

The Ghost Of You (Extended Version)

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/46970701) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/46970701>.

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| Rating: | Not Rated |
| Archive Warning: | Major Character Death |
| Category: | F/M |
| Fandom: | Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling |
| Relationship: | Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy |
| Characters: | Hermione Granger , Draco Malfoy , Remus Lupin , Nymphadora Tonks , Lucius Malfoy , Narcissa Black Malfoy , Ginny Weasley , Harry Potter , Theodore Nott , Blaise Zabini , Pansy Parkinson , Teddy Lupin , Tom Riddle , Voldemort , Andromeda Black Tonks , Ron Weasley , Severus Snape |
| Additional Tags: | Post-Battle of Hogwarts , Major and Minor Character Death , Grief/Mourning , denial is a river in egypt and draco lives in that river , POV Hermione Granger , this shit will hurt don't even try to get mad at me about it , i mean you can get mad but i did warn you , carmen is a simp for draco malfoy , theodore nott is kyra's pretty princess , god do i love the bipster , Extended Epilogue , did i accidentally write a slight lucius malfoy redemption? , it's possible , personally i think the extended epilogue makes this a hea , but then again i thought the original was a hea , i'm also not right in the head , Horcrux Hunting , Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence , ron is still out here getting bashed , Battle of Hogwarts , Death Eater Draco Malfoy , POV Draco Malfoy , the betas suffered while reading all of this , flashbacks mixed with present time , some cleaning the other's wounds trope , A little bit of angst , a little bit of Slow Burn , everyone is having a hard time , including me , Not Canon Compliant - Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows |
| Language: | English |
| Series: | Part 3 of TGOY Universe |
| Stats: | Published: 2023-05-12 Words: 107,980 Chapters: 16/16 |

The Ghost Of You (Extended Version)

by [worthlesswriter](#)

Summary

A combination of The Ghost Of You and The Ghost Of You (Hermione's Version) with intertwining POVs for the last chapter plus the extended "epilogue" from Hermione's Version.

Notes

I wrote The Ghost Of You with the intention of it being read twice because certain things will hold different meanings the second time around. With that being said, if you haven't read that version yet this one can be read through this one once and get the same experience.

Chapter 1

THE GHOST OF YOU



BY WORTHLESSWRITER



(this is a perfectly curated playlist that I made for not only my enjoyment but also yours)

When it came to Hermione Granger, Draco knew many things. He knew she was a stubborn witch whose heart was far too big for her own good. He knew she was the type to sacrifice her own life if it meant saving another's. He knew that she had a horrid taste in friends and, most of all, Draco knew that she, more than anyone, was destined for greatness.

What he never knew, nor could have ever predicted, was how royally fucked he was when it came to the curly-haired witch.

A week after Dumbledore's death, Draco found himself scanning the faces of the individuals that filled the dining room of his childhood home. They were cruel and vile people who held all the wrong values—they were Death Eaters, and so was he.

From the age of ten, Lucius began shaping and moulding Draco into the perfect Malfoy heir. He would take etiquette classes on Saturdays, ballroom dance classes on Sundays, and every other weekday, Lucius himself taught Draco both physical and magical combat. By the age of fourteen, Draco had perfected the Viennese Waltz, five different languages, and could kill a man with nothing more than a safety pin (if needed).

"It's better to be feared than to be loved, son," his father would say, his face stoic and cold.

It was a motto that Draco lived by for most of his years. Everything he did adhered to his father's beliefs. But then one day, that all changed.

As he knelt in the centre of the study, Draco remained silent as he watched his father extract a dagger from the cabinet and dip it into a red glass stained vial. It took everything in him not to wince at the action. He was well aware of the contents within and what they did.

Carefully, Lucius held up the dagger and slowly approached Draco. While Narcissa cowered in the corner, unable to watch the events that were about to unfold before her, Voldemort stood off to the side with a delighted look on his face.

"On June 30th, you were assigned the task of locating and mending the vanishing cabinet to grant passage to the Death Eaters so that they may infiltrate Hogwarts," Lucius stated. "You were also given clear orders to execute the current headmaster, Albus Dumbledore. While you completed the first task successfully, you failed to do the same for the second. This, Draco, is your punishment for failing our Dark Lord."

As Lucius raised the knife, the remaining sunlight in the sky caught on the edge of the blade, momentarily blinding Draco. Just as he turned his head and squinted his eyes, Draco felt the sharp steel slide across his skin. Immediately, searing agony surged through his entire body. His teeth cracked under pressure as he clenched his jaw, trying his best to mask the pain.

Every muscle tensed and waves of agony cascaded over him as the poison travelled through his bloodstream. It felt like he was being submerged into a pool of acid while simultaneously having his skin ripped from his body bit by bit.

Draco wanted to scream, break something, and even curse his father out. He wanted release. He wanted to rid himself of the pain that he was currently drowning in, but he couldn't. He wouldn't.

"You failed the Dark Lord and now you must reap the consequences," his father had told him earlier that evening. "Do not let me see even a hint of weakness, son. You can not afford it."

He did as his father had commanded. He refused to show weakness and accepted the punishment.

Once Voldemort was satisfied, he whispered something for only Lucius to hear and then apparated. With only his father and mother now in attendance, Draco allowed himself to collapse forward, his hand clutching onto the wound along his left side.

"Look at me, Draco," Lucius demanded. Draco didn't necessarily expect a pat on the back or for his father to tell him that he was proud of him but he was hoping for some sort of recognition. Instead, Lucius simply said, "Go to your room and try to not embarrass me any further."

At that moment, with blood dripping from his side onto the travertine floor, Draco realised that no matter what he did, or what kind of man or soldier he became, he would never be enough for his father. The life he was living, abiding by Lucius's every wish and command, promptly became one that he no longer desired.

Draco was done trying to appease his father.

That night, he went to his mother and did something he never thought he would. He asked for help. Narcissa arranged a meeting with his former potions professor the very next day.

Flashback - 'The Beginning'

July 17, 1997

"I should've figured you were a mole," Draco scoffed. "Still pining over your little Gryffindor? I hate to break it to you, professor, but playing double agent won't magically bring her back to life and make her love you."

"That's enough, Draco!" Narcissa scolded as she stepped forward. "Severus has agreed to help you. It would do you well to be respectful."

"Respectful?" Draco mocked as he faced his mother. "I told you I wanted a way out, not to be babysat by some spineless fool," he stated, not caring that the "spineless fool" was standing only an arm's length away. "This whole thing is a waste of time. I'll figure something else out."

Before he could even attempt to leave, the door slammed shut. Narcissa flinched at the loud and abrupt thud while Draco remained unfazed.

"Mr. Malfoy," Snape drawled, the low timbre of his voice echoing throughout the room. "I have no intention of babysitting you. Truth be told, your well-being is at the very bottom of my list of priorities."

"What a heartwarming speech, professor," Draco replied flatly, still refusing to meet his stare. "Pray tell, what is at the top of your list?"

"Killing The Dark Lord," he answered casually, as if it were as simple as casting a lumos.

"Do you have a plan to achieve such a feat?"

"Yes."

"And you believe it will be successful?"

"Yes."

"I'm assuming you can't provide me with any details, correct?"

"Correct."

Finally, Draco turned to face his former professor. For a moment, he searched Snape's eyes for any sign of dishonesty or betrayal—anything that would land him in an even shittier position than he already was. Feeling extra cautious, Draco took it upon himself to peek inside his head. Snape offered him only a minute to look around before throwing up a steel wall and forcing him back out.

"You're an occlumens," Draco stated matter-of-factly. "I'm guessing a legilimens as well?"

"Having the ability to protect your thoughts and memories will be a key part of guaranteeing your safety," Snape replied. "Your mother informed me you are a natural occlumens and that your aunt Bella taught you legilimency last summer."

"Did she now?" Draco raised a disapproving brow as he glanced over at Narcissa. "What else has my lovely mother told you about me?"

"That your heart is far bigger than you allow others to believe."

The muscle in Draco's jaw tensed and his eyes narrowed as he took a sharp step forward and grabbed Snape by the lapel of his coat. "I urge you to listen to me carefully, professor," he warned through gritted teeth. "I am not here to seek redemption for myself or my family. So any thoughts you may have of me becoming some sort of hero are a waste of space in that pathetic head of yours."

The corner of Snape's mouth twitched up into a subtle smirk. A rather unsettling view, Draco mentally noted.

"You needn't worry, Mr. Malfoy," Snape carefully removed Draco's hands. "Never once did the idea of you becoming a hero ever cross my pathetic mind."

Present Day

September 19, 1998

It's been over a year since his first meeting with Snape and four months since the infamous battle of Hogwarts took place. Most of Draco's class returned to school two weeks ago to begin their eighth year and complete their NEWTs. The Ministry marketed it as a way to 'return their youth to them' and 'bring back normalcy.'

An absolute load of shit if you asked Draco.

Theo, Blaise, and Pansy all opted out of returning to the former Warzone and began their healing journey by travelling across Europe. They had offered - no - *insisted* that Draco join them, but he graciously declined. "I need to stay at the manor and be here for my mother while she grieves my father," Draco had told them, which earned three concerned expressions-a look he found himself on the receiving end of too frequently as of late.

He didn't understand why everyone seemed to be so worried about him. The war was over, and Voldemort was dead. They had won. Yes, his father was gone, but in reality, that was a blessing, *not* a curse.

Perhaps his friends couldn't understand his light and calm demeanour because they weren't experiencing what he was — pure and genuine happiness.

Draco never expected that the curly-haired, smart-mouthed, know-it-all witch would be the one to bring him such solace. But each morning, when he woke and turned to see her delicate frame beside him, he couldn't help but thank the stars.

All the years of his father ripping his childhood, youth, decisions, and life from him were all worth it because, in the end, he got the girl.

Today was Hermione's birthday. While Draco was never big on such occasions, this year was different. It was their first time celebrating together and after everything they had been through over the past year, he knew he had to go all out.

The moment he heard a knock on the door, Draco jumped out of bed and rushed over to answer.

"Your cake, Master Draco." The house-elf looked up at him, her tiny hands gripping tightly onto the silver platter. "Cherry Bakewell, just as requested."

"Thank you, Bippy," Draco whispered as he accepted the tray.. "Could you please set the table for breakfast? We'll be down shortly."

The house-elf looked up at him with an eerily similar look that his friends often gave him.

"There is no need for the concerned look, Bippy. Just set the table and inform my mother that we will be down shortly."

"But Master Draco, Missus Malfoy—" she began, but Draco promptly cut her off.

"I know that my mother usually takes her tea in her room, but today is a special occasion. Now, off you go," he commanded before kicking the door shut with his foot.

When he turned to face the bed, his eyes immediately locked onto hers. Draco always loved the way Hermione looked in the mornings. The way she'd stare at him with half-lidded eyes as she stretched her arms out to the side. And how the corners of her mouth lifted into a soft smile as she said, "Good morning."

Those two words held no significance to Draco a year ago, but today, they were everything. It was so much more than just a casual greeting. It was a reminder that after everything, they had made it and lived to see another day.

"What's that?" Hermione yawned.

Draco's eyes flickered down at the tray and then back up at her. "Oh, this?" he questioned as he sauntered over to her. "Nothing special. Just a homemade Cherry Bakewell cake that Bippy spent all night baking."

"Cherry Bakewell? That's my favourite." Hermione's eyes lit up as she licked her lips.

"Is it? I hadn't a clue," Draco's tongue poked into the side of his cheek, attempting to suppress his smirk as he removed the metal lid. "Happy birthday, Granger."

The excitement suddenly dropped from her face, and there was a flicker of pain in her eyes as she looked up at him.

"What's wrong?"

She shook her head. "Nothing." Getting up from the bed, Hermione frustratingly ran her fingers through her hair as she paced the length of the room.

"This doesn't seem like nothing." Draco carefully set the tray down. "Tell me what's wrong and I'll fix it."

"You can't!" she snapped. "There's nothing you or anyone else can do! I wish you could," her voice cracked. "Gods do I wish for that, but you can't, and I just-" Hermione's eyes frantically shifted around the room and the panic in her voice increased as she continued to stammer. "I need you to—I don't want to be—"

"Hey, hey," he cooed as he stood and cleared the space between them. "Look at me, Granger."

Hermione continued to pace, refusing to meet his gaze.

"Granger, look at me," he said once again.

When he took another forward and reached for her arm, Hermione took a quick step back and avoided his touch.

"I don't want to be like this," her words drowning in pain.

Draco knew from experience that telling her everything would be okay would do more harm than good. Much like the rest of Wizarding England, Hermione struggled to adapt to life post-war. Several nights he would wake to the sound of her screaming, but much like today, whenever he would try to comfort her, she would jerk away.

The first time that it happened, it felt like his heart had been ripped from his chest. The terror, anger, and pain that flooded her eyes when she looked at him was far more painful than anything he had ever experienced. As time went on, Draco learned to not take it personally. Everyone processed and healed differently and this was just Hermione's way.

After countless failed attempts to navigate the situation, Draco had discovered one way he could help her. Something about talking about their time during the war seemed to console Hermione. It didn't entirely make sense to him, considering the impact the war had on her, but Draco was willing to do whatever he needed to.

"Do you remember my first night at the Burrow?" He asked, his voice gentle as he reclaimed his spot on the edge of their bed.

Hermione's footsteps came to a halt, signalling to Draco that she was listening.

"I do," he continued, the corner of his mouth lifted into a soft smile as he recalled that night. "I was almost certain Snape was fucking with me when I had arrived at the meeting spot."

Flashback - 'Stipulations'

July 27, 1997

Draco hadn't a clue where he was, all he knew was that he was standing in the middle of a field. For the third time that night, he took out the scrap piece of parchment his mother had given him to ensure that he had the correct coordinates.

50.64251° N, 3.29126° W at 22:30.

Moony will collect you. Stay put.

–S.S.

“Stay put,” Draco scoffed. “As if I would wander off. There's nothing but fields for miles.” He dramatically threw his arms up in the air as he took in his surroundings. “Moony will collect you,” he mocked. “The only thing that's been collected so far is water in my bloody shoes. And what the fuck is a Moony?”

“I am,” a male voice casually stated.

Following a rustling coming from the tall grass behind, a figure gradually stepped into the light emanating from the half-moon in the sky. Draco first noticed the hair, then the scar along the individual's cheek, and lastly, the tweed jacket.

“Professor Lupin,” he replied flatly. “I never pinned you as the type to fraternise with the enemy.”

“Severus isn't the enemy. Though, I don't need to tell *you* that. You wouldn't be here if it weren't for him,” he said with a knowing smile. “And please, call me Lupin or even Remus. As we both know, my teaching days are long gone.”

"Yeah, yeah." Draco waved his hand dismissively. "Where even is 'here,' *Lupin* ?"

"A safe house."

Draco glanced around at the empty field surrounding them before remarking, “Forgive me for my ignorance, but shouldn't a safe house include... gee, I don't know, a fucking house?”

Remus let out a soft chuckle before turning and disappearing back into the tall grass. “Are you coming or not?” his voice echoed from afar.

The walk was long, and every step caused more mud and water to gather within Draco's shoes.

Snape will be purchasing me a new pair, he mentally noted.

The seemingly never-ending list of complaints within Draco's head was abruptly interrupted when his body slammed into what appeared to be thin air.

"What the fuc—"

"There's a ward," Remus informed him. "A safe house isn't very safe if it can be easily located, wouldn't you say?"

Draco hated the smug look on his former professor's face.

"There are a lot of things I'd like to say right now," Draco sneered as he aggressively brushed the grass from his jacket.

Remus rolled his eyes as he retrieved his wand. Draco stood back and watched as he gracefully moved his hand through the air in a fluid motion, eventually revealing an oval-shaped opening bordered with a faint blue shimmer. Draco's eyes narrowed in scepticism as he stared at the entrance.

"You are supposed to step through it now. It's easy. Just put one foot in front of the other." Remus said with a hint of mockery.

"I swear to Salazar if I walk through that bloody thing and a hex comes flying at me, I will kill you."

"There's no need for the dramatics, Draco. If I wanted to hex you, I would've done so long ago."

Most people would've found the admission somewhat unsettling, but not Draco. He appreciated those who didn't tiptoe around the truth. If someone wanted him dead and had the guts to say so to his face, they earned his respect.

Alongside Remus's honesty, Draco also appreciated the ward that concealed the safe house. Despite his reluctance to acknowledge it, it was quite impressive. Only a moment ago, there was nothing but miles of bare land, but before him now was a crooked house made up of mismatched and worn-down pieces of wood.

"Bloody miracle the thing is still standing," he muttered to himself.

"In we go," Remus said cheerfully before passing through the barrier.

Reluctantly, Draco followed suit. As they entered the house, he couldn't shake the feeling that he was about to be thrown for a curve. Snape was many things, but generous was not one of them. Which meant his help wouldn't come without a few stipulations. A million possibilities flooded Draco's mind as they made their way through the house, but he could have never predicted the words that escaped Remus's mouth.

"Draco will offer his help with hunting the remaining Horcruxes and taking down Voldemort."

Immediate objections echoed throughout the room. Draco would have joined in the protesting, but he was too busy processing the three individuals standing opposite of him.

"He's a Death Eater!" shouted Ron.

"Not by choice," Remus countered.

"He was going to kill Dumbledore!" exclaimed Harry.

