her shoulders, his fingers absently toyed with wisps of hair crowning the nape of her neck. He was tired now. So unbelievably tired. He could quite happily settle his head against Hermione's shoulder and let his lids fall shut.

"Tired?" asked Hermione.

"Hm," he grunted. His heavy lids were aching now, and despite his best efforts to resist, they slid shut. "Shattered."

He heard the bench creak as Hermione moved and then he felt the tips of her hair tickle his cheeks before she kissed him. Their first kiss since Voldemort's defeat, and it was appropriately tender and quiet. A throaty hum vibrated in his chest of its own accord as a numbing sense of calmness spread through him, encouraged by the persistent tug of exhaustion. As the deep darkness of looming sleep began to cloud his mind, he realised this was the first time in over a year that he had closed his eyes and felt completely safe.

"Have a quick nap," he heard Hermione mumble, and one of her hands pushed his hair away from his face. "I'll wake you up in a little while."

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Draco didn't manage to fall asleep. Not really.

He lingered in that blissful but torturous state between awake and sleeping; aware of his surroundings but, oblivious to time or context.

A low rumble of voices pulled him away from that purgatory back to consciousness despite his best attempts to avoid it. He could feel Hermione's hand still in his hair, tracing lazy patterns against his crown, and he was relieved that she was still at his side. Keeping his eyes closed and listening carefully, he recognised the voices of Blaise, Lovegood, Weasley, and Longbottom, all contributing to a conversation with his girlfriend, and then a couple more voices he couldn't quite place. They were inevitably discussing the battle.

The victory.

Slowly, he peeled open one eye and glanced at the little collection of people that had gathered around him and Granger since he had tried to fall asleep. As he'd deduced, the group included Blaise, Lovegood, Weasley, and Longbottom, and sitting with them were also Ginny Weasley, Katie Bell, and Dean Thomas.

Lovegood and Ginny Weasley were chatting about something to do with thestrals while Blaise and Thomas discussed theories about how Potter had beaten Voldemort. Hermione was talking with Longbottom about how he had decapitated Nagini, and Weasley was carefully wrapping Katie Bell's swollen hand in a bandage.

As his eyes scanned the group, he thought they all looked the same to some extent; all bearing expressions of paradoxes. They all looked exhausted, but wide awake. They all looked calm but anxious. They all looked happy but sad.

He must've moved slightly because the bench groaned and Hermione twisted her head to smile down at him.

"Good morning," she said.

Draco sat up and wiped his face with his dusty fingers. "Is it still morning?"

"Yes. You were only out for about twenty minutes."

"It's hard to sleep when everyone insists on talking so bloody loud," he grumbled, flinching when Hermione half-heartedly slapped his knee. "Did I miss anything?"

"Shacklebolt, Mad-eye, and some others took the Death Eaters down to the dungeons," said Blaise. "That's about it."

Draco nodded. He wondered how long it would take for all the Death Eaters, including Lucius, to be sent to Azkaban. Or even if they would be sent to Azkaban at all; there was clearly a security issue there. And they would need to face trial first. The Ministry would inevitably take a while to become a functioning authority again, even with all the tenacity of the Order and Voldemort stone cold dead.

As these thoughts pestered his mind, Draco became aware of Longbottom staring at him with confused, narrowed eyes, and his head slightly cocked to the side. Blinking when Draco caught his eye, he corrected himself and cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Sorry," he blurted loudly, drawing the attention of everyone else in the small group. "But...I mean, I have to ask."

Draco exchanged a quick, knowing glance with Blaise. "Go on then, Longbottom."

"So you two are good now?"

Blaise grinned. "Define good."

"Well..." he began hesitantly. "You know. Like you're not...You know."

"We're not Death Eaters," said Draco.

"Not just that. During school you were both...um...you were both..."

"Twats?" offered Ron.

"Yes!" Neville exclaimed, and then his face dropped. "No! No, wait, that wasn't what I-

"We're still twats," said Blaise, shrugging his shoulders. "But I guess we're...decent twats now."

"Decent twats sounds like an apt description," agreed Draco.

Hermione frowned as she leaned in to peck his cheek. "I don't think it is. I would say you two are good, decent men."

"And sorry, can I just check something?" asked Neville. "You two" — he pointed at Hermione and Draco — "And you two" — his finger moved to Luna and Blaise — "Are...you know...together?"

"All four of us?" smirked Draco. "Not exactly my taste, Longbottom, but I can't speak for the others."

"I didn't mean...You're just messing with me, aren't you?"

Hermione stifled a laugh with the back of her hand. "Draco and I are a couple, and Luna and Blaise are a couple, Neville," she explained, smiling fondly at him. "Any more questions?"

"Just one. How the hell did that happen?"

Hermione and Draco shared a brief but meaningful glance. They weren't sure themselves how they had happened. It had sort of snuck up on them both, like a blast of wind shaking the trees before it reaches you.

"I'm sorry, Neville," said Hermione. "But it's a long story, and one I'm too tired to tell."

"Fair enough," he sighed, getting to his feet. "Tell me another time then. I'm sure it's an...interesting story. I'm going to see if the professors need a hand with anything."

"I'll come with you," said Dean.

"I will too," said Katie, turning to Ron with an almost bashful smile before she stood up. "Thank you for bandaging my hand."

"No problem," he beamed back. "See you later."

The three waved their goodbyes as they left the rest of the little group behind and Draco noted the cordial nod that Longbottom offered him. He nodded back. To be fair, the guy had decapitated an enormous snake which had had happened to be the pet of the most evil wizard

known to the magical world. That alone had earned Longbottom some respect, albeit a reluctant kind.

"Katie's a nice girl," Luna remarked casually. "Isn't she, Ron?"

He blinked blankly at her. "Uh, yes, I guess."

"And didn't you two used to play Quidditch together?"

"...Yes?"

She grinned contentedly to herself. "Well, that's nice, isn't it?"

"Um, sure, Luna," he replied, awkwardly clearing his throat.

"And you and Draco are friends now," she said. "That's also nice."

Draco slowly turned to face her, his eyes slitting into a glare. "Lovegood, you have all the subtlety of a mountain troll in drag."

"So you're not friends? You appear to be getting on well enough."

"Well enough," repeated Draco dryly.

"We're as good as we'll probably ever be," said Ron. "I think friends is certainly pushing it a bit, though, Luna."

"I prefer to think of it as a... mutual tolerance."

"But you see, you're not very good at admitting you have friends," mumbled Luna thoughtfully. "You still don't think I'm your friend."

Draco glowered at her. "That's because you're not."

"Oh, I definitely am," she said confidently.

"She is," Hermione agreed, smiling smugly at Draco. "Speaking of friends, I haven't seen Harry for a while now."

"He was talking to Aberforth last time I saw him," said Ron. "Maybe he slipped out for a bit to get some space. Can't imagine he's had a second to think with someone congratulating every two seconds."

"How was Harry when you spoke to him?" asked Luna.

"Much the same as everyone else," replied Hermione. "Elated and devastated all at once. Don't think he can believe he's done it, really."

"I have to say," muttered Blaise, "I didn't think Potter would actually be capable of beating Voldemort."

"Hm," Draco hummed in agreement. "Despite Granger's pestering to the contrary, I didn't think he could kill him either."

"I wasn't sure I could do it either, to be honest."

The intimate little group of five all simultaneously turned with stunned gasps, whipping around their heads to find the source of the new voice. Floating just behind Hermione's shoulder was Harry's disembodied face, bobbing like a creepy, rogue balloon as he smiled sheepishly at them.

"Merlin's bollocks, Potter!" exclaimed Draco, catching his breath after the shock. "What the hell are you doing, sneaking up on people? Don't you think our hearts have had enough attacks for the-

"Shhh, Malfoy," hissed Harry, glancing around. "I don't want to attract too much attention."

"Well, maybe you should have thought of that before you decided to scare the shit out of-

"Congratulations, Potter," interrupted Blaise, his mouth tight with a sincere sort of awkwardness. "I mean...good job, I guess."

As Potter offered an amicable nod to Blaise, Draco attempted to ignore Hermione's elbow discreetly prodding into his ribs, but her jabs were persistent and becoming more painful with every second. Coughing to clear his throat, he folded his arms across his chest and studied his shoes, pretending not to notice as everyone's eyes slowly turned to him.

"What Blaise said," he mumbled, but apparently, from the glare Granger sent in his direction, that wasn't sufficient. "Nice work with...the hero shit and...stuff."

In spite of himself, Harry grinned. "That's the best I can expect from you, isn't it?"

"Yes. Take it or leave it, Potter," he said, and then, as an afterthought, "Do I get my wand back?"

"I just need to take care of a couple of things, and then it's yours. Not as the Elder Wand, though, obviously."

"Harry," interjected Hermione, "Why on Earth are you wearing your invisibility cloak?"

"He has an invisibility cloak?" asked Draco, and then, grumbled, "Of course he bloody does."

"I wanted some peace and quiet," he said, ignoring Draco's comments and shifting his eyes between Hermione and Ron. "But there's something I want to do. Will you two come with me?"

Without a moment's hesitation, Hermione and Ron were on their feet, nearing Potter's hovering head. With what sounded like a flutter of material, they disappeared, along with Potter's head. The sounds of shuffling footsteps pattered across the floor for a few moments, and then there was nothing except a slight drag mark where Potter's magic cloak had disturbed some dust and debris.

Blaise moved his rather amused eyes over to Draco. "Does it bother you that your girlfriend just disappeared with two men using a magical item with the sole purpose of providing privacy?"