"Was is a key part of that sentence, Harry."

Their voices were nothing more than a muffled mess in Draco's head. None of it made any fucking sense. He remembered the horrified look on his mother's face as she watched Voldemort cast the dark mark on his arm. So why in Merlin's name would she want him here? Why would she want him to become a spy? The task was significantly riskier than being one of Voldemort's lackeys.

"Hermione, don't you have anything to say?" he heard Ron ask.

The sound of her name earned his attention. Lifting his eyes, Draco met Hermione's gaze.

"He's vile, just like the rest of them." Her stare mirrored the revulsion that laced her words.

"We have no reason to believe that he won't turn on us." Hermione advanced toward him.

"With that being said, we also have no solid evidence to believe the contrary." Hermione was quiet for a moment, her eyes darkening with each step.

Draco braced himself as he waited to be, for the second time in his life, punched in the face by the witch.

"But the second you give us any reason to believe the former," she said to him, her voice firm. "I promise you, I won't hesitate to shoot a hex through your pretentious skull."

Chapter 2

Flashback - 'Lessons'

August 1, 1997

Draco spent all morning pacing the perimeter of the drawing room. His restlessness wasn't due to stress or anticipation, it was a result of something he hated far more. Anticipation. Just as he was about to retire to his room last night, Lucius pulled him aside and informed him that he had been called upon.

"You will meet me here promptly at eight am tomorrow," Lucius had instructed. "We will use the floo to go to the Ministry. The Dark Lord will be waiting for us which means we can not, under any circumstance, be late. He is rather unforgiving when it comes to such a thing."

Ever since Draco had failed the task of executing his headmaster, Voldemort had been keeping a watchful eye on him. All Draco wanted was another chance to prove himself and his allegiance. He wouldn't be a very useful spy if the only information he could provide The Order was a count on how often Bippy needed to sweep the manor due to Greyback's incessant shedding.

"It's time," Lucius announced as he descended the staircase and slipped his hands into a pair of dragonhide gloves.

Narcissa followed closely behind, a trouble looked etched onto her face, a harsh contrast to her husband's. Her eyes had been drowning in fear and her hands hadn't stopped shaking since the dark mark was cast upon her son's forearm. She was always on edge. Even the slightest sound would cause her to jump. Though, she somehow managed to maintain her elegance even when startled.

As Draco crossed the room to join his father, Narcissa's dainty fingers gently wrapped around his bicep. Pulling him close, she whispered, "Remember darling, you are not what they try to turn you into." Narcissa glanced over at Lucius to make sure he wasn't listening. "You are a good person, Draco. Whether you choose to believe it or not."

His mother's words played over and over, like a broken record repeating the same song on an endless loop, inside Draco's head as he and his father arrived at the Ministry of Magic and made their way through the first floor to the Minister's office. Even as he stood along the wall, watching as Dolohov and Yaxley took turns torturing Scrimgeour, Draco continued to mull it over.

"You are not what they try to turn you into."

It was a nice sentiment, but he couldn't help but think of it as both foolish and naive, two things he was painfully aware his mother was not. If Draco were ordered to kill someone, he

would. He couldn't afford to let his conscience stop him. Not this time.

The rules were simple: do as you're told and you might live to see another day.

"Please," Scrimgeour begged, his hands raised in defeat. "I'll do whatever you ask of me. Just *please*, don't kill me."

Dolohov and Yaxley drew back and returned to their spots against the wall as Voldemort moved forward. His movements were slow and fluid, much like the snake that rarely left his side. His presence alone was enough to make even the toughest of men cower.

"I am to believe that you, a decorated auror, could be trusted in my regime?" Voldemort questioned as he circled the man. Draco couldn't help but compare the scene to a lion stalking its prey—waiting for the perfect moment to strike. "The man who, just a few weeks ago, publicly spoke out against me?"

"I was just... doing... my... job," Scrimgeour panted.

"Tell me, Minister, why would I put my faith in a man whose allegiance is so easily swayed?"

It was evident that the question itself wasn't actually a question at all. There would be no negotiating for one's life today. Voldemort was merely doing what he does best—getting people to throw away their dignity and beg for mercy, only for them to then die at his hands moments later. The only person in the room who was unaware of this was the Minister himself, who went on to explain the vital role he could play and the assistance he could lend.

"Lucius," Voldemort called out, cutting Scrimgeour off mid-sentence. "Read off today's entry regarding the Minister's travels."

Lucius flipped open the file in his hands and took a single step forward. "At nine-thirty am, Minister Scrimgeour travelled to an unknown site near the town of Ottery St. Catchpole, where he concluded the readings of late Albus Dumbledore's will." Like the proper soldier he was, Lucius snapped the folder shut, retreated into his original spot, and lowered his head.

Ottery St. Catchpole. The name sounded familiar to Draco, but the reason as to why was unbeknownst to him which only irritated him. He knew it held some kind of significance or else his brow wouldn't have quirked when he heard his father say it but why? Draco's brows scrunched together as he sifted through every memory, attempting to unscramble the puzzle that was his mind. And then, he heard it.

"Harry Potter." Instantly, Draco's head shot up. "That is who you met with," Voldemort continued. "He is one of the three names that you had redacted from the document." Scrimgeour's lips parted, ready to defend himself or make up some lie, but before he could, Voldemort said, "You met with Harry Potter no more than a few hours ago and now here you are, trying to convince me that you would be a trusted ally."

The air in the room grew thick and it felt like the temperature had dropped twenty degrees as Voldemort's lips curved up into a spine-chilling grin and a mocking chuckle escaped the back

of his throat.

“It is always a shame to see magical blood be split.” Voldemort’s hand raised, his wand casually balanced between his pointer and middle finger. “But I’m afraid you serve no purpose other than being an untrustworthy nuisance. Say hello to the former Minister for me.”

Everything moved in slow motion as the green beam of light soared through the air and slammed into the centre of Scrimgeour’s chest. The second his body collapsed onto the ground, everyone promptly filed out of the office—except for Draco, who found his feet cemented to the ground.

The murder he just witnessed wasn’t what paralysed him in place. It was the mention of Otter St. Catchpole. It had finally clicked for him. That was the area where The Order’s safehouse was located. Draco couldn’t believe that it had taken him this long to realise that. Actually, that was a lie, he could.

Truth be told, the well-being of The Order ranked extremely low on his list of priorities. Which meant anything involving the group, including the location of their hideout, was simply filed and stowed away in a junk drawer in his mind. Draco had also zoned out the entire time Remus discussed what he was and wasn’t meant to do as a spy. It seemed rather self-explanatory.

Do: Provide as much information as possible.

Don’t: Die.

However, Draco was now slightly kicking himself for not paying attention because he hadn’t a clue what he was supposed to do in this situation. The Death Eaters didn’t have a precise location yet but Draco knew it would only be a matter of time before Voldemort sent someone to investigate. And based on what he had witnessed so far, a ward will always fail to keep Death Eaters out, no matter how strong they might be.

So now what? Was he meant to send word to the idiots? And if so, how the fuck was he meant to do that without someone noticing? Or was Draco meant to physically go there to warn them? And if that’s the case, he would love for someone to tell him how he was supposed to manage sneaking away because it wasn’t like he could disappear without his father-

“Draco,” Lucius hissed from the doorway. “Get,” his eyes pierced at Draco. “Over,” his vein popped in his neck. “Here,” he narrowed his eyes in assertion.

Spy duties will have to wait I guess.

Joining his father, he stepped out onto the main floor and took note of the hundreds of individuals that occupied the area. The entire Ministry was gathered in the atrium, each petrified by fear as they stared at Voldemort.

“It saddens me to announce that Rufus Scrimgeour is no longer with us,” he began, his words full of mock sympathy. “But fear not, you will not be without a leader.”

Greyback moved into everyone’s line of sight, dragging a dishevelled man behind him. Gasps filled the air as he pushed the thin man to the front. His left eye was swollen shut, and blood and bruises painted his face.

“I am certain you are all familiar with Pius Thicknesse,” Voldemort stated. “For three decades, he has served as head of the DMLE, until today. From this day forth, he will be your new Minister. If there are any objections, I urge you to voice them now.”

A deadly quiet fell upon the room. Not a single person was daft enough to speak out, regardless of their opinion on the matter.

“Excellent.” A smirk danced at the corner of his lips. “You may all return to your work now. Minister Thicknesse will be in his office acquainting himself with his new role.”

Draco had been desensitised to death for most of his life. When he was ten, he saw an injured bird in the garden. When he rushed inside, his hands carefully caressing the animal, he approached his father and begged him to help.

“Sometimes it is best to put the weak out of their misery,” his father had told him, his tone just as emotionless as his expression. Lucius’s eerily calm demeanour never once faltered as his hand wrapped around the bird’s neck, and with a casual jerk of his wrist, snapped it.

That was the first time Draco had witnessed a killing.

That’s not to say murders were prevalent in Draco’s life, they were more like a distant aunt or cousin who appeared a handful of times throughout the year. Few and far between, but not unfamiliar or disconcerting. A singular thread also wove through each occurrence; they were a lesson.

So as Draco followed the other Death Eaters back into the office, the newly appointed Minister on his knees in the middle of the room, he knew what to expect—a lesson.

Voldemort’s red eyes locked upon Draco’s silver ones with an intensity that would cause any weak man to look away. For once, Draco found himself thankful for his father. From a young age, Lucius made it known that weakness was a trait that a Malfoy man was never allowed to possess. The word itself was forbidden unless used to insult another.

“Draco,” Voldemort hummed. “Step forward.”

This is it, Draco thought as he placed one foot in front of the other and gripped the base of his wand. *This is my chance to earn his trust.*

“The cruciatus should suffice,” he said casually.

Deep breath.

Draco raised his wand.

Clear your mind and focus.

His eyes glossed over as his occlumency cemented.

You have to mean it because if you don't, it won't work. And if it doesn't work, he will kill you.

“Crucio.” The second the word fell from his lips, Thicknesse’s body toppled over and began convulsing. With each whimper and pain-filled groan the new Minister let out, Draco mentally placed brick after brick, until a wall twice his size formed. He could feel the dark magic coursing through his body. It started at his feet, travelled up his legs, through his torso, arms, and down to his fingertips.

It was heavy.

Consuming.

Addicting.

He remembered the discussions back at Hogwarts in Defense Against the Dark Arts. Snape would lecture them on the consequences of using dark magic and how many witches and wizards described the untethered irrational panic that accompanied their first dark spell. Draco had prepared himself to feel the same but what he ended up experiencing was the exact opposite. For the first time in his life, he felt at ease. He felt in control.

It wasn’t until Voldemort placed his hand on Draco’s shoulder, his nails piercing through the fabric of his suit jacket and into his skin, that he dropped the hex. He felt the weight of the magic subside when he lowered his wand, like the final note of a haunting melody fading into silence.

“Very good, Draco,” he praised, his lips curled upward, revealing his decaying teeth.

“Perhaps you are not as incompetent as your past actions led me to believe.” Draco released a subtle sigh of relief. “One final thing.” Voldemort lowered his mouth to be level with his ear. “Make him obedient,” he said in a low hissed whisper.

“Please.” Thicknesse’s eyes held a desperate plea. “There is no need. I will do whatever you ask of me.”

Shut out the thoughts.

Draco raised his wand once more.

“As honourable as your word may be, I have never been foolish enough to trust on that alone. I am sure you understand, Minister.” With a lazy wave of his hand, Voldemort signalled Draco to proceed.

Lock out the emotions.

“Imperio.”

If there was one thing to be said about Voldemort, besides being a psychotic mass murderer, it was that he appreciated efficiency. Once the Minister was under an imperio, everything moved quickly.

Voldemort sent different fleets to carry out various orders, one of which included scoping out Ottery St Catchpole. When Greyback and Bellatrix returned with a location, Draco, Yaxley and the Carrow siblings were ordered to infiltrate.

Draco did his best to stall without growing suspicion. He still hadn't remembered what Lupin and Snape had told him to do in such a circumstance, but he felt delaying his fellow Death Eaters was an excellent first step. Asking questions that even he knew were moronic only hindered them for five minutes. Before he knew it, Draco once again found himself in ankle-high water as he stood in the middle of a field of tall grass.

Yaxley and the Carrows wasted no time before heading straight towards the seemingly empty area ahead as they threw curses and hexes to shatter the ward. Screams echoed throughout the night sky as Draco sauntered his way over. When he finally entered the burning tent, he was met by a wand to the neck.

"That's no way to greet a guest," Draco scoffed.

"Draco," Remus let out a sigh of relief as he lowered his arm. "What are you doing here?"

"My job."

"Your job includes crashing a peaceful wedding?"

"When my orders are to do so, yes," Draco simply replied as he scanned the surrounding area. "Where are the Three Musketeers?"

"They're gone," Remus replied as he casually blocked a hex from behind.

"Shame," Draco frowned before muttering an enchantment that made Amycus' shoelaces knot together, causing him to trip over. "I never got the chance to insult Potter properly. I have a long list that I've been saving for a rainy day."

Remus shook his head. "They're not dead."

"An even bigger shame."

"I need you to go find them, Draco. To make sure that they're safe."

"What am I, a Crup? I don't remember protecting the three dimwits as part of our deal, Remus."

"Our deal was that you would help the Order. Finding Harry, Hermione, and Ron fall under that category."

Draco let out an irritated groan as he rolled his eyes. “How am I even supposed to locate the lot? You wouldn’t happen to have some fancy map that tells me their whereabouts, would you?”

“No, but a simple tracking spell should do the trick. Perhaps try A-”

“Avenseguim, I know.”

“I was going to suggest Appare Vestigium, but yeah, that works too.”

“Do you have something that belonged to any of them? Piece of hair, clothing item, a brain cell. Oh-wait-apologies, none of them are in possession of the latter,” Draco smirked.

Ignoring the snide remark, Remus yanked at the tie wrapped around his neck and handed it to Draco. “That’s Ron’s,” he explained. “He loaned it to me for tonight’s event.”

“There was no need for the backstory,” Draco replied, his nose scrunched in disgust as he held the fabric between his fingers. “Only a Weasley would own such a hideous piece.”

Remus turned and continued to block any curses that flew in their direction while Draco began mumbling the enchantment. It took only a moment for the spell to activate and for the tie to glow a soft shade of orange.

“Good, it worked,” Remus said as he faced Draco again. “Now go and stay out of sight.”

“Woof,” Draco deadpanned. His movements were as if he broke his wrists downwards like a dog placing its paws on a fence.

Draco pushed through the sea of people as he followed the tracking device that was previously nothing more than a dreadful tie. His body shivered each time he rubbed shoulders with one of the hundreds of Muggles that flooded the area.

“Loathsome creatures,” he muttered.

Of course they’d be in London, Draco mentally scrutinised as he dramatically rolled his eyes. Brilliant idea Gryffin-dumb fucks, go to one of the most populated areas where it’s nearly impossible to spot if someone’s trailing you.

His internal litany of insults regarding the trio abruptly stopped when he spotted a familiar face just ahead.

Antonin Dolohov.

He was dressed in a blue workman’s jumpsuit and by his side was another man in an identical outfit. Draco watched as the pair stowed their wands in their sleeves and entered the café.

Two Death Eaters dressed as Muggles walk into a café, it sounded like the opening to a rather shit joke, but in this particular case – it was the beginning of society’s beloved golden trio’s

possible demise.

Draco took a moment to ponder his options.

Option one: cross the street and save the morons.

Option two: obliviate himself, turn around, go home and let them fend for themselves. If they make it, they make it, and if they don't... may they rest in peace.

Both had pros and cons, and as much as he would've preferred to go with option two, Draco found himself headed straight for the café. Once he pushed open the red door and stepped inside, a curse flew past, barely missing his face.

"Wanker," Draco mumbled before he swiftly removed his wand from his coat pocket and cast a stupefy at Dolohov.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry shouted, disarming the other.

"Expelliarmus, really? Is that the only spell you know?" Draco ridiculed.

"Oh, I'm sorry Malfoy, was that not good enough for you?"

"No, it wasn't. I understand that it's a difficult concept for you Potter, but use your fucking brain. Disarming spells were a fun trick back at school, but this is life or death. You need to grow up and use something like—"

"Petrificus Totalus," Hermione interrupted as she shot up from behind the table. A burst of light escaped the tip of her wand, soared across the room and knocked the remaining Death Eater to the ground.

"Something like *that*," Draco finished as he pointed at Hermione. "Well done, Granger," he praised. "Care to finish the job?"

"We aren't killing anyone," Ron stated as he stood and brushed the dirt from his jeans.

"Since when did the carrot-head call the shots?" Draco directed at Harry and Hermione. As he awaited a reply, he moved around to the back of the counter. A young woman appeared in the kitchen doorway as Draco kicked the bottom of Dolohov's boot. Her eyes grew wide as they shifted to the two bodies lying on the floor to her right.

All of the blood drained from her face when her gaze met Draco's. She stood frozen and found herself unable to speak as her hand gripped tightly onto the brown handle of the coffee pot.

"You can't—" she began, but her voice caught in the back of her throat.

"Leave," Draco instructed. When the waitress remained unmoved, Draco stepped into her and narrowed his eyes. "Leave," he repeated, the command doubling as a threat.

The waitress nodded her head and hurried into the kitchens. Once the backdoor shut, informing them that the Muggle was gone, Hermione got to work on the blinds while Harry and Ron joined Draco behind the counter.

“That’s Dolohov,” Ron stated as he glared at the man on the ground. “I recognise him from the wanted posters.”

“Who’s the other guy?” Harry questioned.

Draco knelt and used the tip of his wand to turn the man’s head to face him. “Thorfinn Rowle. He fought in the first wizarding war and was in the astronomy tower that night.”

“You mean the night you killed Dumbledore?” Ron glowered.

“I didn’t kill Dumbledore, not that I owe *you* any sort of explanation.”

Ron let out a scoff of disbelief. “Oh, so you’re trying to tell me that you’re not a killer?”

“I never said that,” Draco casually replied as he stood and walked over to him. “I was merely correcting you on your false accusation. Speaking of killing, would anyone like to do the honours? What about you, Granger? I’d recognise a thirst for blood anywhere, and you’re drowning in it.”

“Hermione isn’t a murderer,” Ron positioned himself between Draco and Hermione as if she were in some sort of danger and his body needed to act as a protective shield.

“*Hermione* can speak for herself, Ronald,” she stated as she stepped out from behind him. “And while I may not be a murderer, I do think discarding them would be the best course of action.”

“You’re joking, right?” Harry’s brows furrowed as he whipped his head to look at her.

“Do I look like I’m joking Harry?” Hermione snapped. “They’re Death Eaters, and if that’s not enough reason, they tried to kill us. Who’s to say that they won’t try again if we let them go? I’m sorry, Harry, but that’s not a risk I’m willing to take.”

“You’ve gone completely mental,” Ron interjected. “I thought we came to an agreement on this Mione?”

“If by an agreement you mean, you scolding me for simply suggesting a war tactic, then sure Ron. But never once did I explicitly state that I would play nice. *Nice* has never been known to win wars.”

Draco couldn’t help but be baffled, though he tried his best to keep as straight of a face as possible. He knew Hermione tended to be somewhat dictatorial and, at times, curt, but he never in his wildest dreams expected to listen as she justified killing someone. For the first time, Hermione Granger had Draco Malfoy’s full attention.

“I can’t believe you’re still on this dark magic thing!” Ron exclaimed as he threw his arms in the air.

“She never specifically said dark magic,” Harry added in an attempt to diffuse the situation.

“Dark magic is *precisely* what I meant,” Hermione stated. “What’s a few Unforgivables if it means saving the entirety of Wizarding England?”

“Are you kidding me?” Ron stared at Hermione as if she were a stranger, not the curly-haired girl he had spent the last seven years growing up and falling in love with. “Hermione, please, don’t do this to me,” he pleaded as he grabbed her hand.

“I’m not doing anything to you Ron!” She argued as she yanked her hand away. “I told you I would do whatever it takes to win this war. To make everyone’s sacrifices worth it. To justify what I did to my par–” pain flashed in her eyes as she choked on the last word.

“Mione,” Ron sighed. His shoulders dropped as he took a cautious step toward her. “I didn’t mean to–”

“It doesn’t matter,” Hermione blurted as she shook her head. “Let’s just clean this mess up and get out of here before any more Death Eaters wander in.”

Hermione pushed past everyone and removed her wand from her back pocket. As she lifted her arm, Harry and Ron both shuddered.

“Relax,” she groaned. “I’m not killing either of them, though I still think it’d be wise.” Hermione raised her wand once more and cleared her throat. “Obliviate,” she muttered as she slowly turned her wrist clockwise.

Present Day

“Draco, darling,” the sound of Narcissa’s voice pulled Draco from his thoughts. Shaking his head and blinking a few times, he looked over at his mother and offered her a tight smile.

That night at the café seemed like a lifetime ago, yet he could still recall every emotion he felt that day. The exhaustion from being on such high alert whilst at the Ministry, the intoxicating feeling from using dark magic for the first time, and most of all, the overwhelming urge to get to know Hermione.

He remembered how much he hated that. Hermione bloody Granger? *She* was what had piqued his interest? Not the fact that he had used his first Unforgivable, or even better yet, that he had enjoyed it? No. Of course not. It just *had* to be the five-foot-five, bushy-haired witch.

Before then, she held no significance to Draco. The only time he had noticed her at school was when she broke his nose in third year, and after that, it was only when another student would mention her name.

During fourth year, rumours had spread that Hermione trapped Rita Skeeter in a jar. Draco found it ridiculous to believe that the almighty golden girl would be capable of such a devious act, but that night at Lucchino Caffè, he found himself reevaluating his perception of her.

She was still just as stubborn and snippy, but there was a new side he had yet to discover. He had always cast Hermione as the type to follow the rules, to do the honourable thing - murder didn't fall under that category. While her friends seemed appalled by her suggestion, Draco was fascinated.

The witch from that night was intense, captivating, and even a bit intimidating. That's not to say that the golden-eyed girl sitting at the table to his right was no longer those things, but she had changed. Draco couldn't blame her though. He had changed too. Who he was back then felt like a stranger.

Still, it was hard for him to see Hermione like this. The once outspoken girl was now a quiet and often frightened woman. All Draco wanted to do was help her, but he knew no matter what he said or did or how hard he tried, it wouldn't be enough. Hermione had to *want* to get better, and it was apparent that she had no interest in doing so.

"I thought we might take a walk around the garden today," Draco said as he turned to look at Hermione. Her empty gaze remained trained on the plate before her as she picked at the dead skin around her nail.

"Granger?"

"Hmm?" she hummed as her gaze finally met his.

"The garden, thoughts? It's your birthday, I don't want to force you to do anything you aren't interested in."

"No-I mean-sure. That sounds nice," she replied quietly with a soft smile.

"You must visit the dahlias," Narcissa chimed. "They're absolutely delightful this time of the year. Bippy could put together a basket and the two of you could enjoy a picnic under the family oak tree. The weather is supposed to be perfect today too. Not too sunny with a light breeze. Oh, it'll be so lovely!" She exclaimed as she clapped her hands together.

Narcissa tended to get overly excited, especially when planning things. Since the war, social gatherings had been at a minimum. With no events, Narcissa focused her energy on rearranging the manor with help from Draco. Each room had been reconstructed more times than Draco could keep count, but he knew that, much like Hermione, his mother was struggling.

The loss of his father impacted Draco and his mother differently. For her, it felt like a dagger to the heart. Lucius was her first and only love, the man she vowed to be with until the end. He was her safe place, regardless of the poor decisions made and the difficult positions he put them in. For Draco, it was a mixture of regret, relief, and anger.

He hated his father for the way he treated his mother. He hated that because of Lucius, he would forever wear the mark of a killer. He was also relieved to be free of his constant scrutiny, but most of all, he regretted never being able to tell his father how he truly felt.

Draco spent his entire life obeying every command given to him. If his father told him to stand taller, he would. If he were instructed to hate a specific group of people, he did. And if he were ordered to become a Death Eater, he would offer his forearm to be branded.

If Draco could go back in time, he would say every thought that ever crossed his mind. He would tell Lucius that he was no father to him at all and that his constant ‘lessons’ did nothing but break him. If he could, Draco would look his father dead in the eyes and tell him that he himself was the only failure in the family.

But he couldn’t. His father was gone. What he could do was notice how his mother’s excitement seemed to drain Hermione. She would always put on a good show for Narcissa. She’d wear her best fake smile and agree to things she clearly had no interest in. Draco loved her for it, but he also loved her enough to save her from it.

“Perhaps we can save the picnic for a later date?” Draco suggested. “I already had something planned for today anyways.”

“Oh,” Narcissa tried to mask the disappointment behind a tight smile. “Of course, another time then.”

No one spoke for the remainder of breakfast, the only sound being the tip of Draco’s fork scraping against the surface of the fine china as he stabbed at his eggs. After Narcissa excused herself and Bippy came around to clear the table, Draco got up from his chair and motioned for Hermione to follow.

As they stepped through the french doors and into the backyard, Draco felt the cool breeze dance across his skin as he closed his eyes and slowly inhaled the fresh scent. He listened as the collection of orange and red leaves crunched beneath his feet as they walked past the fountain and over to the dahlias.

Draco watched as Hermione hesitantly approached the area and took a seat on the marble bench. She began to reach out for one of the flowers but paused just before contact and quickly withdrew her hand.

“Did you know that the dahlia was one of Queen Victoria’s favourites?” Draco questioned.

Hermione shook her head.

“Though it’s also wise to mention that she was also quite the fan of orange blossoms, lilies, and violets,” Draco continued as he fiddled with the black stone on his ring. “But I’m certain that, at one point, dahlias were at the top of her list.”

“I must say, I’m surprised you, of all people, carry so much knowledge on a topic like this,” Hermione replied.

“Oh?” Draco’s brow arched. “And why’s that?”

“It just seems like a rather useless piece of information if I’m being honest.”

“Miss Granger, I can assure you that knowing the late Queen Victoria’s preference in flowers is *extremely* useful.”

“Is that so?” she teased as the corner of her mouth lifted into a smirk.

Draco nodded.

“Go on then, enlighten me.”

“Gladly. You see, not only did it help me redirect an exasperating conversation about my theoretical future wife with one of my mother’s friends during Sunday tea three years ago,” he explained as he slowly stepped toward her. “But it also managed to provide me with my favourite view.”

“Which is?” she questioned.

He raised his hand and pointed his finger at her.

“Me?”

“Yes, you,” he replied. “More specifically, that smile of yours. It’s been far too long since I’ve seen it. But on the rare occasions that I do, it still causes me to go weak in the knees. *You* make me weak in the knees, Granger.”

Hermione playfully rolled her eyes as her cheeks turned a soft shade of pink, matching the flowers to the left of her.

“You know, it’s almost comical thinking back on my impression of you back at Hogwarts.”

Intrigued, Draco claimed the seat beside her and leaned back onto the tree behind them. “I’m listening,” he smirked as he motioned for her to continue.

“Where to even begin?” Hermione teased as she let out a small giggle. “For starters, you were England’s most pompous child.”

“I prefer the term confident, but please, do continue.”

“There are so many words that come to mind when I think back on the Draco Malfoy everyone knew and loathed so dearly,” she said sarcastically. “A few of my favourites would have to be judgemental, arrogant, selfish, vain, aggravating, dramatic....”

“Dramatic? I am *not* dramatic!” he argued as he shot up to his feet and threw his hands into the air.

“Right,” Hermione chuckled. “Not dramatic at all, my apologies.”

“Apology accepted.” Draco readjusted his shirt before returning to his seat on the bench.

“Now that that’s settled,” she began. “The point I was trying to make was that if someone told me back then that Draco Malfoy knew random facts about flowers and enjoyed filling his free time whispering sweet nothings, I would’ve laughed in their face. You’re a far more complex person than I gave you credit for.”

“You forgot to mention how devilishly handsome I am,” he grinned as he flashed her a wink.

“I seem to have forgotten humble as well.”

“That you did. But no worries love, I forgive you,” he assured her through a cheeky smile.

This is us, he thought. This is how we used to be.

A piece of Draco felt ashamed for wanting to freeze time and stay in this moment forever. He knew that Hermione was hurting and it would take her time to adjust, but he missed the days when they’d be this way. When they’d tease one another, laugh and just simply exist. He even missed the times when they’d fight because, at least then, he had some idea of how to fix it.

Sometimes Draco found himself reminiscing on the days when he was nothing more to Hermione than a thorn in her side. It was easier then; there were no expectations for him apart from being a prat. He remembered how a sneer would always find its way onto Hermione’s face whenever he’d show up during the Horcrux hunt.

Flashback - 'Reunions'

August 4, 1997

“Did someone order a small man whose head resembles a crystal ball?” Draco questioned.

“Malfoy?” Harry’s brow raised as he watched Draco drag Mundungus through the kitchen.

“Get your elitist Death Eater hands off of me!” Mundungus shouted as he kicked his feet and flailed his arms in an attempt to free himself.

“What the bloody hell are you doing here Malfoy?” Ron glowered.

“What you failed to do on your own,” Draco replied before throwing Mundungus down onto the wooden chair. “I must say, I always thought sending a house elf to do your fetching was above you bleeding-heart Gryffindors. Especially *you*,” Draco’s eyes shifted over to Hermione’s.

“And where is Kreacher, might I ask?” Hermione sneered as she crossed her arms.

“Harry Potter,” A small voice exclaimed. “How long it's been!”

“Dobby, what are you—” Harry began, but he was cut off.

“Dobby was in Diagon Alley and saw Kreacher, which Dobby thought was curious.”

“And—” Kreacher attempted to speak but was pushed back by Dobby, who continued to talk over him.

“And then, Dobby heard Kreacher say Harry Potter’s name.”

“I had to—” Kreacher began, only to be once again pushed aside.

“*And then*, Dobby ran into master Draco which confused Dobby even more.”

“When he says ran into, he quite literally means *ran* into,” Draco added.

“Yes, Dobby’s head still hurts from crashing into Master Draco’s leg,” Dobby stated as he rubbed his forehead.

“As lovely as it is to see you Dobby, and as nauseating as your presence is, Malfoy, might we focus on the task at hand?” Hermione suggested.

“Right, the task,” Harry agreed as he turned his attention to the back corner of the kitchen. Everyone followed closely behind as he made his way over to Mundungus, who was busy sifting through the cabinet.

“Hand it over,” Harry commanded.

Startled by the voice, Mundungus spun around and clutched at his chest as if he were having a heart attack. “Hasn’t anyone told you that it’s improper to sneak up on someone like that?” He ridiculed.

“Just hand it over Mundungus,” Ron demanded. “We know you have it.”

“Even if I knew what you were referring to, why would I listen to you? You’re just a couple of children with two house elves as sidekicks.”

“Dobby is a free elf!” Dobby shouted from behind. “Dobby even has his own trainers!” the elf proudly extended his leg, displaying his shiny new red converse.

“Yeah, yeah,” Mundungus groaned as he waved his hand and rolled his eyes. “It doesn’t change the fact that none of you scare me. Not even you, blonde.”

“That’s fine,” Draco shrugged nonchalantly. “Everyone acts brave until they find themselves with a wand pointed at their head or a hand wrapped around their neck. I’d be delighted to assist you in discovering just how cowardly you truly are, but only if you ask nicely.”

Mundungus’ previously smug look quickly dissipated as he swallowed back any remaining remarks. His face turned a ghostly shade of white and fear consumed his eyes as he met

Draco's cold and uninviting glare.

Harry and Ron moved aside as Draco stalked over to where he stood. With each step Draco advanced, Mundungus retreated. He matched stride for stride until there was no room left and he found himself pinched between the cold brick wall and Draco's tall and domineering stature.

"I'll take your silence as a no," Draco stated. "Pity, I was in a good mood too. Perhaps another time." In one swift motion, Draco swung his arm around, gripped firmly onto the back of Mundungus' neck and dragged him over to the fireplace.

"Now, we can do this one of two ways. Either you hand over whatever the fuck it is the three idiots are asking for, or I'll spend my evening watching as the skin melts from your face."

"Have you gone mad!?" Mundungus screamed.

"Possibly. You have ten seconds to decide. Ten... nine..."

"You're even crazier than your father, you know that?"

"Flattery will get you nowhere," Draco replied before he resumed counting. "Six... five..." Retrieving his wand, he aimed at the fireplace and flicked his wrist, causing flames to erupt within.

"You're bluffing!"

"Three..." he continued as he pushed Mundungus toward the fire.

"Alright, alright! I'll give you what you want, just let me go you bloody sociopath!"

"As you wish."

Releasing his hold, Draco stepped back and watched as the short man fell forward. Wails escaped the back of Mundungus' throat as his hands pressed down onto the burning wood to catch himself.

"You're going to be sorry you did that!" He shot over at Draco.

"Sorry isn't in my vocabulary."

"The locket Mundungus," Harry interjected as he stepped forward and held out his hand.

"What? Locket? I don't have a locket."

"Yes, you do, or else Kreacher wouldn't have tracked you down," Harry replied. "When you turned this place over, don't deny it, you found a locket, am I right? So hand it over or we'll leave you with Malfoy for the rest of the night."

"Fair warning, I get pretty handsy at night," Draco smirked.

“I’m telling you, I don’t have a locket,” Mundungus reiterated. “I mean—I *used* to have one but I don’t anymore.”

“What do you mean by used to?” Hermione queried.

“Exactly what it means darling,” he replied with a crooked smile. “I had it and now I don’t.”

Suddenly, Harry lunged forward and pressed the tip of his wand into his neck. “Quit being smart and tell us where it is.”

“Fucks sake, what is it with you kids and your tempers?” He scoffed. “I don’t know where it is. One moment I’m making my way through Diagon Alley, and the next, I have some Ministry egg coming up and demanding to see my license. She threatened to lock me up, and she would’ve done it too if she hadn’t taken a fancy to that locket.”

“Who was she?” Harry asked. “The witch, do you know her?”

“No I—” Mundungus’ brows knitted together as he stared down at the stack of newspapers. Following his line of sight, Hermione rushed over, grabbed a copy of The Daily Prophet and held it up for him.

“Is this her?” she asked him.

“Yeah, would you look at that,” he replied. “There she is, pink costume and everything.”

“Harry,” Hermione said quietly. Noting her worried expression, Harry removed his wand from Mundungus’ neck and grabbed the paper.