"No," he replied honestly. "And that, in some ways, is troubling in itself. I am a little pissed off, though. I had quite a few questions I wanted to ask, like what Potter was saying about Snape, and how he died." He sighed and shrugged. "I guess my questions will just have to wait until later."

Blaise rubbed his chin. "We all have a lot of questions, Draco. The answers will come when the dust settles."

"Can I ask you a question, Draco?" said Luna, leaning forward, her expression intrigued.

He regarded her cautiously. "I'm sure you will regardless of my answer, Lovegood."

"Well...you were the master of the Elder Wand, but you had no idea?"

"Not a clue."

"But if you had known, would you have done anything differently?"

"That's a good question," remarked Blaise, his tone slightly softer with affection.

"Never was a big fan of 'what if' questions," said Draco. The reality of his own was complex enough without considering others. "I never saw the point in them."

"Oh, come on, mate. Luna asked you a decent question there. Amuse us."

Tilting his head to the side in thought, Draco travelled back in his mind to when he'd been stranded with Snape in Scotland for months, fearing for his life and constantly looking over his shoulder, practically waiting for Voldemort to find and kill him. Had he known then that the power of the Elder Wand was in his trembling hands, of course he would have used it, but that wasn't what Luna and Blaise were asking him.

They were asking him if he would trade a reality of power with the reality he lived in now; the reality with Granger.

He tried to imagine it. He tried to imagine never being forced to stay in her dorm. He tried to imagine that all those arguments had never happened. He tried to imagine that she hadn't sliced open his palm, and then hers, and blended their blood. He tried to imagine never kissing her after the bee sting. He tried to imagine that they'd never been ice-skating, or watched fireworks, or had sex, or read Shakespeare, or talked, or cried, or kissed, or screamed, or anything.

He tried to imagine the absence of all those things, and merely the notion of such made something at his very core ache.

A reality without his and Hermione's isolation from the rest of the world, and all the events that had been catalysed by that, was not something he could even bear to contemplate.

"Both of you already know my answer," he said quietly. "I wouldn't change it."

Luna beamed back at him with an almost proud expression. "I knew you were going to say that." Leaning her head against Blaise's shoulder, she sighed with contentment. "Everything's going to change, and it's going to be so much better."

Chapter End Notes

Well, hello! Long time no see! I can only apologise for how long it's been, I have been extremely busy with my teacher training! It's been hardcore, and I can only thank all the people that have waited patiently and continued to show support!

I just have to give a quick shout out to the reviewer 'Brad'. Your review made me smile from ear to ear and thank you SO MUCH for your supportive comments. I really appreciate it.

Also, can I just say right now that reaching 10k reviews for this fic is just AMAZING. I have no idea how it's happened and all I can do is say THANK YOU. I am truly touched and stunned by the response this fic has received and I was speechless when I realised that it had reached 10k.

There's only one chapter left and then the epilogue...so yeah...it's almost finished...which is leaving me with mixed feelings. Let me know your thoughts on the chapter, and I hope you liked it!

Thanks for reading!

Bex

After

Chapter Notes

Just the usual song recs! Shearwater - I'm so glad and Angus and Julia Stone - The Devil's Tears. Huge thank you to my Beta, Maeghan (occupymalfoysbed on tumblr) for betaing this chapter! Hope you like it!

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

Lucius Malfoy's body was discovered on May 6th, just four days after Voldemort was defeated by Harry Potter in what had become known as the Battle of Hogwarts.

Efforts to rebuild and restore Hogwarts to all her former beauty had commenced two days after the battle, and Professor Slughorn had found the body — or rather, some of it — under a fallen wall in the courtyard.

Beneath the rubble had been Lucius' left leg, some of his torso, and his Dark Mark-stained arm. The rest of his body wasn't found until the next day, when two Aurors stumbled across the rest of Lucius' corpse in Malfoy Manor.

With a select group of loyal and trustworthy Aurors, Shacklebolt and Mad-Eye had restored some semblance of legal order to the Wizarding World. This small makeshift Ministry of no more than fifty members was slowly tackling the widespread damage littered across the British landscape and rounding up the remaining Death Eaters, incarcerating them to await trial.

Shacklebolt had ordered that nobody enter Malfoy Manor in case Voldemort had been using any dark artifacts while he had been using it as his base that might injure anyone who should enter the grounds. After a few days of studying the Manor and testing its safety with some probing spells, the Aurors had been sent in to search the property and ensure it was secure.

They found the other half of Lucius inside the Manor. More specifically, inside Draco's bedroom.

Using the Prior Incantato spell, the Aurors confirmed what they had already suspected: Lucius Malfoy had attempted to Apparate from Hogwarts to the Manor and had fatally splinched.

Shacklebolt had informed Draco in person.

Draco had nodded his head once, clenched his jaw, and had simply said, "Okay."

Of course, the question had crossed Draco's mind: just why the hell had Lucius attempted to Apparate into his room? He'd probably never know, and he had forced himself not to torture

himself with analysing all the possible scenarios.

Perhaps it was best he didn't know. There is a certain level of freedom with ignorance.

Two days later and he was still seemingly stoic as Andromeda fixed his black tie into a perfect knot around his neck with nimble fingers. They were both silent; he didn't comment on his aunt's chewed fingernails, and she didn't comment on his tense shoulders. Peering over her shoulder, Draco watched Teddy sleep soundlessly in his Moses basket, completely at peace. Ignorance is such bliss. Smoothing down his tie and tucking it behind the folds of his suit jacket, Andromeda sighed and offered him a weak smile.

"There," she said. "You look very smart in that suit."

"I should hope so. I feel like this is the only thing I've bloody worn for the past week. I might as well sleep in it."

It was an exaggeration, of course. In the week since the Battle of Hogwarts, Draco had attended three funerals; Remus and Tonks had been buried three days after the event, Ted had been buried the day after that, and then Theo had been buried beside him the day after that.

Four people, three funerals.

Draco had found out about Lucius' death just one hour after they had lowered Theo into the ground. When Draco thought back to that day, it was all a blur of drizzle, black clothes, and concerned brown eyes. Granger's eyes.

And, of course, this black suit.

His mother had bought him the suit back in fifth year, just after Lucius had been arrested. He had worn it almost a year ago, when he'd let the Death Eaters into Hogwarts and consequently been forced to go into hiding with Snape. It was the only outfit he had in his possession that he had owned prior to that night. With the exception of the night that the Death Eaters invaded Hogwarts, Draco had only worn the suit to one other occasion before the Battle of Hogwarts: two years ago at Lucius' trial.

There was an irony there somewhere, but he didn't care enough to take notice of it.

Back then the suit had been slightly too big, but now it fit him perfectly, which only made him resent it more.

So, today would be his fourth funeral, and he would watch a fifth corpse being dipped into the ground like a dead, purposeless seed. Lucius' corpse. A purposeless seed, indeed.

"How are you feeling?" asked Andromeda.

Draco shrugged his stiff shoulders. "Indifferent."

"I don't believe that."

"Well, that's how I feel."

Exhaling, she shook her head sadly. "You are allowed to feel something for him, Draco-

"I don't-

"Just listen to me for a minute," she pleaded. "Do you think I didn't feel anything when I found out Bellatrix was dead?"

Draco's eyes flashed with shock. "Did you?"

"Yes. She was my sister."

"She killed your daughter!"

"She was still a someone in my life," Andromeda said, her voice quivering. "And when I found out that she had died, there was a faint, but real instinctive twinge in my heart, and it was sadness. Yes, I hated her. I swear on my soul I still hate her, and I will probably hate her until the lonely day I die for everything that she did to me and my beautiful family. She stole them from me..." She paused to sleeve away some tears and then she took a deep, shaking breath. "But I loved her once. I loved her, just as you loved Lucius."

Draco averted his eyes to the floor. "I only feel the hate."

"No, that's all you choose to feel when you think about him, because it's easier," she replied, placing her hand on his shoulder. "I understand that. I really do. But it's okay, Draco. It's okay to feel things for people who don't deserve it. It's okay to feel things that you don't want to feel for people who don't deserve it. If everyone could stifle their feelings towards undeserving people, the world would be too perfect. We are only human, but we are sometimes at our most beautiful when we feel things we shouldn't."

Draco continued to study the floor, uncomfortably shuffling his feet and scuffing his shoes against Andromeda's kitchen tiles. His mouth was dry with the absence of words and his mind heavy with too many thoughts. Thankfully, a shrill, piercing cry saved him from his own silence.

Andromeda sighed as Teddy began to wail from his Moses basket. Lingering for a moment in front of Draco, she thumbed away a stubborn crease in his tie and then headed for the baby, lifting him up into her arms.

"He's certainly going to be a loud one," she mumbled, rocking him. "Just like his mother was. Poor thing."

Watching them both, Draco felt a pressure build up inside of him; an uneasiness that made everything seem a little off-balance.

"Dromeda," he started slowly. "How the hell do you do it?"

"Do what, dear?"

"Carry on."

She looked up from her weeping grandson. "Because I have to."

"But you've lost everyone."

"Not everyone," she said. "Not Teddy, not you."

Draco frowned. "Are we enough?"

"Oh, god," she muttered, looking horrified that he had questioned it. "Of course you are. Without a doubt, you are both more than enough. And I have my other members of the Enlightened, of course. Blaise, Miles, Tracey, Milli...I am very fond of you all. This might sound silly, but I...I like to consider myself as a sort of aunt figure to all of you that stayed here-

"Much more than an aunt, 'Dromeda," he assured her, and she smiled in response. "To Theo, too."