“You have to be kidding me,” he groaned as he handed it back to her and removed his glasses. As he slumped down into one of the chairs at the table, he dropped his face into his hands and let out an irritated sigh.

“What is it?” Ron asked.

“More like who,” she corrected. “It’s Umbridge.”

It had been three hours since Mundungus was kicked out. During that time, Draco was debriefed on not only the locket but also the other remaining Horcruxes.

“Where are they?”

“Besides the locket, we don’t know,” Harry replied.

“What are they?”

“We don’t know.”

“How many are there?”

“We—”

Draco raised his hand to stop him. “Let me guess, you don’t know.” Harry shook his head. “Is there anything that you *do* know, Potter?”

“Well I—” Harry began, but he was once again cut off.

“What we know is that if we don’t destroy every last Horcrux, killing Voldemort will be an unachievable task,” Remus said as he stepped into the room.

“Lupin,” Harry smiled before walking over and hugging him. “What’re you doing here? We thought everyone had gone underground.”

“You would be right about that, but we thought you could use all the help you could get.”

Harry’s eyebrows pulled together as his head cocked slightly, but before he could ask any questions, a purple-haired woman appeared at Remus’ side.

“Tonks!” Hermione exclaimed as she cleared the distance between them and flung her arms around her.

“Hey there sweet girl,” Tonks smiled as she welcomed her embrace. “How have you been holding up? The boys haven’t been giving you too much trouble, have they?”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

“That’s my girl. *And you,*” Tonks directed at Draco. “You haven’t been giving her a hard time, right?”

“No more than I give everyone else,” he replied.

“Good,” she nodded as she walked over to him. “Because if you do, I’ll kill you.”

“Please cousin,” he scoffed. “We both know your threats are nothing more than empty promises used to tease me. You would never grant me such a wonderful thing as death.”

“Damn right I wouldn’t,” she said before throwing her arms around Draco and pulling him into her. “This would be far less awkward if you hugged me back.”

As much as he would’ve preferred not to, Draco gave in and wrapped his arms around her small frame. It had been over five years since he’d last seen her.

Growing up, Draco and Narcissa would visit his aunt, uncle and cousin for a day during the Christmas holiday. His father would never be in attendance and was kept in the dark about the gatherings altogether. One year, just as they were about to leave, Lucius appeared in the doorway. Draco didn’t know what had happened afterwards, seeing as he was sent to his room, but what he did know was that he hadn’t seen his extended family since.

That was until today.

It was a strange feeling, being with her again. It felt like centuries had passed but at the same time, like none had gone by at all. Despite the seven-year age gap, the pair had always been close. There was something about Tonks that seemed to put Draco at ease.

“It’s good to see you Draco,” Tonks whispered.

“You too, Dora.”

“And what about me?” another voice chimed.

“Aunt Dromeda?”

“Merlin, you’ve certainly grown. The last time I saw you, you stood no taller than, well, right about here,” she said as she held her hand level with her hip.

As the sound of her heels clicking against the wood floor echoed in Draco’s ears, he couldn’t help but be at a loss for words. She looked like she hadn’t aged a single day.

Her light brown hair remained at its usual length, just exceeding past her shoulders, and her posture was still just as poised. When Draco was younger, he would always take note of the similarities between his aunt and mother. They both carried themselves with such grace and elegance, and they both emanated a warm light – unlike their eldest sister, Bellatrix.

Between the two, Andromeda resembled her the most, uncanny, some would even say. Though, Draco never understood how people would mistake one for the other. Not only did Bella have jet-black hair, but her eyes were heavily lidded and malicious-looking, while Andromeda’s were wide and kind. Where Bella’s features were sharp and cutting, hers were soft and delicate. And while Bellatrix’s presence set Draco on edge, Andromeda’s, much like her daughter, helped him relax.

As she raised her hand and gently pressed her palm to his cheek, Draco felt a crack in his occlumency.

“Hello Draco,” Andromeda’s voice was soft and laced with both love and hurt.

“Hi,” he managed to choke out.

“Let’s give them some privacy,” Remus directed at Harry, Ron, and Hermione.

Even after everyone exited the room and the door closed shut, the three of them remained in the same position. Andromeda and Draco facing one another with a foot of space between them, her hand still resting on his cheek, and Tonks to the right.

Andromeda’s tear-filled eyes flitted down to his left forearm, the end of the dark mark just barely peeking out from underneath his sleeve.

“I should have been there for you,” she said quietly, her voice breaking.

“There’s nothing that you could have done.”

“That doesn’t mean I shouldn’t have at least tried,” she countered. “Maybe I could have talked some sense into your father. Perhaps your mother and I together would have been able to help you. To save you from this.”

“Aunt Dromeda—”

“You shouldn’t have to be going through this! You’re only seventeen. You’re just a boy!” she cried out. “You don’t deserve this Draco. You deserve better. If something happens to you—you’re more of a son than a nephew to me and I—”

“Aunt Dromeda,” Draco repeated as he took her hand and placed it back on his cheek. “I’m okay, see? Nothing will happen to me, I’m going to be fine.”

The panic in her expression faded, and her eyes softened as she drew in a slow and deep breath.

“You’re okay?” she questioned.

Draco nodded.

“I want you to be more than just okay,” she sighed. “But for now, I’ll accept it.”

Chapter 3

Flashback - 'Showtime, Granger'

September 2, 1997

Draco was instructed to keep tabs on Umbridge whenever he was at the Ministry. After a month of doing so, he had her down to a T. She arrived every day by floo at precisely eight o'clock, her lunch break was always at eleven and every forty-five minutes, the pink mess of a woman used the restroom.

On Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, she met with Voldemort, Minister Thicknesse and Lucius. On Fridays, she would treat herself to a blueberry muffin from a local bakery. Though it was worth mentioning that she was never the one to go out and retrieve the baked good, she sent her assistant.

He had also noted that the locket had never once left her neck.

"Is that all?" Remus asked after Draco finished debriefing the group on Umbridge's schedule.

"Yes-wait-no."

Remus lifted a brow as he patiently waited for Draco to continue.

"I forgot to mention that she has a Glamour specialist sent up to her office every three days."

"For what?" Harry asked.

"A full body hair removal," Draco replied casually, both Harry and Ron shivered in their seats.

"No amount of galleons could ever persuade me to be in attendance for one of those sessions," Ron declared with a repulsed look, to which Harry agreeingly nodded.

"Oh please," Tonks groaned. "You're acting like the concept of women getting hair removed is some obscene thing. Would you prefer if we kept our legs nice and hairy for you men? Is that what would make you happy? Curling up in bed with us and feeling our bushy legs brush up against yours?"

"Tonks..." Remus exhaled.

"Oh, are you wanting to join in on this conversation?" Tonks' glare darted to her husband, who stared back at her like a deer in headlights. As she tilted her head slightly, her hair faded from its usual soft purple to a bold and threatening shade of red.

Remus' lips parted as he prepared to speak but as soon as Tonk's eyebrow quirked, he promptly snapped his jaw shut. He knew that look, and unlike the younger men in attendance,

he knew it was best to stay silent. Remus raised his hands in surrender as he fell back into his seat.

Tonks gave Remus a curt nod before returning her attention to the two teen boys sitting opposite of her. “Now, where was I?” she began. “Ah, yes, that’s right. Tell me, *boys*, what other sexist beliefs has society infected your brain with?”

“It wasn’t meant to be sexist,” Harry sheepishly replied.

“Yeah, we were just grossed out by the idea of Umbridge-” Ron began, but Tonks abruptly cut him off.

“Of Umbridge growing hair like every female on earth? Just because she’s an evil minger doesn’t mean you get to shame her with your male privilege.”

Harry and Ron both turned to one another, unsure how to respond or save themselves from the situation. Feeling desperate to escape the forbidding stare of Tonks, whose hair still matched the flames burning in her eyes, Ron looked over at Draco, who was busy cleaning the dirt from under his nails.

“Malfoy, don’t you have anything to say?” Ron asked. “You knew we didn’t mean any harm, right?”

Without missing a beat, Draco said, “I think both you and scarhead need to dislodge your heads from each other’s arses and own up to your internalised sexism.” The room fell silent, and everyone’s jaws dropped as they stared in shock at Draco, everyone except Tonks, who proudly smiled at her cousin.

“That’s a load coming from you,” Ron jeered. “A pure-blood Death Eater whose daddy has given him everything he ever wanted.” Draco slowly lifted his head and met Ron’s stare. Leaning forward, Draco placed his forearms on the table and clasped his hands together before speaking.

“I may be a Death Eater who has always gotten whatever it was that he desired, but as you mentioned, I’m a pure-blood, and something that *usually* comes with such a status is having respect, especially for women. I say usually because clearly, that trait has fallen short within the Weasley family.”

“Respect? Since when have you ever shown any sort of respect for anyone” Ron challenged. “Your entire family is vile, *no offence Tonks*.”

“Some taken,” she retorted.

“The Malfoys may have a history of being cruel and putting their loved ones in less than *desirable* situations,” Draco began. “But the one thing the men have always carried is admiration for women. At the end of the day, no matter what Lord or higher being they may offer themselves to, their wife is whom they’re endlessly devoted to. Without women, we’d be nothing.”

Once again, Ron and Harry stared at him slack-jawed while Tonks bobbed her head, her mouth stretched into a wide grin as she reached for her glass and raised it in the air, toasting Draco from the opposite end of the table. Hermione stayed silent as she stared fixedly at the boy who once spent his days tormenting their classmates.

Much like her friends, she had only ever viewed Draco as a one-dimensional being. From their first day at Hogwarts, he was nothing more than a bully who believed that he was above everyone else due to the purity of his blood. It only made sense to her that he would remain the same until his final days.

But as she listened while Ron and Draco went back and forth, she couldn't help but be curious about who Draco Malfoy truly was. Her mind was an endless flow of questions she figured she'd never be granted the answers to.

I wonder what caused the separation between Malfoy and Tonks. Based on their first interaction, it's evident that they hadn't seen one another in a long time and that it wasn't by choice.

How close were they? Did they spend the holidays together? Have they had any communication before this year?

Did Tonks and Remus invite him to their wedding? Does Malfoy know that they're expecting their first child in April? Does he even know that they're a couple?

And since when was Malfoy a feminist? I don't remember him ever advocating for us females back at school. Granted, that sort of topic was never brought up in class.

Now that I think about it, he was always quick to defend Pansy.

Pansy.

Where was she? Was she a death eater now too? And what about his other friends? What were their names again? Leo? No. Theo? Theo! Theodore Nott and... and Blaise Zabini! Were they death eaters too? They're pure-bloods after all. It would make sense if they were forced into the same unfortunate circumstance as Malfoy.

"Hermione?" Remus called out, snapping her from the trance-like state.

Hermione's eyes skipped from one set of eyes to another and another until they landed on those belonging to the individual who had consumed her thoughts only a few seconds ago. She felt her face instantly go red as Draco held her stare.

"Er-sorry," she apologised as she cleared her throat and forced herself to look at anyone other than the blonde Death Eater.

"No need to apologise," Remus assured her. "We were just revisiting the main topic of the evening."

As Remus continued discussing their options when it came to retrieving the locket from Umbridge, Ron leaned into Hermione and whispered, "Hey, are you alright?"

"I'm fine," she declared. "Why would you ask that? Do I not seem fine?"

"No-er-I mean-you seem fine, I guess," Ron replied, confused by her defensive demeanour. "Is this my fault? Is it because of what I said earlier?"

Of course he thinks this is about him. Everything always is, Hermione thought as she rolled her eyes.

"No."

"You know I didn't mean for it to come across that way," he continued. "And that whole thing with Malfoy... I wasn't trying to justify anything. He just gets under my skin and-"

"I'd like to pay attention to what Remus is saying," she clipped, interrupting his ego-driven apology as she crossed her arms and tuned into the conversation.

"So she arrives by private floo every time?" Harry questioned.

Draco nodded. "That's correct."

"And the locket is with her at all times?"

"Excellent job Potter, you've learned to use your ears. I'm so proud of you," Draco said with mock praise.

"Well that's just bloody brilliant," Ron scoffed. "How are we meant to get our hands on the locket if the maddening woman never takes it off?"

Harry, Remus, Tonks and Andromeda all remained silent. Even Hermione seemed to have no solution to offer. Draco rolled his eyes as he leaned over and reached into his bag.

"Must I do everything?" Draco groaned as he tossed a file onto the table.

"What are these?" Harry asked.

"Your way in."

"Who is Albert Runcorn?" Harry inquired as he held up a photo of a dark-haired man.

"A high-ranking Ministry official, which means he has clearance to every floor," Draco explained with a bored expression.

"I'm assuming this one is for me?" Hermione queried.

"Good job Granger, ten points to Gryffindor," he smirked, which caused her to break eye contact and shift back into her seat. "Our dear Mafalda works in the DMLE and has just been *conveniently* assigned to work alongside Dolores Umbridge."

Draco studied Hermione as she kept her head down and looked over the file. It wasn't like the brightest witch of their age to shy away from meeting a snarky remark with one of her

own. After some thought, he realised she had been relatively quiet all morning, an even stranger concept when it came to her. But the thing that puzzled him the most was her expression.

She looked... impressed.

Draco knew that he was, in his humble opinion, an *extremely* impressive individual. But he also knew that it would be a cold day in hell before Hermione Granger ever thought the same. No. This couldn't be right. He must've been reading her all wrong.

Refusing to move on with his day until he confirmed his theory that something else must be causing the curly-haired witch's eyebrows to raise in surprise and lips to part as she stared wide-eyed at the file in her hands, Draco focused on the space between her brows and peered into her mind.

Immediately, he was met with a barricade in the form of an old wooden door. Variations of flowers lined the border of the single glass window in the centre, and moss crawled its way up the reclaimed white oak.

As soon as his hand gripped the handle, an intense sharp pain surged through his body. Draco had never encountered a defence of this calibre. Most individuals, himself included, merely filed, separated and built walls. But Hermione, in true fashion, over-delivered.

Extracting himself from the minefield that was Hermione Granger's head, Draco leaned back into his chair and pinched his brows together as he stared her down. Feeling the intensity of his gaze burning through her, Hermione flitted her eyes up to meet his.

"What?" she asked apprehensively.

"Who taught you?"

"Who taught me what, Malfoy?"

"Occlumency," he stated.

"Occlumency? I don't know occlu-"

"Who's this?" Ron questioned, cutting her off. Reluctantly, Draco peeled his eyes from Hermione and looked over at the photo within Ron's grasp.

"Reginald Cattermole," Draco replied.

"What's his job? Does he work in the Ghoul Task Force or maybe the DMLE? Is he a baddass auror?" Excitement consumed Ron's expression as he continued to list off job titles.

"Please, did you get a look at the guy?" Draco quipped. "No Weaslebee, Cattermole works in the maintenance department. In even simpler terms, he's a nobody. I thought he'd be perfect since you share so many similarities."

Ron's lip curled into a snarl while Draco's casually lifted into a satisfied smirk. Sensing a fight was about to erupt, Remus cleared his throat and got up from his seat.

"It's settled then," he announced. "Hermione, I trust you still have a batch of polyjuice?"

"Yes," she nodded.

"Good, and Draco, do you know where?"

"All three of them use the employee entrance off of Whitehall," Draco answered.

"Alright, we'll set out in half an hour. Draco will help with coverage inside while Tonks and I patrol outside. With that being said, I want to make it very clear that you are to stick to defensive spells only. A stun or two if needed, but please, try to keep the damage at a minimum," Remus informed them, his focus turning to Hermione.

"Why did you look at me when you said that?" she asked innocently.

Remus closed his eyes and let out a deep breath. "I just want to remind all of you that while collecting the remaining Horcruxes is our top priority, we are also trying to show that we aren't a hostile group. The last thing we need is our faces printed on wanted posters."

"Aren't they already?" Harry asked.

"Yes, but let's not give them any credible reasons for doing so. Tonks and I also made these," Remus held up two gold pins and tossed them onto the table. "Should anything go wrong, and our groups get separated, we will be able to use those to locate one another."

"There's only two here," Harry pointed out.

"Yes, well, we figured since the three of you always manage to stick together, there was only a need for you to have one. Draco will be taking the other. Now, take this time to get ready. We'll reconvene in twenty minutes."



For the first time, Draco was offered a chance to wander the house he grew up hearing his aunt and mother mention as they reminisced on their childhood. He remembered how fondly his mother would speak about the holiday parties hosted at Grimmauld Place. As a child, he had always envisioned a cosy space full of colour and warmth. But as he made his way up the stairs, the floor creaking beneath his feet with each step, he couldn't help but laugh at how wrong he was.

The walls were painted black, the furniture a shade of either dark green or brown and a thin layer of dust covered nearly every inch of the house, despite Kreacher's regular cleanings. It was as if death itself had washed over Grimmauld Place.

After ten minutes of a disappointment-filled tour, Draco stood inside one of the bedrooms and scanned the wallpaper that doubled as a family tree. His fingers grazed the faded gold banner beneath his mother's portrait and over to a burnt hole in the vinyl where his aunt Andromeda's photo once existed.

The sound of glass clinking and a muffled "fuck," caused his hand to drop. Stepping out of the room, Draco made his way down the hall and towards the source. Standing in the doorway, he silently watched as Hermione fumbled with various vials.

"Such a bad girl, Granger," Draco tutted as he crossed his arms and leaned against the doorframe.

Startled by his sudden presence, Hermione spun around and shoved her right hand behind her back. "What're you doing up here, Malfoy?"

"I think the better question is, what are *you* doing?" Clearing the space between them, Draco peered over Hermione's shoulder and down at the vial within her grasp. "Did you remember to add ten drops of erumpent fluid?"

"Obviously I remembered to add ten-wait-how did you..." she trailed off.

"Need I remind you who was top of the class in Advanced Potions, Granger?" he smirked.

Taking advantage of her momentarily stunned phase, Draco reached around and retrieved the vial from her hand. Holding it up to the light, he carefully examined the green liquid.

"Not bad, though I can tell based on the colour alone that you didn't let it boil for the full thirty minutes. You always were the impatient sort, must be why you scored so far below me," he taunted.

"What's it going to take?" Hermione asked as she folded her arms over her chest and tapped her foot.

"In regards to..."

"Your silence, to not rat me out to Remus."

"Your automatic assumption that I am, as your Muggles like to call it, a tattletale hurts Granger," Draco replied as he placed his hand on his chest. "However, you can make amends by telling me what you plan on doing with this Erumpent potion."

"It's just a precautionary measure," she replied.

"You're a terrible liar," Draco ridiculed. "At least give me a warning before you set the place on fire, I just got this jacket, and I'd prefer to not have any scorch marks on it."

When Draco had first delivered news of the Muggle-Born Registration, everyone expected Hermione to be appalled, infuriated, perhaps even crushed, but she was a blank canvas. There was no emotion or reaction, just a single blink before she continued with the meeting. Now, polyjuiced as one of the individuals that helped conduct said trials, Hermione stood in front of the marble fountain, unblinking, and her lips parted as she stared in horror at the Muggles encased in stone.

“Horrifying, isn’t it?” Ron asked.

“Dehumanising was the word that came to my mind,” Hermione replied.

“I’ll be finding a way to get back at Malfoy for this. I mean, look at me!”

Once her head turned and her gaze landed on Ron, she realised they had been talking about two completely different things. While she was referring to the sinister crimes Voldemort and his followers were committing against Muggles, Ron was busy worrying about his appearance.

Everything in her wanted to scream, to criticise him for only thinking about himself when there were hundreds of innocent people being targeted and even killed for something so meaningless like their blood status. But before she could, Draco appeared at her side.

“Repulsive,” his tone full of disgust as he looked at the fountain. Hermione’s hand found its way to her hip, and her lip curled as she prepared to scold Draco and Ron for their lack of empathy. “I get the aversion to Muggles but *this*?” Draco continued as he jutted his chin toward the display.

“*You* have something negative to say about the current treatment of Muggles?” Hermione queried.

“Many,” he replied. “But unfortunately, we’re on a bit of a tight schedule. So if you don’t mind, let’s get a move on, yeah?”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione trailed behind Draco as they made their way across the main floor and over to the lifts. Stepping inside, Harry grabbed onto the gate and began to close it when suddenly, Yaxley appeared and stuck his foot out to stop it.

“Cattermole,” he stated, his attention focused on Ron. “It’s still raining inside my office. That’s two days now.”

Ron glanced at the uncertain faces of Harry, Hermione and even Draco, who offered him nothing more than a deadpan expression.

“Have you tried an umbrella?” he asked timidly.

Yaxley pressed his lips together and narrowed his eyes, accentuating his crow’s feet. “You realise that I’m going downstairs, don’t you, Cattermole?”

“Downstairs?”

“To interrogate your wife,” he explained. “Now, if my wife’s blood status were in doubt, and the head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement needed a job doing, I think I just might make that a priority.” Yaxley took a moment to observe Ron’s expression, checking to ensure that his threat was received. “You have one hour,” he said before turning and leaving.

Once more, Harry reached forward and dragged the gate closed. As the lift reversed and shot up to the next floor, Ron stared wide-eyed at the space in front of him.

“Oh my god, what am I going to do?” he asked, his voice full of panic. “My wife is all alone downstairs.”

“Hey fuckwit,” Draco called out. “You don’t have a wife.”

“Oh, right,” he exhaled.

“Level two,” a female voice announced as the lift halted.

“This is you Ron,” Harry said as the gate opened.

Ron let out a deep breath and staggered out of the lift. Turning, he scratched his head and said, “Wait, how am I supposed to find you all?”

“We’ll find you,” Hermione replied.

“Okay, but what if—” his question was interrupted when the gate abruptly shut.

“Best of luck Weaslebee,” Draco brought his pointer and middle finger to the corner of his eyebrow and saluted Ron as the lift shot back.

After dropping Harry off on the Minister of Magic and Support Staff floor so he could investigate Umbridge’s office, Draco and Hermione found themselves alone as they stepped onto the tenth floor and headed towards the courtrooms.

Halfway down the corridor, Draco noticed Hermione in a state that he was unfamiliar with when it came to the witch. Panic. She had always been the type to remain composed, especially during stressful situations. But each time she placed a foot in front of the other, she began to unravel at the seams.

Knowing that she was the sort to thrive on details and information, Draco began to talk her through the trials from start to finish.

“The Muggle registrations are organised alphabetically by last name. Each individual is given a twelve-hour notice about their hearing. Umbridge suggested that twenty-four hours would give them too much time to strategise a getaway.” Draco took a brief pause as he waited for the guards to pass by before proceeding. “They’re escorted downstairs the morning of their trial and held in a cell until their appointment time. No one is granted a lawyer, but they can have one immediate family member in attendance.” As he continued through the steps, the muscles in Hermione’s shoulders began to relax.

There was something strange to Draco about bringing comfort to someone he wouldn't have given the time of day to a few months ago. But he knew that if he wanted the mission to go smoothly, he needed Hermione to live up to her title of being 'the brightest witch of her age'.

"If they're found guilty, which they usually are, they're brought back to their cell. At the end of the day, Yaxley and some other Death Eaters will execute them."

As soon as the last word fell from his lips, another pair of guards appeared. Hermione's eyes locked onto the middle-aged man who was kicking and screaming as they dragged him.

"I'm a half-blood, I swear it!" he shouted.

All of the work that Draco had put in to help subside her nerves immediately came undone when the man cried out, "Please don't do this. I have a family." It was then that he realised no amount of lists or facts would be able to reverse the terror that quickly overtook Hermione. Her hands flew up to her neck, and her body shook as she began to hyperventilate.

"They're... going... to... kill... him," she choked out. "H-he.. has... a... f-family."

Grabbing her by the shoulders, Draco pinned Hermione up against the stone wall.

"I need you to calm down, Granger," he commanded. "You need to lock away that heart of yours and get your shit together, do you hear me?"

"D-dead," she stuttered. "So many are dead."

Fuck, she's gone completely mad, he mentally cursed. Running his hand down the length of his face, Draco let out a deep breath before attempting a new approach.

"I need you to focus on a memory, a happy memory," he instructed. "Do you think you can do that?" Still struggling to steady her breathing, Hermione nodded her head. "Good. Let me know when you have it." As she closed her eyes, Draco kept watch as he struggled to hold on to the little bit of patience he had.

"By all means, take your time," he groaned.

"Okay, I have one," she said as she opened her eyes.

"Now focus on the details. Where are you? What are you doing? Who are you with?"

"In a greenhouse looking at the orchids with my par-"

Draco shook his head. "You don't need to say it out loud, Granger."

"Oh-er-sorry," she apologised before biting down on her bottom lip.

"And you don't need to apologise," he replied. Taking a step back, Draco motioned for Hermione to follow him. "Back to your memory, do you still have it?"

"Yes."

“And the people you’re with, do you care about them?”

“Very much so.”

“You would do anything to protect them, to keep them out of harm's way, yes?”

Hermione’s head dropped as she tugged at a loose strand on her sleeve. “Yes.”

“Lock them away.”

“What?!” she asked, her eyes snapping up to meet his.

“Lock. Them. Away,” he repeated sternly. “Lock them, the memory and your bleeding heart away in a box. Then, once you’ve done that, lock that box in a safe, build the strongest fucking wall and reinforce it with every ward that mind of yours knows.”

“You’re having me occlude?”

“You’re already occluding. I’m simply helping you control it. Now lock them away Granger. If you want a chance at getting that damn locket from Umbridge, you need to do as I say.”

“Okay,” she sighed before shutting her eyes again.

“Breathe in and focus,” Draco instructed, his voice barely above a whisper. “Place them in the box and exhale.” Hermione let out a slow and controlled breath. “Good, again, only when you inhale this time, build a wall. Place brick after brick until you can’t see the top.” Her chest raised as she dragged in a breath. “Exhale and cast a ward.”

Hermione continued to compartmentalise and separate with each breath while Draco guided her down the remaining length of the corridor.

“How are we feeling?” Draco asked once they reached the door to the courtroom.

“Better, lighter.”

“Good,” he nodded before pressing his palm against the door. “Showtime, Granger.”

Present Day

“I have a surprise for you,” Draco smiled as he got up from the bench.

“What is it?” Hermione asked as she also stood.

“If I told you, that would defeat the purpose of a surprise, now wouldn’t it?”

“You know surprises irritate me, Draco.”

“And you know that I love to irritate you,” he replied with a cheeky smile. “Now come, it’s not far of a walk.”

As they made their way through the garden, Draco couldn’t help but admire the way Hermione looked. The golden tint of the sun brought out the honey colour within her eyes and perfectly accentuated her high cheekbones. And when the autumn breeze wafted through her hair, causing her wild curls to dance behind her gracefully, Draco thanked the Gods.

There was never a time in his life where he imagined that he’d ever be graced with the chance to love someone and for them to love him back, especially not someone like Hermione Granger. Despite how he may have acted towards her at Hogwarts, he always knew that someone like Hermione would always be beyond his reach. She was warm, kind, thoughtful, everything that he wasn’t. But he was trying. He was trying to be a better man. He *wanted* to be a better man. He wanted to be someone deserving of her.

“Are we there yet?” Hermione groaned.

“Still the impatient sort,” Draco teased. “But yes, we’re here.”

“Oh, wow, this is a very nice-er-field,” she replied. “I love it.”

Draco rolled his eyes and let out a soft chuckle. “And still a terrible liar as well.” Removing his wand, he muttered an enchantment causing the concealment charm to drop and a greenhouse to appear. Holding the door open, Draco watched as Hermione’s face lit up the second she stepped foot inside. Her eyes doubled in size, and she held her clasped hands tightly to her chest as she explored each aisle. When she reached the row on the far right, she sharply inhaled and stopped in her tracks.

“Are those…”

“Orchids, yes,” Draco answered, already knowing the question. “I remembered that day at the Ministry when you were polyjuiced as Mafalda and how I had you focus on a happy memory. You said that you were in a greenhouse looking at-”

“Looking at the orchids,” she finished.

Draco nodded. “I thought that perhaps if the memory alone could bring you comfort back then, that maybe bringing it to life would be able to help bring you some now. Do you hate it?” Hermione’s lip quivered as her eyes misted over. “Shit, you hate it. I’m sorry, I should never have-”

Unable to contain her emotions any longer, she dropped to her knees as a heap of grief poured out in a flood of uncontrollable tears. Her face fell into her hands, and she mumbled incoherent things as she choked on her sobs.

“Granger, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to upset you,” Draco apologised as he rushed to her side. “I can have it dismantled.”

“No,” she cried out as she shook her head.

“No?”

“No,” she repeated once more. “I don’t want you to get rid of it.”

“But you’re crying?”

“Not because of this,” she said as she motioned to the space around them. “This is wonderful.”

“Then what is it? What’s wrong? Talk to me, please,” he pleaded.

Hermione wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand before flitting her bloodshot eyes up to meet Draco’s. She hated herself for how she had treated him over the last few months. She knew he only wanted to help her, and she loved him for it, but he didn’t understand. She hated how she always managed to ruin a good moment. She was tired of crying, of being angry and broken, but most of all, she was tired of hurting him.

All she wanted was to be happy, to be happy with *him*. She wanted to laugh with him until her cheeks hurt, and she wanted to fill their days with banter just like they used to. But that was then, and this was now. She wasn’t the same girl that she was during the war. Instead, she was merely a ghost of who she used to be. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn’t be the girl that Draco had fallen in love with, not entirely. What she could do was drop her defensive walls for once and let him in.

“I never told you why I chose that memory.”

“You don’t have to, Granger.”

“I know I don’t *have* to, but I want to,” she said quietly.

“Okay,” he nodded understandingly. “I’m all ears then.”

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. “The memory was one with my parents. My dad used to have a greenhouse like this in our backyard; granted, it wasn’t nearly as extravagant. It was his pride and joy aside from mum and I. He would spend hours in there. One summer, he came rushing into the house and insisted that mum and I follow him. He had grown his first tomato which was a *very* big deal,” she giggled. “We spent all evening walking up and down the aisles as he told us about each plant and the specific care required. My dad had a thing for turning everything into a lesson, so of course, he seamlessly related the various vegetables and flowers to life. But the one that stuck with me was the orchids.”

Draco could tell, despite her smile, that it was hurting her to talk about this. He could hear the pain in her voice and see the strain in her eyes as she reflected on the memory, but it had been so long since she had been vulnerable with him, and selfishly, he didn’t want it to end, not yet.

“He told me that you needed to be careful not to overwater them and that once the blooming is over, let the flowers wilt and fall off naturally,” she continued. “He then went on to tell me

that I should use the same approach with life. Everything was best in moderation, and I needed to relinquish my need for control and let things happen organically.”

Lowering her head, Hermione swallowed back the tears that threatened to escape again.

“It’s one of my favourite memories with them, one that I hope I never lose because I won’t have the chance to make any new ones.”

Draco’s head tilted to the side, “What do you mean? Are they..”

“No, but sometimes I wish they were, which is a terrible thing to say, but it would certainly make things hurt less,” she admitted. “I never told you this because, frankly, I never saw any reason to do so, but before we began the Horcrux hunt, I obliviated my parents.”

“Granger...”

“It’s fine. It was for the best. It was to protect them,” she replied, though it seemed like she was trying to convince herself more than anyone. “I knew Voldemort would do anything to get to Harry, which meant he’d do anything to get to me. Wiping their memories was the best way to ensure their safety. It’s what was best for them.”

“Where are they now?”

“Australia, at least that’s where I had sent them. They could’ve moved for all I know. I just wish I could see them again, even if only for a moment. I never got to say goodbye, to tell them that I love them.”

“Then let’s go to them,” Draco suggested.

“I can’t, not like this. Besides, they wouldn’t even remember me.”

“Surely there’s a way to reverse the effects. Somewhere someone has done a study on it; we just need to figure out who and speak with them. We can do this Granger. Let me help you with this. Let me bring your family back to you.”

Hermione’s eyes softened as she raised her hand and reached for him. Just as her palm was about to cup his cheek, a sharp crack cut through the silence.

“Master Draco, Bippy brings news,” the elf announced.

“Not now, Bippy.”

“But Master Draco, it has to do with the guests for this evening,” she urged.

Rubbing his eyes and letting out a sigh of defeat, Draco signalled for Bippy to continue with her message.

“Mister Ronald Weasley sends his regards but says he will not be in attendance.”

“And what of the others?”

Bippy shook her head, “No response from anyone else yet Master Draco.”

“Alright, thank you Bippy. You’re dismissed.”

With another crack, the house elf disappeared as quickly as she appeared, leaving Hermione and Draco alone again. Draco had wished that she hadn’t been present for the conversation. He had wanted it to be a surprise. Swallowing his pride and strong distaste for her friends, Draco sent letters yesterday inviting them to dinner to celebrate her birthday.

He knew that the short notice was less than ideal and that asking someone to step foot inside the house that they were once held captive in wasn’t exactly a selling point. But he figured if Hermione could stomach living in the bloody place, then surely her friends could grow some bloody balls and suffer through an evening.

But now that he thought about it, it didn’t surprise him that the first to decline was Ron fucking Weasley. He had forgotten her birthday altogether last year, so why in Merlin’s name would he make it a priority this time? He was probably still bitter that Hermione had chosen the Death Eater over the sad pathetic pining best friend.

Flashback - 'Cuts and Comfort'

September 19, 1997

Following the infiltration at the Ministry, Harry, Ron and Hermione found themselves bouncing from one place to the next every few days. When Draco had first visited to deliver them supplies, his entire list of disparaging remarks regarding their tent paused the moment he entered. He had never seen anything like it.

“It’s a fairly common charm when camping. You were at the Wizarding World Cup, didn’t you use it on your tent then?” Harry asked.

“The fact that you think I stayed in a tent is insulting Potter,” Draco scoffed.

In all honesty, he most likely would’ve stayed in a tent. One much nicer than everyone else’s, but nonetheless, a tent. The only reason he hadn’t was that his father had received, what he referred to at the time as, a business message. That business message ended up being a summoning from the mark that now covered Draco’s left forearm.

It was a common theme throughout Draco’s life. Whenever he and his father had something planned it either got interrupted or cancelled altogether due to some sort of business matter. By the time Draco was eight, he learned to no longer get his hopes up for anything, no matter how much his father may have assured him that he would be in attendance. Instead, Draco learned to expect people to *not* show up, to not live up to their word.

“If you expect nothing, then it won’t hurt as much when you get nothing,” he would always remind himself.