"Yes. Poor Theo."

"I never did get to really say thank you, 'Dromeda. For agreeing to let Theo be buried next to Ted. You didn't have to do that."

"Honestly, I am honoured," she said. "For my husband to have had such a positive impact on someone as damaged as Theo that he would ask...I am very proud. Of both of them."

Another high-pitched noise cut the air. As the kettle blew its whistle, Teddy's cries grew louder, as if he was trying to outmatch it.

"Oh dear," mumbled Andromeda.

"Give him here," said Draco, gesturing to Teddy. "I'll hold him."

"No, no, we don't want to crease your suit."

"Dromeda, it's fine," he insisted, carefully taking the baby from her. "I really couldn't care less about how my suit looks for Lucius' funeral."

Andromeda looked like she wanted to comment, but she must have changed her mind and she made her way over to deal with the hissing kettle. Once settled against Draco's chest, Teddy's howling calmed into soft sniffles and those gentle, intelligible sounds that babies make. Within the past week he had received a crash-course in baby care from Andromeda and Hermione and, to be fair, he was slowly getting the hang of it.

"He likes you," said Andromeda. "Is Hermione not going with you to the funeral?"

"No. She offered, but I told her there was no need for her to come. She has no reason to mourn Lucius at all."

"Then where is she? Did she stay here last night or at Grimmauld Place?"

"She stayed here, but she headed to Hogwarts this morning with the others," he explained. "Didn't you hear them leave?"

"I thought I heard Milli and Tracey leave, but not the others," she said absently. "You know that Milli's moving out this evening?"

"Is she?"

"She's going to stay with her uncle in Gloucestershire. I met him yesterday and he's a nice man. And then Luna and Blaise are moving into Xenophilius' house at the weekend, now it's been repaired."

"Miles and Tracey, too," said Draco. "Miles inherited the house after his father was killed in the war and I think they're moving in soon. Heard them talking about it. You'll be free of us all soon."

"... Yes."

Noting the hint of sadness in her tone, Draco glanced in her direction. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she said quickly, but then she tilted her head thoughtfully to the side. "I mean, I knew you would all be leaving soon. This was always just a temporary arrangement, but the idea of the house being all quiet...well, not completely quiet with Teddy, but still..."

Her voice faded into a telling silence that made Draco's eyebrows draw together in the centre of his forehead in a slight frown. Studying her closely, he tried to put himself in her shoes. She was hardly young; by the time Teddy was a teenager she would be well into her sixties. Already, the strain of the last week — all the deaths and trying to stifle the grief to care for this little baby — had added a few grey hairs to her crown and some wrinkles to her brow. As she tipped the kettle to pour some water in a stewpot, he realised her hands were slightly shaking and, despite her best efforts to mask it, he had noticed the tear-tracks staining her cheeks most mornings.

She was coping fantastically well, almost at a supernatural level, but he had a feeling the cracks in her brave facade would only begin to deepen as time rolled on. Just like buildings, even the strongest and proudest of people are beaten and battered by time, if not war.

Teddy had fallen asleep in his arms, so he carefully placed the baby back in his Moses basket, tucking him in like Andromeda had shown him a few days ago.

"Actually, 'Dromeda," said Draco. "There was something I wanted to ask you."

.

* * *

It was pathetic, really.

So monumentally pathetic.

Aside from the two young volunteers that Shacklebolt had politely asked to assist with the actual burial of Lucius' coffin in the Malfoy family plot, only two people attended his funeral: Narcissa and Draco.

Draco had held his mother's trembling hand as she had furiously wiped away any tears that had spilled down her cheeks during the ceremony.

If you could call it a ceremony.

Narcissa had said a few words and that had been it; the fact that she didn't even ask Draco if he would like to say anything spoke volumes to him. She'd been right not to ask him, though. Had it been up to him, he wouldn't have attended at all.

The whole thing was over in less than ten minutes and that was that. Lucius was gone forever, six feet under, neither forgiven nor forgotten.

Lucius' gravestone, much like the ceremony, was tellingly short.

Here Lies Lucius Armand Malfoy

1954 - 1998

Finally at Peace

As Draco and Narcissa walked a path which led through the Manor gardens from the burial plot, they could see a small group of Aurors near the main gates. Preliminary investigations and searches were still taking place for any dangerous artifacts that Voldemort may have used during his stay at the Manor. As a result, Narcissa had been staying in one of the Malfoy holiday homes near the Blashford lakes.

"I spoke to Mad-Eye earlier," said Narcissa, her voice a little hoarse. "He said that they could be doing these searches in the Manor for months."

Draco scowled. "Months?"

"Yes. Apparently they've found a few things already."

"So you're going to keep staying in Blashford?" he asked. "Until they say you can move back in?"

Narcissa stopped walking so Draco did too. "Actually, I wanted to talk to you about that."

"Okay," he said warily. "Is everything alright?"

"I think so. You see, I think I need to get out of Britain for a while."

"You're leaving?"

"I don't know if I have the strength to return to the Manor, Draco," she sighed sadly. "Too many bad things happened in there that I...can't revisit."

Draco hesitated, confused. "But...where do you intend to go?"

"We have a property in Guernsey, and I-

"Guernsey? The island?"

"Listen to me a moment. I know it's quite far away, but there are Floo links to both the British Ministry and the French Ministry if I need anything." She looked down at her feet. "Most importantly, no one there knows me. It's isolated. You know, I've already had some hopeful journalists contact me, asking about Lucius-

"Tell them to fuck off."

"Draco," she frowned. "I want to be away from it all for a while, until some of it dies down, at least."

He tried hard not to understand, but he did. He knew exactly what was going through her mind.

On the evening of the day of the Battle, when the sun had just started to sink behind the hills and everything had been bathed in orange, McGonagall had called the attention of all the survivors. Everyone had taken part in a two-minute silence, raising their glowing wands above their heads as a sign of respect for the fallen. Thereafter, McGonagall had revealed Snape's innocence and declared that he would be remembered as nothing less than a hero.

She had also taken the time to note several other, as she called them, "Unlikely Heroes", which included himself, his mother, and the other members of the Enlightened. Draco suspected that McGonagall's main reason for this was to deter the skeptical glances that had continued to drift over them during the day and, in some respects, it had worked.

But people had also noticed that Lucius' name hadn't been in that list of unlikely heroes, and many had witnessed him firing curses and hexes during the battle. Everybody knew what Lucius was, but they didn't know enough to not have questions. Like his mother, Draco had also been approached by a couple of would-be journalists to ask about his personal experiences during the war, including the details about Lucius.

The difference between Draco and his mother was that he had Granger.

Granger: Potter the Saviour's best friend, and arguably the most loved and respected teenage witch in Great Britain right now.

With barely a glance of admonishment, Granger could stifle the ever-prying press and Draco would be saved from having to deal with any nosy sods who thought they had rights to his private life.

Because he was Hermione Granger's boyfriend, and that title certainly had its benefits at the moment.

And what was his mother's title? Narcissa Malfoy: Widow of Lucius Malfoy, the Death Eater who killed a teenage boy.

Even with the support of McGonagall and Hermione, and the knowledge that Narcissa had worked with the Order, people were still wary, and there was little he could do about that. People's minds are dangerously stubborn things that often seek the more sordid and scandalous stories for their own amusement, regardless of the reasoning of their slightly softer hearts.

He didn't blame his mother for wanting to leave. Had it not been for Granger, he would have Apparated his way to the other side of the world by now.

"Right," he mumbled. "I understand, but...how long are you planning to stay in Guernsey?"

"I'm not sure exactly, but at least a year."

"A year? What the...I thought you just meant for a month or two. Are you sure, mother?"

"I'm positive, Draco. I need to...get away," she told him. "And I wanted to know if you wanted to come with me."

Draco's face dropped. "Come with you?"

"Look, you don't have to. You'll be turning eighteen soon and you'll get your inheritance-

"Mother-

"But if you're worried about not seeing Hermione as much, she is welcome to come and stay whenever-

"No, it's not that," he said, exhaling hard to steady himself. "Mother, I can't live with you, and it's not because of Granger."

"Oh," she murmured, evidently trying to conceal her disappointment. "Well, I understand-

"I spoke to Andromeda earlier, and I asked her if I could live with her," he rushed out. "I'm going to live with Aunt 'Dromeda, mum."

Her eyes widened with surprise. "Oh. I see. Well...that's-

"She took me in despite all of the history with our family," he carried on, hoping she would understand. "And she looked after me, even though I was vile to her to begin with. And now

she's alone, looking after her grandson. Her husband, daughter, and son-in-law were all killed and she's completely alone-

"Except for you," Narcissa interrupted with a forlorn smile.

"Except for me," he echoed. "I owe her a lot. I can help her out with the kid and just...be there. I care about her, and" — he released an almost nervous breath — "I had hoped that it might help you two to reconcile."

"Ah," she whispered. "Well, you see...that's easier said than done."

"You both need each other right now. You've both lost people you love-

"Draco, I haven't spoken to her in almost three decades. And the things I said to her...nobody should ever say those kinds of things to a sister."

"But she's forgiven me, and she will-

"I haven't forgiven myself for what I said to her," she confessed dejectedly. "The things I said were...so awful-

"Mother-

"But maybe, now that we have you in common...Perhaps I could come and visit, see how things go."

Draco nodded his head, though he suspected that she was saying it more for his benefit. "You should."

"Perhaps," she repeated.

"But you still intend to move to Guernsey?"

"I do. But, as I said, you can get there by Floo, and once you've visited a few times, you could Apparate."

"And...you don't mind me living with Andromeda?"

She hesitated and pursed her lips with contemplation, staring at his face with an expression caught somewhere between hurt and proud. After at least one full minute, she forced another smile and touched his face, stroking the ridge of his cheek with her thumb.

"I will miss you terribly, of course," she murmured gently. "But I think your decision to stay with Andromeda is the right one. And I...I am happy with your decision."

He exhaled his relief. "Thank you."

Draco allowed his mother to pull him towards her and envelop him in a desperate, crushing embrace. He also allowed her to sob into the crook of his shoulder, until he could actually feel the dampness of her tears seep through his shirt and lick his skin. They stayed that

way for a long time; longer, Draco suspected, that Lucius' funeral had lasted. When she pulled away, she kept a firm grip on his hand, like she feared he might suddenly float away.

"You okay?" he asked her.

"Yes, I'm fine. Just being a silly old woman."

And she really did look quite old now; worn out, in fact.

"Come on," he said, tugging her along as he began walking. "I'll Apparate you back to Blashford."

"Draco," she blurted suddenly. "I haven't spoken much about your father today because I know you're still angry-

"Mother," he groaned tiredly, "Please-

"But you must forgive him. Not today or tomorrow or even ten years from now. But one day, you must forgive him. If you allow that anger to just fester inside of you for the rest of your life, it will haunt you. Do you understand?"

"Come on, mother, I'm taking you home."

She held her ground. "Do you understand?"

"No, I don't," he said stiffly. "Not at all."

"Then I want you to think about what you're asking Andromeda to forgive me for," she rushed out, breathlessly.

"It's different!"

"Is it? Your father and I may have had different victims in different circumstances, but our crimes were the same. I disowned a member of my family because they fell in love with a muggle-born."

He looked his mother dead in the eye and grabbed her shoulders, trying to calm his shaking hands. "But you didn't kill someone!" he spat through clenched teeth, and then, in a harsh whisper, "You didn't kill Theo. You didn't kill my friend."

Narcissa bowed her head. "No, you're right. I didn't."

"And Theo...You know what he had to deal with. You know his father was a piece of shit who strived to keep his son as broken as a person can be without being dead! Theo crawled his way through life with his father's foot pressing down on his back! And then he finally got free and he had this...chance. A chance to fix himself and Lucius fucking stole that! He stole that and he stole him!"

Draco pulled in a breath that made his whole body shudder.

"That's why I won't forgive him!" he shouted. "You think it's just all about him disowning me? It isn't! I expected that! What I didn't expect was to have Lucius kill my friend! Do you understand?"

Narcissa's lower lip quivered as she looked at Draco. She realised now, after listening to him talk about fathers breaking their sons, that her son had also been broken by his father. And that broke her.

Looking over her shoulder back to Lucius' freshly chiseled gravestone, she wondered if she would always feel this senseless, futile loyalty beating in her heart for her dead, Death Eater husband. It battled ruthlessly with her more rational loyalty to Draco, and it was like a riot between her head and her heart. It hurt her and she had a feeling it would continue to hurt her for some time.

You see, she forgot sometimes. She forgot that her dead husband had killed a boy. She forgot.

Weakly, she tugged at Draco's hand. "Can you take me home, please?"

"Mother, I'm sorry," he said, calm now. "I didn't mean to shout at you, but I-

"I know, darling. I'm just ready to go home now."

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* * *

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With the snap of Apparition ringing in his ears and worsening his already relentless headache, Draco arrived in the Quidditch field at Hogwarts.

He studied his surroundings. One week after the Battle, and already Hogwarts was looking better after her ordeal. But then, that was the wonder of magic; with just a few flicks of a wand, rubble could be shifted and bricks could be stacked. Cleaning up wasn't the issue, it was the repairs that were going to take the longest.

As he looked now at the resilient castle, he could see the damage to the towers and bastions stretching high into the sky. Some had gaping holes, some seemed to even be tilting hazardously to the side, and some were almost completely gone with only a skeleton of tenacious timber to hold its place. Hogwarts' silhouette had changed so much that Draco struggled to get his bearings as he trudged up the path, intending to find Granger.

As he walked through Hogwarts, he passed many people along the way, all doing what they could to heal the castle's wounds. Some offered him polite nods of acknowledgement, some didn't.

Longbottom, bless his cotton socks, even waved at him with a wide smile. Draco had no idea how to respond to that, so he just bobbed his head and kept on walking, keeping his eyes downcast so Longbottom wouldn't be tempted to initiate a conversation. Several paces later, he encountered Blaise and Luna repairing one of the classrooms.

"Hello, Draco," greeted Luna airily. "I like your suit."

"I wore it to a funeral."

"I can see why. It's dark and depressing."

"Sort of like this conversation?" retorted Draco, ignoring Blaise's glare. "Either of you seen Granger anywhere?"

"Not since this morning," replied Blaise. "How was the funeral?"

"Loads of fun," he quipped with rolling eyes. "I'll tell you about it later, I need to speak to Granger about something."

"Something exciting?" asked Luna.

"No, nosy," he frowned, turning away from the couple. "If you see her, tell her I'm looking for her."

He headed for the Great Hall; it had become the unofficial base of the efforts to restore Hogwarts and it seemed as good a place as any to go. With the exception of a few scuffs and scrapes, the Great Hall was in good condition, and at its centre was a makeshift command station. Spread across some of the House benches were notes about the worst-hit areas of Hogwarts, and adjacent to that was a recuperation area — run by Madam Rosmerta and Ambrosius Flume — where people were welcome to free refreshments between work.

Draco scanned the room for Hermione's tell-tale bushy hair, and then scanned it again because sometimes she wore her hair up. Realising she wasn't there, he turned to leave and look elsewhere, but he hesitated when a glare of Weasley-orange hair temporarily blinded him. Ron and Katie were near the recuperation area, chatting casually and sipping water, evidently taking a break from fixing Hogwarts. Draco considered asking Weasley where Granger was, but just as he'd made up his mind that it would probably be easier to search by himself, Weasley spotted him. With a reluctance he didn't try to conceal (or if he did, he didn't do it well), Weasley muttered something to Katie and approached Draco.

"Malfoy," greeted Ron awkwardly, shoving his hands in his pockets. "You're... awfully dressed up today for clean-up duty."

"Funeral," he said simply.

"Oh...uh," stuttered Ron. "Are you...okay?"

Draco arched a quizzical eyebrow. "Really, Weasley? Are we going to do this friend shit? We agreed to be civil, not friends. Because if you're going to do this friend bollocks every time I see you, I'll just fling myself off a cliff right now."

"You promise? Can I watch?"

In spite of himself, Draco smirked and said, "That's more like it, Weasley."

"Yeah, civil works better," nodded Ron. "You're still a wanker."

"So are you," he retorted. "You seen Granger anywhere?"

"Last I heard she was upstairs with Harry and McGonagall. They were working on Gryffindor Tower, I think."

"Okay," said Draco, turning on his heel.

"You're welcome, Malfoy!" called Ron.

"You're a tosser, Weasley!"

Backtracking and making his way to the nearest staircase, Draco headed towards Gryffindor Tower. Or tried to. He was hardly familiar with the route to his rivalry house's dorm anyway, and with Hogwarts being as damaged as she was, it was easy to get disorientated. Some staircases (including the Grand Staircase) were still inaccessible, blocked-off corridors created confusing mazes, and the absence of many walls meant that you sometimes ended up outside without intending to. After several frustrating detours, Draco climbed his fifth staircase up to Gryffindor Tower.

All the portraits had been taken down and put into a room for safe-keeping, so Draco simply slipped inside and was immediately struck by a blast of wind. Moving through the common room and snaking around the upturned chairs and tables, he followed the source of the wind to the large reading room, where a yawning hole in the wall was allowing the wind to invade the space. Amongst the tumbled bookshelves stood Granger, McGonagall, and Potter, discussing the tower's cavity as they waved their wands to clear some of the debris strewn around the room.

In a baggy red jumper and an oversized pair of dungarees which were peppered with dirt and mud, Hermione looked like she had been dragged through a filthy field, but it only made Draco grin with amusement. Especially when he looked down at his pristine, tailored suit.

She spotted him before he could say anything and, with a mumbled apology, she left McGonagall's side and rushed at Draco. Her features were tight with apprehension as she flung her arms around his neck and held him so tight he choked.

"I've been thinking about you all morning," she said, loosening her grip.

"Bloody hell, Granger, I think you broke something," he groaned, rubbing the back of his now sore neck. "What was that for?"

"I've been worried about you!"

"Oh, for Merlin's sake...Are you and Aunt 'Dromeda in this together? Because she gave me an earful this morning, too."

Hermione frowned at him. "We both care about you and we are concerned-

"But I'm fine—

"You're not fine, Draco—

"Granger, look at me," he said quietly, waiting until she did. "I really am fine. But maybe tomorrow I won't be fine. Or maybe the next day. Or maybe several weeks from now. And when I'm not fine, you'll be the first to know; perhaps the only person to know. But today, I promise, I am fine."

Hermione studied him with narrowed eyes for a moment, and then slowly nodded her head. "Okay," she sighed. "Okay, you're fine. So...how did it go? Did anyone else..."

"Turn up? No, just my mother and I."

"And how was your mother?"