With that being said, Draco made sure to always make good on his word. Whether he chose to admit it or not, he never wanted anyone to feel the way he did as a young kid. He never wanted to be the reason someone choked on their tears as their mother tried to console them.

During fourth year, he had told Theo that he would meet him at The Three Broomsticks for drinks. Despite dislocating his knee during a last-minute quidditch practice and being advised to visit Madam Pomfrey to get it fixed, Draco limped his way to Hogsmeade to meet his friend.

During sixth year, Draco agreed to help Blaise and Pansy with their potions assignment. Even though he was mentally and physically exhausted from hours of mending the vanishing cabinet, he still stayed up until one in the morning going over alchemic symbols.

If Draco gave his word, he stuck to it, which is exactly what he was doing as he lugged a sack of different foods and potion ingredients through the woods. The locator pin that Tonks and Remus made would bring him to the general area in which the trio was located but never directly to them. Usually, Draco wouldn't hesitate to bring forth a complaint over a matter like such but after discovering that Tonks was pregnant, he chose to bite his tongue. Something about ridiculing a pregnant woman's work seemed brash, even for him.

Finally reaching the campsite, Draco effortlessly crossed the concealment barrier and found himself face to face with Hermione, who stood no further than a foot away from him.

"Just can't stay away from me, can you Granger?" Draco smirked.

"In your dreams," Hermione quipped as she rolled her eyes and headed back to the fire.

"Yes, you and your dirt-covered body are *precisely* what I fantasise about at night," he replied sarcastically as he dropped the sack on the ground. Wasting no time, Hermione pulled the bag into her lap and sifted through the contents within.

"You're welcome, by the way. It was a pain getting the dittany."

Once she retrieved the vial of herbs, she looked up at Draco. "Thank you, we were just about to run out."

"How is the orange peel doing?" Draco asked as he took a seat on the edge of the log, making sure to keep as much distance between himself and Hermione as possible. "Still moaning and crying like the child he is?"

"He's recovering, slowly, but still recovering."

"So he's not going to die?"

"No."

"That's unfortunate. Can I see that?" he requested, pointing at the knife to her right. Picking it up off the ground, Hermione tossed him the item. "So, tell me, what's with the children's book?" Draco asked as he flipped the blade out and began scraping the collection of mud,

sticks and stones from the sole of his boots. "I always pinned you as the classical literature type."

"Dumbledore left it to me. I've read through it four times now trying to find any sort of message or clue that he may have left us regarding the Horcruxes."

"And have you?"

"No."

"I will say Granger, I figured even you would allow yourself a break from the world-saving on your birthday. I guess I should've known you'd prove me wrong, you're painfully annoying like that."

"What did you just say?"

"I said you're annoying."

"No, before that."

"What? That it's your birthday?"

"Yes! That!" she exclaimed as she shot up to her feet. "You know that it's my birthday today?"

"Am I not supposed to?" he asked, his voice full of annoyance.

"No-I mean-you're allowed to-it's just-" Hermione slumped back down onto the log and stared at her hands as she picked at her nails. "Harry and Ron didn't, that's all. Which is fine, there are more important things to be focusing on than some stupid birthday."

Unsure of how he's meant to respond, Draco decided to remain silent as he continued to clean the bottom of his shoes.

"Can I ask you something?"

"I'd prefer if you didn't."

"Oh, okay."

There it was again. The strange and disgusting impulse to help her, to *comfort* her. He hated it and would rather take the knife in his hand and drive it into his eye than do so, and yet the words "What's your question Granger" still fell from his lips.

"Did Bellatrix teach you occlumency?"

His eyes snapped over to her and his hand jolted, causing the blade's sharp edge to cut into the palm of his other hand. "Fuck," he muttered as he dropped the knife and applied pressure to the wound.

“Shit, let me see it,” Hermione requested as she slid over to him.

“I think the fuck not,” he retorted as he jerked away from her. “Everyone may consider you to be some brilliant witch, but I know that you’ve been roommates with four eyes and carrot-head for the last two weeks. And based on the heinous sound coming from inside the tent, I’d say you haven’t had a full night’s rest in a while. I mean seriously, Granger, how do you stand that snoring? Regardless, the last thing I need is you accidentally disfiguring my hand due to exhaustion.”

“Can you try to not be an insufferable prat for one minute?” she scoffed as she reached across and yanked his hand into view.

“I can try, but no promises.”

Ignoring his comment, Hermione held up her wand, cast a lumos and inspected the gash.

“It’s pretty deep but a few drops of dittany should heal it,” she informed him as she set her wand down and reached into her small beaded bag.

“No,” Draco said as she applied the first drop.

“Malfoy, I promise this isn’t going to cause your hand to burn off.”

He shook his head. “That’s not what I’m talking about, I’m referring to your question. No, my aunt Bella didn’t teach me occlumency.”

“Oh, I see....”

“Just ask it.”

“Ask what?”

“Your follow-up question. I know you have one.”

Still holding onto his hand, Hermione rolled her shoulders back and cleared her throat.

“Alright, who taught you then?”

“No one. I’m a natural occlumens, just like you Granger.”

“I still think you’re wrong. I think I would’ve known if I were an occlumens.”

“You can *think* all you want, but that doesn’t change the facts. And the fact is that you are an occlumens, a pretty devious one too. I’ll admit, your whole shocking door handle thing is rather impressive.”

“Wait, have you tried to look into my min—”

“What’s going on here?” Ron’s voice cut through the air and his eyes burned a hole through Hermione’s hand that was still gripping onto Draco’s.

Dropping his hand and brushing the blood from her own onto her jeans, Hermione replied, “Nothing, Malfoy came by to drop off more supplies and accidentally cut his hand.”

“So you took it upon yourself to heal him?!” Ron questioned. “Don’t you have a house full of elves that could do that for you?” he directed at Draco.

“That I do,” Draco replied as he got up, grabbed the sack and walked over to Ron. “Word of advice Weasley,” he whispered. “If you want a chance at getting the girl, perhaps try to remember her birthday.”

Forcefully shoving the bag into Ron’s chest, Draco harshly patted his left arm that was being supported by a sling before turning and leaving.

Chapter 4

Flashback - 'Darkness'

October 12, 1997

Draco didn't know what to expect the summer before sixth year when he stood in the drawing room of his childhood home and watched as the black ink crawled across the skin of his forearm. He didn't know that once the snake and skull solidified into its final form, he would then be ordered to murder his headmaster. And he didn't know that his meeting with Snape would result in a partnership with the Order. But most of all, what Draco didn't know was just how exhausting all of it would be.

During the day he was expected to stand tall, remain silent and do as he was told. He had to file away his humanity and stare into the eyes of men, women and children as they begged for mercy.

The act of hurting others was neither something he enjoyed nor feared - it was more like a tedious task that took up far too much of his time. He had quickly become immune to the ecstasy-like feeling that had flooded his body the first time he used dark magic, leaving the use of Unforgivables to level with something as simple as an illuminating charm.

But the sounds - those were what he struggled with. No matter how much he compartmentalised, no matter how big of a wall he built or how much he reinforced it, they always managed to slip through the cracks and haunt him at night.

He couldn't remember their names as he didn't care enough to learn them in the first place and their faces were only something he could recall if he focused really hard. But the sound of their voices as they begged for mercy were burned into his memory.

Draco tried various methods in an attempt to alleviate himself of them. The first week he turned to occlumency, which worked... for an hour. The fourth week he consumed enough firewhiskey to knock a troll on its arse but even that only offered him momentary relief. From there, Draco tried anything he could get his hands on.

Calming draught - didn't do very much calming.

Even more firewhiskey - only provided one hell of a hangover.

Muggle herbs - smelled terrible.

By the time August came and went, Draco had concluded that he would forever be tormented by the distressed sounds of his victims. Which was fine, he decided, it was the least of his problems.

Whenever he wasn't being ordered to torture someone, he would meet with Remus to provide him with any new information and then he'd track down the infamous trio to deliver

whatever supplies they had asked for that day.

Draco couldn't recall the last time he was allowed to relax, take time to himself and just fucking breathe. If he wasn't running around fulfilling his duties as a Death Eater, then he was busy doing his part as a spy for the Order.

He was constantly at battle with himself. Each step and decision he made and every mission he completed was contradicting one of the two sides he vowed his allegiance to. Every time he raised his wand and cast a crucio, he was opposing the Order. And each time he managed to misdirect the other Death Eaters and keep the trio's location safe, he was betraying Voldemort.

Draco knew that he shouldn't feel so conflicted. Voldemort was the bad guy and the Order members were the good ones. But where did that leave him? What classification did he fall under if he was providing services to both?

Was he good?

Was he evil?

Was he the worst of them all for playing both sides?

There were too many questions. Too many things being asked of him. And for what? What was he getting out of it other than insomnia and a raging headache? Draco was used to being spread thin, of being given more than any individual would be capable of handling on their own but it was becoming too much, even for him.

He didn't know how much longer he could keep it together. But until the day came when he'd break and succumb to the weight of playing double agent, he'd continue. He'd continue to wake each day and put on whatever mask necessary because he gave his word. He would continue to drain himself mentally, physically and emotionally day after day because it's what he agreed to when accepting Snape's help – even if he hadn't known it at the time.

He'd continue because it's what he needed to do to survive.

Survival had always been his top priority. Surviving his father's constant scrutiny, his classmates' allegations and even his own bloody mind.

Now, as he sat at the table that had previously hosted his childhood family dinners and stared down at the head to see not his father but his master, Draco added one more item to his list of things to survive.

A war.

"It brings me great joy to announce the successful capture of Dedalus Diggle," Voldemort announced. "A known member of the Order. A group whose sole purpose is to dismantle our regime."

Boos echoed throughout the mansion for a brief moment before Voldemort raised his hand, signalling for silence to return. As he stood and slowly walked the length of the table, the

door creaked open and Peter Pettigrew entered, a man levitating in the air behind him.

“It’s imperative that we show this proclaimed resistance group that it is not wise to defy us,” Voldemort continued. “We must show them the consequences of their foolish beliefs. Malfoy, join me.”

Immediately, Lucius slid his chair back but before he could stand, Voldemort stopped him.

“The *young* Malfoy,” he corrected.

Draco could feel his mother’s eyes stalking his every move as he got up from his chair and cautiously approached Voldemort. He didn’t need to look at her to know that worry currently filled the creases of her forehead.

“You’ve been doing very well lately, Draco,” Voldemort praised as his slender fingers tightly gripped onto Draco’s shoulder. “Consider this my gift to you for all of your hard work.”

As Dedalus’ body slammed onto the hardwood floor, Voldemort stepped back and patiently waited for Draco to demonstrate just how obedient of a soldier he was. Removing his wand, he stared into the eyes of yet another innocent man. He filed and sorted away his emotions as he swallowed the acidic fluid that rose in the back of his throat as Dedalus called him a “Heartless scumbag Death Eater.”

“Crucio,” Draco muttered, causing Dedalus’ muscles to stiffen as his body thrashed about on the floor. He watched as the man’s eyes rolled to the back of his head as drool seeped from the corner of his mouth. The vein in his neck looked like it was ready to burst at any moment.

“Put him out of his misery,” Voldemort commanded.

“My Lord?” Draco lowered his wand and glanced over at the snake-like eyes that were already locked onto him.

“The best way to send a message is to attach a dead body to it. Now kill him or take his place.”

It was moments like these where Draco found himself wondering how far was too far. There were no textbooks on being a mole. There were no guidelines for him to follow, no rules for him to consider breaking. He was on his own. He had to make the decision. And in this moment, it was a rather simple one; his life or another’s.

Raising his wand once more, Draco’s grip tightened on the handle as he drew in a deep breath.

“Avada kedavra.”



Arrogant, entitled, hard-headed - those were all words one might use when describing Draco Malfoy. Even his own friends would attest to such, but the one word that never came to mind was killer. At least not often.

Ron wasn't the first to accuse him of being such, Draco had heard it a handful of times while at Hogwarts. He was never one to care about what people thought of him. After everything he had been through, especially at the hands of his father, name-calling wasn't something that would pierce the steel wall he had built.

Still, there was something about there being validity behind such an accusation now. Draco had been capable of killing a man with nothing more than his bare hands since his early teen years. He could point out the exact spots to puncture to leave an individual alive but severely injured. And if someone asked him to provide them with a lethal potion that left no trace, Draco would be able to list off more than twenty.

With self-preservation came the knowledge of how to decimate another, that he was aware of. What he wasn't aware of was the fact that when taking someone's life, it also chipped away at his.

He felt it. The moment his magic left the tip of his wand and made contact with Dedalus' chest, Draco felt a piece of himself die too. The few light moments, the crumbs of happiness that he had tightly held onto the past few months to help him maintain some sort of sanity became stained with darkness. He waited for the feeling to subside, for the ache to soothe, but it never did. It felt like someone had dug their nails into his heart, leaving him permanently scarred.



"It's been rather effective, just like I said it would be." As Aleto continued to boast about his success with keeping students in line with the use of the cruciatus curse, Draco scanned over every inch of his former Divination classroom.

It looked the same, interior wise, but everything about it was off. That seemed to be a common theme throughout the entire castle. When Draco, Greyback and Dolohov first stepped foot inside Hogwarts, Draco barely recognised the building where he spent the majority of his formative years at. The once packed corridors he previously roamed as a student were now dim and bare. The Great Hall which was usually filled with excited chatter was silent. Even the grass had lost its colour.

Hogwarts had been stripped of its entire essence. There was no magic, no joy, no excitement, no hope.

Draco wondered what it would be like to revisit the school grounds he had previously fled after the falling of his former headmaster. He assumed it would feel odd, uncomfortable even, which it was but he never took into consideration the devastation.

Hogwarts had always felt more like a home to him than the manor ever did. It provided him with an escape from the watchful eye and extreme expectations of his father. It was somewhere he felt safe to be himself and just be a kid. But none of that mattered anymore. He was no longer granted the luxury of acting his age. He wasn't a student, he was a soldier, a spy, and he had orders to follow.

"If you'll excuse me," Draco said, interrupting Aleto. "I have a message that I need to deliver to the headmaster."

Greyback studied his face. Whether it was meant to be a form of intimidation or because he simply didn't trust him, Draco couldn't care less. He stared directly back, never once breaking eye contact.

"Fine," Greyback waved him off and turned his attention back to Aleto.

Ever since the new school year began, communication with Snape had been scarce. Convenient, was what Draco had thought. While he's busy being a lackey for both Voldemort and the Order, Snape got to sit back, kick his feet up and relax in his new office. An office that Draco entered to discover not the six foot two dark-haired man but instead, a five foot four redhead who was currently reaching for the sword hanging above the desk.

"Do they not teach a simple summoning spell in charms class anymore?" Draco questioned.

Spinning on her heels, Ginny stared at Draco wide-eyed as she stuttered through a poor lie as to why she was there.

"...delivering something and then I noticed the sword was-er-crooked and so I-"

Draco raised his hand. "I'm going to stop you there, for my sanity." Reaching into his pocket, Draco removed a small envelope and held it up before tossing it onto the desk. "That's from wolf boy."

"Wolf boy?" As soon as the realisation of who he was referring to struck, Ginny lunged forward and carelessly ripped open the letter.

In the short amount of time it took her to read the note twice over, Draco had scanned every book that lined the shelves of Snape's walls and he had sifted through every drawer that wasn't locked. Which resulted in him discovering what appeared to be a diary. Of course, it was charmed to keep anyone but the owner from opening it. But still, it caused Draco to let out a soft chuckle. Something about picturing Snape writing down his thoughts and feelings humanised him in a way Draco never deemed possible.

"This says we're going to be put into contact with an external support aid," Ginny said. "When? And who is it?"

"Look, I'm essentially the human version of an owl," he replied, irritation consuming his words. "Do you really think I have a single answer for you?"

Ginny rolled her eyes and stuffed the parchment into her pocket before crossing her arms.
“So, what’s your deal?”

“You’re going to have to be more specific, Weasley.”

“Whose side are you on? I mean, you’re here with the Death Eaters, you’re dressed like a Death Eater and yet you’re delivering me a message from Remus. So again I ask, whose side are you on?”

Draco’s jaw clenched. He hated that question. He hated that he didn’t have a definitive answer. He hated that even if he did have one, it would mean that his allegiance belonged to someone, that *he* belonged to someone.

“The only side that I’m on is my own,” he said as he took a step forward, his eyes darkening. “Every decision that I make, every curse that I cast, letter that I distribute and life that I take is for my own benefit. I couldn’t care less who wins this war, so long as I get what I want.”

“You always were a real selfish piece of shit,” Ginny bit out.

“And I always will be.”

The sound of the door opening was shortly accompanied by Snape’s monotone voice.

“What’s going on here?”

“Nothing,” Draco replied, his gaze still locked onto Ginny. “Weasley here was just leaving, isn’t that right?”

Without a word, Ginny pushed past Draco and exited the office.

“What was-”

“Does she know?” Draco asked, cutting him off.

“Does she know what, Mr. Malfoy?” Snape drawled.

“About you,” he replied quietly. “Does she know that you bleed red and gold just like the rest of them?”

“I don’t see how that information is relevant.”

“Just answer the damn question!” Draco sneered as he turned around.

Unaffected by his outburst, Snape casually replied, “No.”

“Figured,” Draco scoffed. “Can’t let people know that a Gryffindor managed to melt that ice-cold heart of yours, huh?” As if his legs could no longer support his weight, he collapsed into one of the chairs and ran his hand through his hair as his leg rapidly bounced.

“What are you thinking about?” Snape asked as he sauntered over to the desk and lowered himself into his seat.

“If this is even worth it.”

“Do you mind elaborating on what *this* is?”

“This double agent shit. I mean, what’s the point?”

“The point is that your work for the Order will grant you immunity when the war is over,” Snape replied. “Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“What I wanted was a way out.”

“And that’s what this is.”

“No, it’s not.”

“Mr. Malfoy-”

“I wanted a way out *entirely*,” Draco clarified. “I didn’t want to be playing bad guy during the day and good guy at night. Maybe I didn’t even want to play a good guy at all. Have you ever thought about that?” he questioned as he narrowed his eyes. “Have you ever thought that maybe I don’t *want* to do this? That I never wanted to be some spy for the Order? Has that thought ever crossed your brilliant fucking mind?”

A flicker of pain flashed in Snape’s eyes. “I know how you’re feeling.”

“No you don’t!” Draco snapped as he shot up to his feet and slammed his hands down onto the wooden desk. “You don’t know because how could you?! You’re not the one experiencing it. You’re not the one having to bounce back and forth and torture people daily.”

As he began pacing back and forth, Draco continued with his rant. He didn’t know why everything that he’d been holding in for the last few months was now spewing out of him but he couldn’t stop. It felt good. It was nice to finally say how he felt.

“You’re not the one who has been kept up all night by their screams,” Draco winced at the mere thought. “And you’ll never understand because you’re not the one who has to look their goddamn mother in her eyes and know that she’s memorising every detail of your face just in case it’s the last time she sees you alive! So don’t tell me that you understand!” He screamed as he balled his fingers into a fist and drove it into the wall.

Small ragged breaths escaped the back of his throat as he rested his forehead against the cold bricks. “You don’t know..” he said quietly, his voice cracking.

Draco didn’t notice Snape cross the room but he figured it must’ve been around the time he split his knuckles open and stained the wall with his blood. Regardless, he was now standing behind him and getting a close look at the pathetic breakdown.

“Just tell me how I’m supposed to handle this, *please*.”

“You’re not,” Snape replied.

“Great, that’s just perfect,” Draco jeered as he turned around, pushed past Snape and slumped back into his seat. “You know, you should really look into motivational speaking. You have a real fucking knack for it.”

“No man or woman is meant to endure the amount of pressure you’re under,” Snape said as he returned to his desk. “Especially not at your age. But I’m afraid you have to, you have no other choice.”

“I could just kill myself,” he shrugged.

Snape folded his hands and leaned forward. “You’re going to be alright, Draco.”

There was something odd about hearing him use his first name, Draco noted. He hoped that Snape wasn’t all of a sudden caring about him. He had already been imprinted on by Remus, he wasn’t sure he could handle another.

“It’s a balancing act,” Snape continued. “It’s hard but not impossible. You just need to keep your head clear, your emotions in line and sometimes, you have to lean into the darkness.”

Perhaps he saw how Draco uncomfortably shifted in his seat at the use of the word darkness or maybe he simply recognised the look on his face from personal experience. Whatever the reasoning was, Snape knew what needed to be asked.

“You’ve used the killing curse, haven’t you?”

Draco’s nails dug into the leather armrest. “Astute observation.”

“When?”

“This morning.”

“Who was it?”

“Does it fucking matter?”

“Who was it, Draco?” Snape urged.

“Dedalus Diggle,” he sighed. “They captured him last night in Diagon Alley.”

“I see,” Snape replied. “You should rejoin Fenrir and Antonin. We don’t need them to become even more suspicious, those two never did hold much trust in me.”

As much as Draco would’ve preferred to not leave the only four walls that allowed him to drop the mask, he knew he had to. Getting up from the chair, he made his way to the front of the room and paused in the doorway.

“He didn’t know about me working with the Order, did he?” he asked, his back still turned.

“Very few do. I’m afraid that your alliance is, and will remain, a secret.”

Draco nodded, he assumed that would be the case.

“This will all be worth it,” Snape continued. “One day you’ll find the reason as to why it was. I promise.”

Present Day

As much as he hated to admit it, Snape was right. Draco had found his reason. He found what made the gruelling hours, constant stress and sleepless nights worth it.

He found Hermione.

It was moments like these where he wished his former professor was still alive. Maybe he would have a solution, a way to help her, but Snape was gone. Draco was once again on his own. And just like back then, there were no textbooks he could turn to. There were no guidelines to follow and no rules when it came to helping your girlfriend heal after a war. It was simply trial and error and lately, Draco felt like all he was doing was the latter.

“Maybe it’s time,” Hermione said, breaking the silence.

“Time for what?”

“For you to move on,” she replied as she got up. “Everyone else has.”

“Don’t *ever* say that to me again.” Draco chastised as he stood and brushed the dirt from his pants.

“But Draco-”

“No Granger!” His jaw tensed and brows furrowed. “Just because Weasley is a piece of shit doesn’t mean that I am too! I’m sorry that your friends are too self involved to be here for you but don’t insult me by lumping me in with them.”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to...” Instinctively, Hermione stepped forward and reached out for him but the moment her palm hovered just above his arm, she retracted her hand and lowered her head. “I’m sorry,” she said once more, her voice quiet and frail.

As he let out a deep breath, he felt the full weight of exhaustion finally hit him. He was tired. He was tired of always doing the wrong thing, of continuing to fail her in one way or another. He was tired of not being enough and he was tired of the distance between them.

“I just need some time alone,” he said, knowing that if he didn’t walk away he would say something he didn’t mean.

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t trying to upset you.”

“Stop apologising, you didn’t do anything wrong. I’m fine. I just need to go for a walk.”

“Okay,” she sheepishly replied as her eyes brimmed with tears.

Everything in him wanted to comfort her but he knew that she didn’t want that, that she wouldn’t accept it. Physical touch became as forbidden as speaking Voldemort’s name after the war. Every time he would reach for her she’d move away. And whenever she’d reach for him, she’d stop and pull back. It hurt but he would never tell her that. The last thing he wanted was to make her feel worse, so he kept it to himself. But everyone has a breaking point and Draco had finally reached his.

This wasn’t how he pictured their life together post-war. They had so many plans, none of which included living in the manor. It wasn’t something they had discussed but Draco presumed it would be the last place Hermione would want to be after everything. Surprisingly, the manor seemed to be the only thing she *didn’t* have a problem with.

No matter what Draco had Bippy put together, she’d refuse to eat. Speaking appeared to be another thing she highly disliked and on the rare occasion she would, it always ended with her in tears or yelling. Leaving their bedroom was a feat in itself but touch – the lack of touch was what killed him.

Draco craved the simple acts like placing his hand on the curve of her lower back and feeling her shoulder brush up against his as they walked together. He craved the warmth of her skin pressed against his as they lay in bed and the tickle of her curls under his chin. He craved the feeling of her small frame in his arms and the rhythm of her heart syncing with his.

He craved the feeling of importance.

He used to be her safe place, her home, and he desperately wanted to be that again. He wanted to be the one she vented to when her friends were acting daft, the person she’d talk to for hours on end about her recent discoveries and most of all, he wanted to be the person she came to when things were hard.

Hermione always made it clear that she was perfectly capable of taking care of herself and Draco admired that about her but Gods, he wished for once she’d put aside her damn pride and accept his help.

He felt useless. The woman he loved was hurting and he couldn’t do anything about it. Draco hoped the greenhouse would lift her spirits, not crush them. And fuck! How did he not know about her parents? How did he go months on end during the Horcrux hunt and never once ask about them?

Most days he felt like this was all his fault. If he had just kept his distance, if he hadn’t fallen in love with her, then she would be with her friends right now. Hermione would spend her mornings with Ginny and her afternoons with boy wonder and his ginger sidekick.

Maybe she would’ve been happier, Draco considered. Maybe *he* was the problem. Maybe the reason Hermione wouldn’t let him help her was because *he* wasn’t who she needed. Maybe she needed them.

Now finding himself in Lucius' study, Draco poured himself a glass of firewhiskey and fell back onto the black leather couch.

"This one's for you, father," he said as he raised the glass in the air. "Seems you were right after all. I am a failure." Tilting his head back, Draco closed his eyes as he felt the liquid burn its way down his throat.

"I thought I might find you here," Narcissa smiled as she stood in the doorway and watched as Draco poured himself another glass. "What's the occasion?"

"Must there be one for me to enjoy a nice drink?"

"Of course not," she replied as she entered the room. "But I'm your mother, which means I know that you aren't one for casual drinks alone in the middle of the day." Her delicate fingers reached for the crystal glass. "Tell me what's going on darling," she requested as she took the seat beside him.

Draco stared at his mother as he contemplated whether or not he wanted to open up to her. Despite her best efforts, he noticed how much she was hurting. The spark in her eye was nowhere to be seen and her smile that once stretched from ear to ear had been reduced to a tight line.

His parents fought a lot, mostly about his father's lack of affection and presence in their son's life. Several times Draco tried to convince Narcissa to leave Lucius but she'd always tell him that he was just a boy, and that one day when he was older he'd understand.

He thought that was the most ridiculous thing he had ever heard. No matter how old he became he would never be able to justify staying in a miserable marriage. But when Draco was fifteen and crept his way down the stairs to sneak out and join Theo for a night in town, he finally understood.

His parents were sitting together by the fire. His mother was wrapped in a blanket and resting her head on his father's shoulder. Draco watched from the shadows as Lucius kissed her forehead and whispered, "I've cleared Andromeda and Ted's files at the Ministry this morning. They'll move into their new place on Wednesday."

Narcissa's head shot up. Even from a distance, Draco could see the water that filled her eyes.

"You did it?" she asked, her voice full of disbelief.

"You asked it of me," he simply stated. "While I may not approve of you sneaking out to see them, I know what they mean to you. So yes, my love, I did it. Should *he* return, there will be no record of their location."

"And what of their daughter? Did you clear hers too?"

"It will be as if Nymphadora never existed. They'll be safe," he assured her. "My loyalties lie with you and our family. I wish you'd see that more often."

"I do, you just have an extraordinary way of making it seem otherwise."

“Everything that I do is for the good of our family, Narcissa.”

Draco would never understand his father or see how anything he had ever done was for them but he did understand his mother’s perspective. He understood why she stayed with him and why she mourned him today. His father wasn’t a great man but he was to her. Underneath all of his pride and ego was a heart and Narcissa owned every inch of it.

He couldn’t condemn his mother for loving a heavily faulted man because then he’d be condemning Hermione as well. Draco had made more mistakes than he wished to admit but one of them wasn’t going to be burdening his own mother with his frustration regarding his relationship.

As if she could read his mind, Narcissa said, “Your feelings are worthy of being heard, Draco. Do not feel the need to bottle them up.”

And there it was. A crack in his defensive wall. It was small but enough to cause everything to pour out.

“It didn’t work,” Draco’s voice cracked as he fought back the tears. “I really thought it would work. I thought that...” he trailed off as he stared down at his shaking hands. “I thought that it would help her but it only hurt her. *I hurt her.*”

“My sweet boy,” she sighed. “You need to rid yourself of this narrative that you are the reason for her affliction. There was nothing that you could’ve done.”

“I’m supposed to take care of her!” he countered, his red eyes snapping up to meet Narcissa’s. “That’s what I’m supposed to do, isn’t it? That’s what a Malfoy man does. He takes care of the woman that he loves, even if she is a stubborn witch who wants to do everything on her own.”

“Draco...”

“I just don’t know what else to do,” he confessed. “I’m trying here mother, I’m *really* trying but I’m running out of ideas and I don’t know how much longer I can take it. I know that she needs time, I get that. But fucking hell, it’s killing me! I look at her and I see this brilliant, outstanding and strong woman. I just wish she could see herself the same way but she doesn’t. She’s stuck in this constant loop of misery and every time I think we’re making progress I do something to mess it up and we take two steps backwards!”

He couldn’t stop. He couldn’t keep the words from falling from his mouth or the tears from escaping as he released all of his frustration, anger and heartache.

The emotions that Draco usually had such control over were now controlling him and it terrified him. He hadn’t felt like this since the earlier days of the war.

October 13, 1997

Even after Snape's *wonderful* pep talk, Draco still struggled to see the value in what he was doing. The cons of his entire situation still heavily outweighed the pros but nevertheless, he carried on.

Approaching the perimeter of the ward, Draco stepped through the invisible protective field and stared blankly at the campsite.

It was quiet. No voices, no screams, just the light rustling sound of the trees blowing in the wind. It was peaceful and Draco was thankful.

His moment of solitude and tranquillity was abruptly cut short when a voice asked, "Is that for us?" Turning, Draco stared at the source of the sound. Holding up the bag, he quirked his brow as he pretended to read off a label.

"It says here that this bag of fluxweed, lacewing flies and knotgrass is for a Sir Dimwit," Draco announced. "So yes, it's for you," he smirked before tossing him the bag.

Harry let out a small grunt as he caught the sack. "Bloody hell Malfoy, since when did a few vials weigh so much?"

"I also threw in some potatoes."

"Potatoes? Why in Godric's name did you include those?"

"Granger asked for them," Draco shrugged nonchalantly before making his way over to the campfire and taking a seat on the log.

"Don't you have somewhere to be?" Harry asked.

"Yes and unfortunately it's here. Remus asked that I keep watch tonight due to the recent increase of snatchers looking for your scarred forehead."

"So you'll be here all night?"

"That does seem to be the case."

Harry nodded a few times as he processed the information. "Does this mean that I can..."

"Go sleep Potter," Draco instructed. "I'll take it from here."

There were worse assignments Draco had been given. Granted, he would've preferred to not spend his night sitting on a piece of wood but it was better than laying in bed and staring at the ceiling for hours.

He had never been camping before and he wasn't even sure if this qualified as such but it was the closest he had come to it. As Draco looked up at the clear night sky, he decided that he didn't mind the act. It was serene and the voices that usually assaulted his mind were silent.

Considering there was nothing else to do, Draco took the time to reflect on what Snape said to him yesterday.

"It's a balancing act. It's hard but not impossible. You just need to keep your head clear, your emotions in line and sometimes, you have to lean into the darkness."

Clear head, emotions in line - both were things that normally came easily to him. It was uncommon for him to not have control over his reactions. Theo had a running joke that Draco was the most unbothered teenager in all of Great Britain.

"If only Nott could see me now," he muttered to himself as he snapped a stick in his hands. "He'd take the piss out of me."

"Who would take the piss out of you?" Hermione asked as she stepped out of the tent.

"No one," Draco replied as he threw the broken twig into the dying flames.

"Aren't you cold? I'll rebuild the fire."

Before he could argue that he was fine, Hermione had already run off. Only a few minutes passed before she returned with a stack of wood in her arms. Draco observed the witch as she bent down and attempted to place the logs in a pyramid-like formation.

"Merlin's tit!" she cursed as the structure collapsed for the third time. Draco's tongue poked into the side of his cheek as he held back a laugh. "Think this is funny Malfoy?!"

"Very much so," he smirked.

"Prat," she snarled as she rolled her eyes and continued with her failed attempt at making a fire.

As entertaining as it was to watch Hermione be bad at something, Draco wished to return to his alone time. Something he wouldn't get back until the bullheaded witch managed to get the bloody fire going again.

Joining her on the ground, Draco reached for the wood - his hand lightly brushing against hers.

"Can I?" he asked.

"Y-yeah," she gulped. "Be my guest."

Hermione sat back and closely watched as Draco strategically arranged each piece. It didn't surprise her when he let go and the configuration remained solid. She would never say it to his face but she sometimes envied his intellect.

He had a way of approaching things that she could never. He flawlessly walked the line of both reckless and calculated. Every move he made, every word he said, was done with intent. He would never do anything just for the sake of it, even if he made it appear that way. When

it came to Draco Malfoy, there was always a bigger picture and it drove Hermione mad when she couldn't figure out what it was.

"Can I ask you something?"

"I have a feeling you're going to regardless of my answer," he stated as he pointed his wand at the pit. "Incendio." Placing his hands on the ground behind him and leaning back, he tilted his head to look at Hermione. "That was me telling you to ask your question, Granger."

"Oh." She instantly felt heat rise to her cheeks. Most likely due to the fire, she concluded. Clearing her throat, she asked, "Why are you doing this?"

"You were taking too long," he replied.

"No, not the fire. I meant helping the Order. Correct me if I'm wrong but I don't think you particularly care as to which side wins this war. So why do this? What are you getting out of it?"

Draco shifted his gaze back to the flickering flames.

Sensing she wasn't going to get an answer, she continued down the lengthy list of questions that currently flooded her mind. "Do you have a plan?" she asked.

"A plan?"

"For when this is all over," she elaborated. "I mean, what do you see for yourself? When you envision your future, what do you see?"

"I don't know," he admitted.

"You can drop the mysterious and cold act Malfoy. It's not like I have anyone I can gossip to."

"It's not an act. Not all of us were given the luxury of fantasising about our dream jobs."

"There has to be something that you-"

Rage flooded his veins as he frustratingly rubbed his eyes and ran his hand down the length of his face. "You really don't get it, do you?!" He glowered. "My life has been planned out for me since the day I was born, maybe even before then. I didn't sit around as a kid and daydream about the person I'd one day become because I wasn't allowed to. I hate to break it to you Granger, but for once in your life, you're not going to get an answer."