"Not so fine. And she..." he drifted off when he remembered he was an earshot of McGonagall and Potter, and the latter appeared to be not-so-subtly eavesdropping. "Actually, is there somewhere we can go? I need to tell you something."

"Okay," she said. "Actually, I have something I want to show you."

Without further explanation, Hermione snatched his hand, tugging him out of the tower and then down a small corridor just to the side. His surroundings were familiar, but Draco couldn't place how or why, so he just allowed her to drag him along until she stopped at an alcove, and in its shadows there hid a door. It was only when Hermione reached for the handle that Draco realised where she had brought him.

Their room. Or rather, their old room.

The first thing that Draco noticed was that there were no holes in the walls, and that the ceiling and the floor were intact. That's not to say the room was unaffected. Much like everywhere in the castle, the majority of the furniture was upended and there were various belongings scattered around the room. Granger's old bedroom door had been blown off its hinges, and beyond that he could see her window had completely shattered. The bathroom door was open and he noticed that quite a few tiles had smashed and lay broken across the floor like an accidental mosaic. He counted the fallen tiles; there were seventeen. His old bedroom door was shut, and he no real desire to see what was inside; after he and Granger had started their relationship, he hadn't spent much time in it anyway.

And then, finally, he spotted something on the floor which made him hesitate, and a lump formed in his throat.

It was the book that Granger had asked him to read all those months ago; Martin Luther King's biography.

The picture of the man stared back up at him with warm, smiling eyes. Draco bent down to retrieve it with careful, gentle hands, and then he placed it on an empty bookshelf, fixing it so

that he could still see King's amiable expression. When he turned back to Granger, she was watching his movements intently.

"It survived very well," she said, gesturing with her arms to the room. "A couple of little dents and bruises here and there, but nothing that can't be fixed. In fact, it's probably one of the best rooms I've seen so far."

Draco nodded. "It's in pretty good shape."

"I don't know why, but I wanted to show you. I thought it was kind of...comforting to see how well it endured the war."

"Yes," he said simply, still glancing around. "It feels rather...odd being in here, though."

"I know what you mean," she agreed, nearing him. "I'm not even sure why, but it does feel strange. It's like I'm surrounded by ghosts. Every inch of this room rouses a memory."

"And not all of them are good memories."

Hermione frowned. "No, not all of them. Most of them, though. Being here makes me think of reading Shakespeare, making tea in the morning..."

"Ice skating at Christmas, watching the fireworks from your window seat," he added, leaning in to kiss her softly. His lips lingered on hers for a moment, warm and supple; she tasted like apple juice. When he pulled away, he smirked down at her and said, "And, of course, all the sex."

Hermione scoffed and rolled her eyes. "Do you always have to lower the tone?"

"Always," he chided, stealing another quick, cheeky kiss before he turned towards Hermione's bedroom. "Especially when I walk in here. Hey, Granger, you do you fancy a quick—

"Don't finish that sentence," she scolded. "What did you want to tell me? About your mother?"

All the mirth drained away from Draco's sharp features. Brushing away the broken glass on the cushions, he perched himself on the window seat and bade Hermione to join him.

"Should I be worried?" asked Hermione, warily edging forward.

"No, just come here."

They sat side by side, feet dangling out of the broken window. The sun was soothingly warm on their faces despite the veil of mist shrouding its glow, and just beyond Hogwarts' grounds, a small herd of Thestrals were gracefully flying south with a flight of swallows. The sounds of all the people repairing the castle were occasionally caught on a wayward breeze, but for the most part, it was quiet up here; quiet enough that Draco could hear Hermione nervously tapping the window frame.

"Granger, there really is nothing to worry about," he said, holding her hand to still her agitated tapping. "I promise. I just needed to tell you that my mother has decided to move away for a little while—

"Are you leaving?" blurted Hermione.

"No, Granger, calm down. I'm not leaving. My mother's moving to Guernsey, and apparently Mad-Eye said that nobody can enter Malfoy Manor for a while; not that I was planning to move back in after..."

"Everything that happened in there."

"Exactly," he nodded. "But it doesn't really matter anyway. I spoke to Aunt 'Dromeda this morning, and I'm going to live with her for a while."

Hermione's eyes widened. "Really?"

"She's going to need help with Teddy, and I don't want her to be alone. I mean, she's coping well with everything, but I think she needs someone to be with her, and when I asked if I could stay, she seemed pretty happy about the idea."

"I think that's a great idea. I think that's...very noble of you."

"It's not noble, Granger, it's just returning a favour. She helped me out when I needed it and now I can repay her."

"Well, I think it's noble," she insisted, squeezing his hand. "So...that was it? You had me all worried about that?"

"You had yourself worried."

"You were acting very serious."

"I'm a serious person, Granger."

"Hm," she hummed absently. "Well, if that's all the news you have, then I have some news of my own."

Draco's brow crinkled with interest. "Should I be worried?"

"Not at all. I was speaking with McGonagall earlier, and she's decided that all the seventh years are going to have the opportunity to return to Hogwarts in September to take the N.E.W.T.s and finish school properly. I've decided I'm going to come back."

"Really? And anyone can come back?"

"Anyone."

Draco cocked his head, considering the new information carefully. "Do you think she'd let me come back?"

Hermione snapped her eyes to him, confused. "I...didn't think you'd want to."

"Well, I fucked up sixth year and seventh year. I could use all the help I can get. Do you think McGonagall would let me leave at weekends to visit Andromeda?"

"I don't see why not. Are you sure you want to come back?"

"I think so. I don't really know what I want to do. It was always assumed I'd take over the family business from Lucius, but I guess that's out the window," he sighed, shrugging his shoulders. "I might as well get some qualifications while I'm deciding what to do."

Hermione smiled fondly at him. "Look at you, being all sensible."

"Plus, it could be pretty decent. You'll get Head Girl again and I can sneak into your dorm so we can—

"Draco. Anyway, McGonagall already asked me and I declined. Last time I was Head Girl, Hogwarts was almost destroyed."

He chuckled a little, but it died quickly. The Thestrals and swallows had disappeared into the distance, and a cloud had sailed into the path of the sun, casting a blanket of darkness. They both shivered in the shadows, huddling a little closer to each other.

"What about your parents?" asked Draco. "Any news on them?"

"Not since I spoke to the Australian Ministry on Thursday," said Hermione, her tone sombre. "I'm just waiting for them to confirm a day when I can go to Brisbane and try to restore their memories."

"Nervous?"

Her eyes fell to her fidgeting hands. "I...I knew that there was a possibility that I wouldn't be able to restore their memories when I decided to Obliviate them, so...I'll just have to wait and see, I guess."

Draco could tell she didn't really want to talk about it. To be fair, the sensitive topic had been brought up on several occasions already during the past few days, and the slow process meant that there was nothing new to say about it. When she had first contacted the Australian Ministry two days after the battle, she had cried and ranted and then cried again, but since then she had spoken very little about her parents, and he wasn't going to push her to discuss them anymore than she wanted to.

The sun was still hiding behind that thick cloud, and a brief, but bitter gust of wind made Hermione's body jerk with a violent shudder. Stifling a shiver of his own, Draco shrugged off his suit jacket and draped it across her shoulders, but she tried to push it away.

"No, I'm filthy," she said. "And you need to wear this again tomorrow."

"It's nothing a quick Scouring Charm won't fix," he insisted. "Anyway, I was considering wearing a different suit tomorrow. You know, something in bright yellow. I think Snape

would have appreciated the irony."

Hermione cracked a smile as she pulled his jacket around her. "How are you feeling about Snape's funeral?"

"I don't know, really," he confessed, his expression thoughtful. "I mean, I've known him since I was a toddler, but I don't really know in what context. We weren't exactly close, but he was always there. He was such an odd man, though. I think he was even stranger now after you told me about his creepy obsession with Potter's mother."

"You thought that was creepy?"

"A little. He was obsessed with a woman who's been dead for seventeen years."

"It wasn't an obsession, it was unrequited love," argued Hermione. "One's dangerous, and one's tragically beautiful. And I think to do something for someone you love is wonderful, but to do something for someone who doesn't love you is possibly the closest thing to perfection that any person could hope to be. When Harry explained everything that Snape had done, I was speechless."

"That's because you're a romantic, Granger," he said. "But, yes, I certainly respected the man, and I know what he did for me. And when you told me about his feelings for Potter's mother, I understood what he said to me."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't tell you? I saw him when I was trying to find you during the battle."

"You told me you saw him just after Pansy was killed, but you didn't mention much about anything he said." Intrigued, Hermione leaned in closer. "What did he say to you?"

"He told me that I should be grateful," he explained, his voice quiet and contemplative. "That I should be grateful that you love me back."

"I do love you," she said, beaming at him. Tilting towards him to plant a kiss on his cheek, oblivious to the slightly vexed and pensive expression on her lover's face. Patting his leg, she then shifted her weight to rise from her seat and said, "Come on, we should get back and—"

"No, Granger, wait a moment," he rushed out, snatching her hand to keep her still. "There's something I need to say."

With a curious gaze, Hermione twisted so she was facing him, sensing the gravity in his tone. "What is it?"

"I just...I need you to understand," muttered Draco hesitantly, pulling in a deep breath. And then he began. "I'm never going to be a man who tells you how lucky I am to have you, even though I know I am. I'm never going to be a man who tells you that you're beautiful everyday, even though you are. And I'm never going to be a man who tells you I love you everyday, even though I do. And I really do, Granger."

"I know you do," she said. "I know."

"And I'm sorry that I'll never be that kind of man—

"Draco, don't—

"No, Granger, let me finish," he interrupted. "I'm sorry that I won't tell you these things, but I will show them to you until you tell me not to, and probably even then. And you and I are inevitably going to yell and scream at each other, and we're going to say stupid things, but they won't mean anything. What I'm telling you right now is what I mean and it's what matters. Do you understand?"

"Of course I do," said Hermione calmly. "I know we are going to be fine, Draco. Better than fine. I mean, we're going to have more obstacles and issues to deal with in the future, but the worst of it is over and we survived."

Draco didn't reply; he simply watched her, but he was forced to squint as that stubborn cloud finally glided out of the path of the sun's rays, freeing the light. It embraced the bedroom like an old friend, illuminating every crook and corner with a dazzling brilliance, and the warmth reached out to stroke both of their faces. Basking in the glow and feeling completely content, Hermione bent forward to kiss him again; just a small, swift kiss to savour the almost nostalgic moment on their broken window seat.

When they pulled apart, Draco took a moment to glance around the room, wondering who would live here next and if they would understand the significance of what had happened within these walls. He wondered if they would slip on the bathroom tiles, or if they would make tea the muggle way in the kitchenette, or watch the fireworks out of the window, or read books on the window seat.

"Come on then," said Hermione, breaking his trance as she rose to her feet. "We have a lot of repairing to do. We've been in here quite a while."

With a curious feeling of reluctance that he didn't really understand, Draco left the security of their window seat, following Hermione as she left her old bedroom and went into the lounge. As he trailed behind her, he still found himself looking around, studying the sitting area attentively, hunting for more memories in the quiet details of the dorm. By the time he reached the door, he had scrutinised every inch and all the space between, yet he still looked over his shoulder as he stepped over the threshold, taking it all in one last time before he closed the door behind him.

And then the room — their room — was empty.

Chapter End Notes

Oh my god it's done...I don't know how I feel...Ummmm yeah. So wow. This is strange. I just have to say a huge thank you to everyone who read/reviewed/shared/anything,

because to get over 10k reviews for a fanfic is something I never expected, and it still stuns me. Seriously, thank you so much.

Special thanks to Masha for keeping me going when I had writer's block, and to Maeghan for being the most awesome beta and always doing an amazing job and at very short notice!

There will be an epilogue. I'm also hoping to do a small collection of one-shots for some of the other characters' perspectives, like Theo, Blaise, and Luna. These will be separate pieces and the epilogue I have planned could be a stand-alone piece.

so really, this is the final chapter...So yeah, I have no idea what to say so I guess I'll just leave it there and say another thank you for being so amazing. I hope this last chapter was okay and let me know what you think!

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR EVERYTHING.

Bex

Inclusion: An Epilogue to Isolation

Chapter Notes

I know, it's been A WHILE since I promised this. Real life got all kinds of hectic. Hopefully it's been worth the wait! This is very much just my own sort of shadowing of Rowling's epilogue following Isolation which I promised A LONG time ago. Massive thank you to my Beta, Maeghan (occuplymalfoysbed on tumblr), who kindly edited this despite it being five years late!

Usual song recs from me – Hozier – Like Real People Do and Shearwater – I'm So Glad

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

Inclusion : An Epilogue to Isolation for Those Who Desire It

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Eleven Years Later

Andromeda flinched as she tried to shift Teddy's suitcase toward the front door. At fifty-seven, her bones groaned a little louder and longer than they used to; only the other day a sneeze had triggered a series of painful spasms up her spine. Caring for a toddler for the past decade certainly hadn't helped, not that she would have changed that for the world. It was times like this, though, that she really missed Tonks and Ted. It was hard to think about all the things that they had never had a chance to see as Teddy grew at a blindingly fast pace. She worried about him, too, and all the moments that had been stolen from him in this life without his parents.

But Teddy had been an absolute joy. He had brought her just as many smiles as Tonks had, if not more. The pride she felt when she looked at him was, at times, awe-inspiring. For a child who had been denied so much by cruel circumstances, he was a responsible, bright, and kind young man. And, despite the fact that it would probably give her some much-needed rest, she was really going to miss his presence when he left for Hogwarts tomorrow.

Fighting the inevitable tears that would no doubt come in torrents the next day, she attempted to move another one of Teddy's suitcases, but she got the angle completely wrong, and her back twitched in agony just as the front door opened.

"Ow! Bloody hell!" she gasped.

"Aunt 'Dromeda, what the hell are you doing?" asked Draco, rushing to her side. "Why didn't you just use magic?"

"Because I left my wand in the other room."

"Why didn't you just Accio it?" asked a younger, smaller voice.

Despite her pain, Andromeda smiled and lifted her head to meet a set of curious, dark-grey eyes. "Hello, Taura."

With a little aid from Draco, Andromeda adjusted her crumpled posture and practically scooped the girl up into a warm, familiar embrace. Taura's bushy, blonde hair tickled her nose, as it always did, not that Andromeda cared at all. Behind them, Draco's eyes softened as he watched the pair.

"You've learned the Summoning Charm?" asked Andromeda, pulling back to peck Taura's cheek. "You really are such an intelligent young witch, sweetheart."

"Yeah, you try having a five-year-old who already knows some incantations," grumbled Draco, shooting his daughter a look. "Impressive, yes, but also terrifying. Granger and I have taken to locking our wands away, just in case."

Andromeda chuckled in spite of herself. "Then I guess we should be grateful she hasn't inherited her father's mischievousness."

"Yet," he finished. "Come on, let's sit you down and I'll make some tea."

"Hermione and Theo not with you?" asked Andromeda as they moved into the kitchen.

"No, Theo's in the final stages of teething and screaming bloody murder, so I thought I'd save your eardrums."

"He really is very loud," agreed Taura.

"They'll be at King's Cross tomorrow, though," continued Draco. "I only popped around to make sure Teddy was all sorted for tomorrow."

"Did Teddy get his pet?" asked Taura, her eyes animated. "What did he get?"

"Yes, he did, darling. He got a barn owl. I'm sure he'll let you have a little play with her. Why don't you pop up to his room and see her?"

The words had barely left Andromeda's mouth before the little witch practically sprinted for the stairs and clumsily ascended them. They heard her small footsteps padding around upstairs until there was a gentle, polite knock at a door. In spite of himself, Draco grinned as his first-born excitedly invited herself into Teddy's room with an enthusiastic tone that reminded him more and more of her mother. Taura Andromeda Malfoy was every inch Hermione Granger's daughter, and he thought that was perfect.

Turning back to his Aunt and sitting at the table, Draco cocked an eyebrow as he studied the dark shadows tucked beneath her eyes and the new wrinkles that certainly hadn't been there a week ago. "You okay, 'Dromeda?"

"Me? Oh yes, I'm fine. Are you okay? I remember the teething days, and those were some sleepless nights."

"Indeed," he nodded, rolling his tired eyes. "According to Mum, he gets it from me."

If Taura Andromeda Malfoy was Hermione Granger's daughter, then Theodore Orion Malfoy was definitely his son. Although not yet a year old, Draco was already drawing parallels between his son and stories his mother had told him about how he'd behaved at that age. If Theo was half as smart as his sister, they were going to be in trouble by the time he reached three.

"Your Mum sent me a letter wishing Teddy luck for tomorrow," said Andromeda, interrupting his thoughts. "She's going to come over for lunch after Teddy's gone to Hogwarts."

Her voice faltered slightly on the final syllable, and Draco noticed. "Hey, if you're going to miss having a kid around, you can borrow Theo for a few days."

"There's a big difference between an eleven-year-old and a one-year-old, Draco."

"Fair point. So, how is Teddy feeling about tomorrow?"

"I'm not really sure," sighed Andromeda. "He seemed fine at Diagon Alley today, but he was a bit distracted. It was very quiet in town."

"I read in the paper that there are only a few new students going this year. It said it was because they were the 'War Babies' and the birth rate was low that year for...obvious reasons."

"Yes, there are only eighteen First Years. But then apparently the next couple of years will have more students; a typical post-war baby boom."

Draco frowned and drummed his fingers against the table. "Seems so long ago now. Strange to think there will be children going to Hogwarts this year who weren't alive during it."

"That doesn't mean they weren't affected by it."

"Makes me feel fucking old, too."

Andromeda grinned. "You'll always be young to me."

"That's because you're old," he smirked, glancing at the stairs. "Well, I came to have a chat with Teddy."

"I think he'd like that. You go ahead. I'll keep Taura busy with something."

"As long as it's not your wand, you should survive."

As Draco left the kitchen and headed upstairs, he couldn't evade the wall of nostalgia that crashed into him. This had been his home for four years after the War, and despite the residual horrendous memories from those months that haunted the house, he had been comfortable living here with Andromeda and Teddy. It was a creaky home with more cobwebs than candles, yet it had always felt warm and secure. Even now, as he scaled the

stairs, he knew which steps would squeak beneath his feet after sneaking back home from Granger's and trying not to wake Teddy as a toddler.

He gently tapped the door and pushed it open, hesitating in the doorway so he could watch two of the most important people in his life. His daughter was gracelessly slumped on the floor, thumbing her way through Teddy's pile of new books with a wild, fascinated expression. Teddy, perched on his bed, watched her with amusement while gently stroking his young barn owl, although Draco could sense his cousin was tense with buried nerves.

Teddy's hair was a vibrant shade of red, a colour that had often tinted his hair when he'd felt nervous as a young child. His Metamorphmagus abilities obviously enabled him to alter it at will, but every now and then it would subconsciously reveal his dormant emotions.

Despite everyone commenting on how much he looked like Remus, Draco saw more of Tonks in Teddy's young features, but perhaps that was because he had known her better than her husband. Teddy might have the responsible, reserved demeanor of his father, but that inquisitive and adventurous glint in his ever-changing eyes was down to his mother.

"So, you get a new pet," said Taura, captivated and intrigued. "And you get to read all these books?"

Teddy chuckled. "Yes."

"You are so lucky! I can't wait to go to Hogwarts. Aunt Luna said that Ravenclaw has a huge library in their tower-"

"There is another big library that Slytherins can use," interrupted Draco. "And so can the other Houses, whatever they're called."

"They're called Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Gryffindor," she listed, tilting her head knowingly. "And Mum said you need to stop trying to get me to pick Slytherin. She said it was a rule."

"Well, your Mum's not here," he quipped, coming into Teddy's room. "Although your obsession with rules probably means you're destined for Gryffindor anyway."

Taura climbed to her feet and beamed playfully at him. "Would you still love me?"

"Yes, I'd just like you a lot less," joked Draco, grinning down at her. "I need to have a little chat with Teddy. Can you go downstairs, please?"

"Do you fancy letting Agatha out for a fly?" asked Teddy, holding out his new owl. "She could do with stretching her wings."

The young Malfoy didn't hesitate; she flung out her arm as Teddy carefully transferred the owl with care, ensuring that Taura could handle the weight and inelegance of Agatha. Once she achieved some semblance of balance, the young witch practically skipped out of the room, and Draco closed the door behind her so he and Teddy could have some privacy.

"Agatha?" questioned Draco, taking a seat on the bed opposite his young cousin.

"It was the name of Dad's owl," replied Teddy, looking down with thoughtful eyes. "I like it."

"What's wrong, kid? Are you nervous about tomorrow?"

"Weren't you?"

Draco cast his mind back almost twenty years to a very different version of himself. "No, but my circumstances were different. I knew a few other students in my year before Hogwarts, like Blaise and Theo."

"That must have made it easier."

"It did. But you know, Granger didn't know anyone before Hogwarts, being a Muggle-born, and she made friends easily enough. I mean, she could have been a bit more selective rather than just settling on Potter and Weasley, but she's always felt the need to care for pathetic things."

"Is that why she married you?" retorted Teddy.

Draco's lips twitched with mirth. "I have taught you well. See, with that wit, you'll make friends easily. But learn from Granger's mistakes and be picky."

"I'm not really that worried about meeting people."

"Then what is it?"

Teddy grimaced and looked down again, his hands fidgeting in his lap. "It's the sorting ceremony."

"Why would that bother you?" asked Draco, his brow knitted with confusion.

"I don't know...I just feel like whichever House I'm in, someone will be disappointed. Mum was in Hufflepuff, Dad and Harry were in Gryffindor, and then you and Gran were in Slytherin. I can't please everyone."

"Well, what on Earth made you think you need to please anyone? If you're that concerned with others' opinions, then it sounds like Slytherin's off the table anyway."

"So you wouldn't be disappointed if I didn't end up in Slytherin?"

Draco exhaled and offered Teddy a reassuring half-smile. "Well, it sounds like a lot of hassle to disown you, so I guess I'd just have to deal with it. Honestly, kid, you can choose whatever House you like."

"Even Hufflepuff?"

"Hufflepuff?" repeated Draco, but he adjusted his tone and nodded in surrender. "Yes, fine, even Hufflepuff."

Teddy's stunned gawk shot up to his cousin. "Really? But you make fun of them."

"I make fun of everyone," he shrugged. "Besides, the only Hufflepuff I really knew was your Mum, and she turned out okay. And the common room is pretty close to the kitchens, so that's a bonus."

"So, it really wouldn't bother you?"

"It would not."

"And you wouldn't be disappointed?"

"I wouldn't be disappointed."

"And you'll stop making fun of them?"

Draco narrowed his eyes with jest. "Don't push your luck, kid."

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Carrying his slumbering daughter over the threshold of his home, Draco sighed with relief at the blissful silence that shrouded the house. Crookshanks, now flecked with flashes of grey fur, greeted him at the door and purred at his feet. Taura snored lightly in his arms as he moved through the hallway, ducking his head into the study and kitchen, searching for Granger. He eventually found her in the living room on the sofa, cradling their son, but her agitated eyes flew up to meet his as he kicked the door a little harder than he'd intended.

"Be quiet," whispered Hermione, and despite the low volume, it was a harsh whisper. "I literally just got Theo to sleep and I swear I will kill you if you wake him up."

"Oh, foreplay," Draco whispered back, gently settling down Taura in an armchair. "Why don't you just put him to bed?"

"I'm scared if I move I'll wake him up again."

Draco shifted his eyes down to his youngest; his fragile wisps of ashy-blond hair were periodically stirred by Hermione's breaths, and his cheeks were flushed and still damp with tears. While Taura's baby months had been a breeze of easy days and nights, Theo had been a lot more challenging, and he had probably cried more in his first week alive than Taura ever had.

As Hermione had taken parental leave with Taura, Draco had taken parental leave for Theo and had been perpetually exhausted for nine months. There had barely been a fistful of nights

uninterrupted by his son's screams, but Draco had gone back to work a couple of months ago, and now he and Hermione rotated days to care for the children.

They both worked for the Ministry: Hermione for The Department of Magical Law Enforcement as the Head Advisor for the Wizengamot, and he for The Department of International Magical Cooperation as Deputy Manager of the International Magical Trading Standards Body, with a particular specialty in potion trading. Both of their careers were thriving, and the Ministry had been more than accommodating to their childcare needs, particularly when Theo had suffered from blood poisoning at only five-months-old. So, despite the insomnia and skull-splitting headaches, the memory of sitting in St. Mungo's, desperate and aching to hear his son's wailing, always reminded him to be grateful his son was here at all.

Grateful. That was definitely the word. Grateful for his life and those in it.

"Are you okay, Draco?"

Hermione's low murmur snapped him out of his reverie and he looked at her. Really looked at her. Above anything else, he was grateful for her. Even now, over a decade after their isolation at Hogwarts, sometimes it still struck him speechless how much she meant to him. If he believed in romantic and pathetic notions like soul-mates, he would say she was definitely his.

Yes. Very grateful.

"Here, give him to me," said Draco, reaching for Theo.

"Be careful!"

"It's fine, he's out of it."

He sounded more confident than he felt as he gingerly handled his son and apprehensively settled him into the nearby Moses basket. The moment Theo was settled, he muttered a quick Muffling Charm over both of the children before he slumped heavily down onto the sofa next to his wife.

"So, how was-"

Draco interjected with a hard and prolonged kiss, gathering her close to his chest to deepen the moment. He let it linger for a while, and when he pulled away, she was smiling brightly at him with hooded eyes and rosy cheeks.

"What was that for?" she asked, feathering some pecks against his jawbone.

"Have I told you I love you this year?"

"Yes, back in March."

"Oh, never mind then," he shrugged, chuckling when she playfully flicked his arm. "I do though, you know."

"I know."

"Good. So Theo's still being a pain in the arse?"

Hermione nodded and rubbed her eyes. "I think he's almost finished teething. Your son sure has a set of lungs on him, though."

"Very much like Nott did, I reckon. Perhaps naming him after Theo was asking for trouble."

"Well, you were the one to suggest it."

Indeed, although Draco didn't regret it at all. When they had been sat in St. Mungo's, frantic and fearing the worst, Draco had wondered if naming his son after his tragic friend had been some sort of eerie foreshadowing. But then he'd come to realise that, like Theo Nott, Theo Malfoy might just be unlucky; one of those people that life seems to treat a little harsher for no conceivable reason. At least this Theo would have a father who loved him unconditionally.

Draco had even questioned if Theo's illness had been fate's punishment for his life before Granger and their room at Hogwarts. He felt so far away from his teenage self now; like that spiteful version of himself was nothing more than a stranger. Sometimes, just before he drifted off to sleep, a dark and unwelcome memory of something he'd said or done to Granger would flash across his mind, and he would cringe until it faded.

He liked who he was now: imperfect but decent, which is all anyone can really hope to be.

"Draco?" said Hermione. "Did you hear me?"

"Sorry, what?"

"I asked how Teddy was?"

"He was fine. A little nervous."

"Well, that's understandable."

"And he wants to be in Hufflepuff," he grumbled, glaring at Hermione as she erupted with laughter. "What is so funny, Granger?"

"S-sorry," she choked out between giggles. "And how did you react to that?"

"Appropriately, believe it or not."

"I don't believe it."

"Well, I did," he said. "I told him he could choose whichever House he wanted...even sodding Hufflepuff."

"Then you did the right thing. You know your opinion means a lot to him."

"And then your bloody daughter started talking like a proper Gryffindor. I'm obviously just destined to grow old surrounded by Hufflepuffs and Gryffindors. This is my punishment for being a dickhead teenager."

"Don't be so melodramatic," she said, smiling and sitting up. "Come on, we need to get this pair to bed. We have an early start tomorrow. Harry, Ron, and Luna are aiming to get there for about ten, so-"

"Weasley's coming? Merlin's arse, this day just keeps getting worse."

"If you stop whinging and help me get the kids to bed, I might know how to end your day on a high."

Draco's eyebrows shot up with intrigue. "Is that you trying to flirt, or are you going to trick me into helping you alphabetise your books again?"

Hermione smiled and kissed him slowly. "I'm trying to flirt, Draco."

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Platform 9³/₄ was a bustling swarm of bodies before ten o'clock. Perhaps all the additional press about this set of First Years being the 'War Babies' had roused public interest. There was already a substantial herd of journalists weaving through the crowd like snakes, trying to identify family members of the smallest group of First Years Hogwarts had ever received. Draco fought the urge to use Theo's pram as a battering ram when a couple of them headed toward him, but apparently his scowl was enough to deter them.

Beside him, Hermione had lifted Taura into her arms to better keep an eye on her among the chaos. Fortunately, some of the platform attendants had noticed the disorder and were ushering the fifty or so journalists away from the waiting Hogwarts Express until, finally, there was room to breathe.

"Ah, here you are," a familiar, airy voice spoke. "Blaise, I found them!"

"Luna!" Hermione exclaimed, immediately lowering Taura to the floor and enveloping her friend in a customary embrace. "It's so good to see you."

Behind them, Blaise meandered his way through the horde to their small clearing, clutching his daughter close to his chest. Upon seeing them, Hermione stepped forward to offer Blaise a hug, which he accepted somewhat awkwardly as he tried to balance his child on his hip.

"Don't even think about it, Lovegood," remarked Draco.

"I wasn't thinking about anything, Draco," she smiled.

"Well, that I can believe."

Draco ignored the glower that Blaise fired at him as he untangled himself from Hermione's arms and set his daughter down beside Taura. Nova Brigid Zabini was the mirror image of her father, except for the thick mass of black curls crowning her head and her silver-grey eyes. She was four-years-old, only six months younger than Taura and, naturally, the two intelligent young witches showed all the signs of an enduring friendship.

"Since when do you hug Granger?" Draco asked his old friend as he came to stand by him.

"I think the question is since when has Granger hugged me?" He peered into the pram that Draco was still holding. "Nice to see Theo asleep, for a change. Don't be rude to Luna again or I'll wake him up just to piss you off."

Draco rolled his eyes. "She knows I'm only messing with her. Do you get more sensitive with each new grey hair that sprouts out of your head?"

"Don't be smug, you'll get them soon; especially if Theo carries on screaming your roof tiles loose."

But then, Blaise hesitated, and his expression darkened with severity. "Seriously, though, is he all better now?"

"Yes, he's fine. His last follow-up appointment was last week-"

"You didn't say anything."

"Well, Granger didn't want people worrying. Anyway, he's all clear."

"Good," said Blaise, grinning and gracing Draco with a friendly slap on the shoulder. "I was a bit concerned about my godson for a while."

"Me too," he admitted quietly.

"Heads up," warned Blaise with a nod. "I think I just spotted the Weasleys."

The moment his godfather had uttered the words, Theo's chestnut-brown eyes reluctantly blinked open and he began to whimper and gargle his protests. Grumbling a few profanities under his breath, Draco quickly scooped up his son in an attempt to resettle him. Glancing over his shoulder, Draco saw them; it wasn't just Ron, Katie, and their children, but also the families of his brothers Fred, George, and Bill. They moved like one vast sea of red hair.

"I think Theo's allergic to Weasleys," said Draco.

"That's impossible," Taura's little voice countered. "Maybe all the red hair just upsets him."

Both Draco and Blaise barked out short gusts of laughter at her comment. "There's hope you'll be in Slytherin yet, my girl," said Draco, ruffling her hair.

The Weasley clan slotted themselves into the space occupied by the Malfoys and Zabinis with some difficulty. There were sixteen of them, after all. Ron and Katie had three children: the twins, Milo and Hugo, aged six, and a younger daughter called Lila. Then there were George and his wife Angelina with their two boys, Maximus and Jonah. Next were Fred and his husband Lee Jordan, and their adopted daughters: Maisie and Eleanor. Finally, way at the back, were Bill and Fleur with their daughter Victoire.

Draco certainly didn't know all their names (hell, he doubted they did), but Granger knew each and every one and went about hugging as many as she could. In spite of himself, he grinned as his eyes followed her; after the year they'd had, it was soothing to see her so carefree and jovial amongst her friends.

"Hello, Draco!" shouted Fred, pushing his way toward him. "How are you?"

"Which one are you again?" asked Draco, only half joking as he still tried to pacify Theo's sniffles.

"Hey, Malfoy. Hey, Zabini," greeted Ron, standing at his brother's side. "Are you okay, Malfoy?"

"Well, I was doing pretty well until your small army woke up my kid."

"Is Teddy not with you?" asked Fred.

"Yeah, he's in my pocket, obviously."

"Oh, there he is!" shouted Ron, pointing to the other side of the platform. "And there's Harry and Ginny with him!"

"Oh joy," scoffed Draco. "More people."

Their growing throng seemed to shift as one like the tide toward the final arrivals, and Draco took advantage of the distraction to tuck his slightly composed son back in his pram. Teddy and Andromeda neared the group alongside Harry and a heavily pregnant Ginny. Their two sons, James and Albus, rushed forward to the others, yanking Teddy along with them until he was seemingly swallowed by his waiting crowd of well-wishers.

"Merlin's grave," muttered Blaise to Draco. "Do you think there are enough people here to see him off?"

"I would say more than enough."

"Hello, boys," said Andromeda, appearing from nowhere and instantly smothering Blaise in a hug. "Thank you so much for being here today."

Despite her beaming eyes and sincere smile, Draco could tell she'd been crying. "Are you keeping it together, Aunt 'Dromeda?"

"I'm just happy so many people came to see Teddy. Don't keep asking me if I'm okay; it will just make me worse"

"Andromeda!" exclaimed Hermione, joining their little cluster with Luna close behind. "How are you doing? Are you-"

"Stop, Granger," said Draco. "You'll set her off."

The Hogwarts Express roared its low, aging whistle and the conductor bellowed out a ten-minute warning.

"Oh dear," said Hermione, looking from Draco to Andromeda. "You two should probably go and say your goodbyes."

"Bugger," sighed Draco. "This is going to be shit."

"You just swore," said Taura, wagging her finger like a miffed teacher. "Twice."

"Tattletale," he retorted, looking at Hermione. "She's definitely your daughter."

With a reassuring smile, Hermione gently cupped her husband's face, clearly sensing his apprehension. "Go on. Go and say goodbye to Teddy."

Unable to ignore it, Draco realised that there was a heavy sense of sorrow now sitting in the pit of his stomach as he contemplated Teddy's imminent departure. He had grown so much fonder of the boy than he could have ever predicted eleven years ago. He knew that, to Teddy, he had become somewhere in between an older brother and father figure, as had Potter, although he was reluctant to admit that they shared such an important role for the same person.

Snaking their way through the others, Draco and Andromeda found Teddy speaking with Harry. A solemn hush seemed to have descended on the entire platform now as family members muttered sad goodbyes to the other First Years waiting to board the train.

"...Will see you at Christmas," Harry was saying. "Trust me, it goes by so quickly."

"Okay," nodded Teddy, reaching up to hug him. "I'll miss you."

"I'll miss you, too."

Teddy then flicked his sad eyes to Draco, and Harry took a step back to allow them some space.

"How are you doing?" Draco asked his young cousin.

"I'll be fine."

"You really will be. Just remember, if some goofy-looking Gryffindors start talking about some evil lord, you ignore them and come straight home."

Teddy chuckled half-heartedly. "I'll miss you, Draco."

"Of course you will."

Without a warning, Teddy rushed at Draco and wrapped his arms around his torso with a tight grip. "I know you hate hugs, but-"

"It's fine," Draco assured him, patting his back.

Pulling away, Teddy finally turned to Andromeda, who was now allowing her tears to fall freely. Draco stood to the side, accidentally finding himself near Potter.

"He hugged me longer than he hugged you," said Draco.

Harry scoffed. "No, he didn't."

"Pretty sure he did."

"How did you react to the whole Hufflepuff thing?"

Draco shrugged nonchalantly. "Fine. You?"

"Fine."

"Liar."

"Well, you're lying, too."

They exchanged a short but knowing glance just as the final warning whistle echoed around Platform 9¾'s sentinel catacombs. Teddy told his grandmother that he loved her and hugged her for much longer than he had hugged Draco and Harry combined. With a parting wave to everyone who had gathered to wish him farewell, he boarded the train.

Draco felt Hermione's arms wind around his waist and he placed a hand over hers, twisting his head to kiss her cheek. There was a gentle tug on his other hand, and he looked down at his daughter, lifting her up so she could better see the train. Theo's pram was at his other side, pushed there by Blaise, and Draco peered down to watch his sleeping son for a moment. Andromeda was stood close by, dabbing her damp face with her handkerchief, but smiling all the same. The train's engine rumbled like an impatient dragon and then, slowly, it started to crawl forward. Inside the carriage, Teddy waved frantically out the window, as did his two new companions.

"I'm not looking forward to doing this with Taura and Theo," mumbled Hermione.

"No, me neither," Draco admitted quietly, holding Taura a bit tighter and pecking her forehead. "A while to go yet, though."

But as the Hogwarts Express drifted further and further away, and Teddy blurred into the distance, he knew that the time would pass quickly. He also knew that it would be fine. Everything would be fine. Because all was as it should be.

And now it really is done. I promise to try and finish my other fic Dark Water and Dying Eyebrights for anyone who's still reading it and, once again, I sincerely apologise that I promised this when Iso finished and I'm delivering it five years later. I hope this is okay and you like it!

Bex

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!