The air around them grew heavy as it filled with a deafening silence. Draco had no guilt for snapping at Hermione but he knew that the full extent of his anger wasn't due to her incessant need to know everything. Hermione, however, did feel guilt. She was aware that she tended to overstep, to stick her nose where it didn't belong, but she couldn't help herself.

There was so much she didn't understand. No matter how many different ways she tried to approach the situation and put herself in his shoes, she couldn't find any logical reason for

him to betray Voldemort. If she were in his position and came from the family that he did, she wouldn't do the same. It terrified her to think that way but it was the truth. Which only confused her more. If even she, the courageous and altruistic Gryffindor, would surrender then why wasn't he?

Hermione discovered weeks ago that Draco Malfoy wasn't who he painted himself out to be. As she looked at him, the flames of the bonfire reflecting in his hollow eyes, she could no longer locate the pretentious bully from school. Instead, she saw a conflicted, broken and worn down boy. He was a lot like Harry in the sense that they were both the chosen ones and had no say in the matter. The only difference was, while Harry was applauded for surviving, Draco was damned for it.

She might not fully trust him yet and saying his name still left a bad taste in her mouth but Hermione knew that she didn't need to like the guy to extend the slightest bit of compassion.

"Just one more question," Hermione requested.

Draco let out an exasperated sigh as he lazily flailed his hand in the air, signalling for her to continue.

"How are you?"

Draco's brows raised and his lips parted slightly as his breathing hitched. Out of all the questions she could've asked, that was the only one that he wasn't prepared for. No one had ever asked him that before. No one ever *cared* enough to ask. The truth was, he was shit. He was going on hour twenty of no sleep, every muscle in his body ached, his eyes were dry and irritated from the smoke of the campfire and despite occluding, he was struggling to control his emotions.

"I'm fine," he lied.

He knew that Hermione could see straight through him, but he also knew that she was smart enough to accept his answer as is and not push any farther, at least for tonight. For once, Draco found himself thankful for Hermione Granger.

Chapter 5

Flashback - 'The Grim'

November 11, 1997

“Please! I’ll do whatever you wa-” the woman’s plea was cut short by the casual jerk of Draco’s wrist, causing the bones in her neck to snap. His half-lidded eyes tracked her lifeless body as it collapsed onto the ground, landing beside her late husband and the dozen others that covered the floor.

“I’m starting to take offence to these mind-numbing tasks,” Greyback grumbled as he kicked a woman’s limp leg. “I don’t know why the Dark Lord doesn’t send someone like Dolohov to do this shit. That git loves grunt work.”

“How does that work?” Draco curiously asked as he buttoned his jacket with his right hand and turned to face Greyback.

“How does *what* work?”

“How can something numb your mind if you don’t have a functioning brain in the first place?”

Greyback’s nostrils flared and lip curled as he stepped into Draco. “How dare you speak to me that way,” he snarled.

“Aside from the constant shedding, do you lick the underside of your arse like dogs too? Because your breath is rancid.” Draco’s nose scrunched in disgust as he waved at the air between them.

“Why you little—”

“As much as I’d *love* to spend all day insulting you, and it would take all day to go through my lengthy list, I have more important things to tend to.” Harshly patting the side of his arm, Draco pushed past Greyback. “Clean this up will you?” He requested as he reached for the door handle. “It’d be a shame to stain such nice flooring.”

Feeling the crisp autumn breeze gently brush against his face as he stepped outside, Draco closed his eyes and slowly dragged in a deep breath. Things were easier now. It took a few weeks but Draco finally felt like he had figured out the whole balancing act thing.

At first, he fought the darkness in an attempt to hold onto the one thing he had left – his identity. He didn’t want to become some thoughtless Death Eater or a blind follower of the Order. He wasn’t a pawn in anyone’s game and he intended to keep it that way. If he were to die during the war, he wanted to still be himself. And if he were to make it out alive, he wanted to be able to look in the mirror and recognise the man staring back at him.

It was an exhausting task, though, resisting the dark magic. Each day that he continued to refuse it sanctuary in his mind, it ate away at him. He felt himself slowly deteriorating. His strength, mental and physical, weakened and his mind became a foggy mess. Eventually, his energy ran dry and he couldn't fight it off any longer. So, he did as Snape suggested. He leaned into it.

Ironically, surrendering himself is what ended up restoring his control. He was able to solidify his occlumency, rid himself of the torturous screams and finally get some damn sleep. Food was enjoyable again, his snark had returned in all its glory and occasionally, he'd laugh. It wasn't often but Draco was relieved when he discovered that he was still capable of such.

He was different, that he couldn't deny, but he felt more like himself than he had in years. He was lighter, sharper, stronger. Unlike his comrades, Draco could restrain himself. He never acted on impulse and he was no longer a slave to his emotions. He had become even more strategic with the things that he did and the words that he spoke. He was manipulative when needed, merciless when necessary and rude when he felt like it.

Draco no longer found himself debating whether or not he was crossing any lines. There were no lines, he realised. Right and wrong were thrown out the window the second he stepped foot inside the burrow that night in July. If he needed to lie straight to Voldemort's face for the sake of the Order, he would. And if he needed to kill someone to maintain his cover as a Death Eater, he did.

Today's events were nothing new, not to him. It was merely another Tuesday. While he no longer felt guilt or shame for executing innocent people, he still didn't find any pleasure in doing so.

Unlike Greyback, Dolohov and every other Death Eater, Draco wasn't one for the dramatics. He didn't care to make a show of it or to play with their emotions. Letting his victims believe that they had a fighting chance was of no benefit to him, so he didn't allow it.

The moment he stepped into a room, whoever was unlucky enough to be there with him immediately knew that they wouldn't be surviving.

'The Grim' is what people referred to him as. An omen of death. Wherever he went, death followed. Or at least that's what Remus told him.

"What a stupid name," Draco scoffed as he leaned back into the chair and crossed his leg.

"I don't know, it seems pretty fitting to me," Tonks shrugged as she poured a cup of tea and handed it to him.

"Word on the street is that there's a young Death Eater that's been rather... unforgiving as of late," Remus stated as he lifted a brow, waiting for Draco to confirm or deny the accusations.

"Don't tell me you're upset that I'm doing what you asked of me," Draco replied.

"I didn't ask you to kill people."

“But you did, Remus,” Draco countered. “The second you asked-no-*told* me that I would be playing both sides, you asked me to do this. So if you have an issue with it, then perhaps you should take a step back and reevaluate your own strategy. I’m just simply following orders.”

Silence.

Remus wanted to fight back. He wanted to argue that he would never ask anyone, *especially* a child, to commit such vile things but he couldn’t. Whether intentional or not, Remus had played a part in what Draco had become over the last month.

Draco didn’t need to use legilimency to know what was going through Remus’ head as he stared vacantly at the floor. His expression mirrored the one Narcissa often wore. It was filled with guilt and shame.

Nauseated by the depressing shift in the room, Draco turned his attention to Tonks and asked, “How’s the baby?”

“Good,” she smiled as she pressed her palms to her stomach. “I just entered my second trimester.”

“Do you have a name picked out yet?”

Tonks shook her head.

“Can I suggest one?”

“If you feel the need.”

“Draco.”

“You’re joking, right?” she asked.

“Do I look like I’m joking?” he replied. “And why are you so opposed to the idea? What’s wrong with the name Draco?”

“Nothing, except for the fact that it’s connected to a notorious Death Eater.”

Remus’ eyes widened at Tonks’ statement and sweat began to trickle down his forehead as he anxiously waited for a fight to break out between the pair. To his surprise, they both laughed. Confused but not wanting to question anything, Remus let out an awkward chuckle.

“Your kid is going to be a little shit, you know that Dora?” Draco said.

“Well it’s going to have our DNA, so yeah, I’m fully prepared for such.”

The rest of the afternoon mostly consisted of Draco and Tonks talking while Remus sat back and listened like a fly on the wall. His wife always had an inviting but hard exterior to her but that always seemed to fall whenever she was with her cousin. Tonks had never spoken to him about anyone in her family aside from her parents but when Remus had come home and

informed her of Draco's new agreement with the Order, he saw in her eyes how much she cared for him.

Remus never asked her directly about their relationship, he knew better than that. But after quietly observing the two of them he learned everything that he needed to know. Draco and Tonks shared a mutual respect for one another. They both provided a safety that allowed the other to drop their guard and despite their constant banter, if something were to happen to one of them, the other would be lost. To Remus, they were more like siblings than cousins.

"As fun as this was," Draco said as he placed his empty cup on the table and got up. "I believe three idiots are waiting for me to deliver their daily snacks to them."

As Draco headed for the door, Tonks called out, "Hey Draco."

"Yes?"

"Try not to die, okay?"

A small smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. "I'll do my best."

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As Draco stepped through the ward, the usually quiet campsite was instead a verbal warzone.

"What's upsetting the children this time?" Draco muttered as he made his way over to the tent.

Stepping inside, he was immediately met by a hex to the shoulder. For the first time since he'd arrived, the shouting ceased.

"Shit, sorry," Hermione apologised as she lowered her wand.

"Work on your aim, Granger. My heart is over here," Draco said as he pointed to the left side of his chest.

"Why are you here?" Ron shot over at him.

"The same reason as the hundred other times you moron," he replied as he held up the sack. "Who shoved a wand up his arse?"

"I don't have a wand up anywhere!" He spat back.

"Right," Draco mocked.

"Fuck this!" Ron bellowed as he snatched his belongings from the table. "I'm leaving."



“You can’t be serious Ron,” Hermione said. “It’s not safe to be out there alone right now. What if a snatcher catches you?”

“You’d probably like that,” he scoffed.

“Excuse me? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I see the way you look at Harry and how you tend to his every need.”

“What? That’s nothing.”

“Even bloody Malfoy!” he cursed. “I mean what the fuck are you doing Hermione? Healing his hand, staying up all night chatting with him by the fire. Yeah, I have ears, I hear you two talking out there.”

Hermione reached for the locket hanging from his neck but he swatted her hands away.

“Ron, please,” Hermione begged.

“Have you forgotten that he’s a Death Eater?!” Ron continued. “Have you forgotten that he killed Dedalus and probably hundreds of others?”

“Twenty-seven,” Draco added.

“What?” Ron questioned as he snapped his eyes over to him.

“You said I’ve most likely killed hundreds of others,” he replied. “While I appreciate the overestimation, it’s only been twenty-seven. Twenty-eight if you count that one goblin, which personally, I don’t.”

“Did either of you hear a word that just came out of that git’s mouth?” Ron asked as he turned to face Hermione and Harry. “Do you hear *any* remorse for what he’s done? Because I don’t!”

“What would I be remorseful for, Weasley? Doing my job?”

“Oh piss off Malfoy,” he snarled.

“Why don’t you?” Draco suggested.

“Excuse me?”

“Clearly you’re unhappy being here, so why don’t you do us all a favour and leave. I’m tired of listening to your pathetic tantrum.”

“Pathetic?! The only pathetic thing here is you,” Ron said as he stepped into Draco. “I mean look at you. You walk around acting all tough when in reality you’re nothing more than a scared little boy who’s too weak to stand up to his daddy.”

“Say whatever you need to make yourself feel better,” Draco calmly replied. “Just remember, it won’t change the fact that you’re nothing more than dead weight. If it weren’t for you and your frail body, we would’ve made a lot more progress with the Horcruxes by now.”

“You think you’re so much better than me, don’t you?”

“Do you really want me to answer that?” Draco taunted. “I mean look at you. Throwing a fit over what, a girl? Your whole fantasy of shagging your childhood best friend is juvenile and a waste of time. So either get over yourself or leave. The choice is up to you.”

Ron looked around the room at his friends, waiting for someone to say something, to tell him not to go, but they didn’t. Ripping the locket from his neck and throwing it to the ground, he adjusted the bag on his shoulder and looked at Hermione.

“Well? Are you coming or are you staying?”

“Ron... I...” Hermione stuttered as she looked over at Harry then Draco and then back at Ron.

“Right, I see how it is,” he sneered. “Have fun with your little Death Eater.”

Harry and Hermione remained frozen in place as they watched him storm out of the tent.

“I’ll take the first watch,” Draco announced as he bent down and picked up the locket.

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Anger, worry and regret. Those were the three emotions Draco had to sit with for the past four hours while he stared out at the trees that surrounded him. They weren’t his feelings though, they were Harry’s.

Around the time he accepted the dark magic into his life and regained control over his own emotions, Draco discovered that he had gained the ability to sense those of another. He hated it but he hadn’t figured out how to stop it yet.

He figured it had something to do with his legilimency. Both his occlumency and legilimency had improved significantly. Entering the minds of others was as easy as breathing, it had become second nature to him. Of course, Voldemort utilised this skill the second he got word of it.

When the Death Eaters would gather a group of individuals, Draco’s job was to sift through each of their minds. He’d search for any information on the Order, where their loyalties lie and most of all if they knew anything about Harry’s whereabouts. In the end, if the person wasn’t a supporter of Voldemort then they were executed. Draco could feel their fear up until they took their last breath. His occlumency was the only thing that kept him from going insane.

Still, it was aggravating. It was like a sixth sense and Draco wanted nothing more than to be rid of it.

“For the love of Merlin, get a grip Potter,” Draco groaned as he picked up a nearby stone and threw it. Harry’s emotions had been all over the place ever since Ron left. At first he was angry, fuming. Then he was ashamed, for whatever reason. It was a constant up and down of rage, annoyance and regret.

Hermione, however, was less intense. He barely felt her. Draco assumed it had something to do with her occlumency but there was one emotion from her that kept poking at him.

Sadness.

She had been sad since Draco arrived and she continued to be hours later. Draco had half a mind to go in and attempt to cheer her up just to save himself from having to feel it for a minute longer but he didn’t. That wasn’t his job. His job was to keep watch on both the campsite and the locket.

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Six hours. Six bloody hours and the witch was still sad. Draco couldn’t take it any longer. Getting up to his feet, he marched into the tent and straight over to where she was sitting.

“Are you done?” he asked.

Hermione lifted her head and looked up at him. “Am I done with what?”

“With being sad,” he stated. “Because I need you to be done, it’s driving me mad.”

“Oh, I’m sorry Malfoy. I didn’t realise how much *my* sadness affected you,” she mocked.

“Now you do. So stop.”

“You’re joking, right?”

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“Ron left.”

“And?” Draco drawled. “I thought you’d be thankful that you no longer have to listen to him whine all day.”

Now standing, Hermione’s hands balled into fists and her eyes narrowed. “He’s gone!” she shouted. “He’s out there all alone, who knows what’s going to happen to him. So forgive me for being fucking sad that my friend could possibly get hurt!”

And there it was, a shift. After continuous hours of the same thing, Draco finally felt it change.

“Thank you,” he exhaled as his shoulders relaxed.

Hermione’s brow quirked. “Thank you?”

“Yes, thank you,” he repeated. “You’re finally something *other* than sad and it’s relieving.”

“You’re unbelievable,” she said as she rolled her eyes and returned to her seat on the wooden stairs.

Satisfied that he got what he wanted, Draco began walking away when he heard a faint sniffle from behind that stopped him in his tracks. Everything in him was telling him to continue walking, to pretend that he didn’t hear anything, but against his better judgement Draco glanced over his shoulder.

She was crying.

Hermione Granger was crying.

*I hate it here*, he thought to himself.

Turning around and rejoining her, Draco uncomfortably took the seat beside her.

“Tell me about them,” he requested.

Wiping her face with the back of her sleeve, Hermione looked over at him. “About what?” she asked.

“Your findings,” he explained as he pointed at the several books sprawled out on the table to their left.

With each new piece of information, Hermione’s body relaxed. She was a brilliant woman, even Draco couldn’t deny that. The way she approached problems and worked through them fascinated him. Intellect was a highly respected trait in his books and Hermione had more of it than anyone he had ever met.

By the time she began talking about the sword of Gryffindor, tears had stopped rolling down her cheeks and the spark in her eyes had returned.

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### ***Present Day***

“Darling, you need to calm down,” Narcissa begged as she watched her son continue to throw things. Glass shards covered the carpet and books and pieces of parchment were scattered throughout the room.

“Why? It’s not like father will be coming home to see the mess,” Draco argued as he knocked everything off the desk. “None of it matters mother, don’t you see? None of this fucking matters!”

“Draco, please.”

“We weren’t even supposed to be here!” he shouted. “Granger and I were supposed to go somewhere new and start over, start our life together. We were supposed to be happy! But we didn’t and we aren’t. Instead we’re trapped here in this house full of shitty memories and she’s miserable, *she’s fucking miserable!*”

Blinded by rage, Draco punched through the glass casing on the bookshelf and retrieved his father’s dagger.

“What are you doing Draco?” Narcissa asked as he ran his finger along the sharp edge.

“Maybe it would’ve been better if I had died during the war,” he suggested.

“Don’t,” she said sternly. “Don’t say that.”

“Why not?!”

“Because there were too many sacrifices made by people who care about you to get you to this point. You don’t get to insult them or her by thinking for even a second that you should’ve died.”

Tears stung his eyes as he turned his head and looked out the window at Hermione who was sitting in the grass and observing the peacocks as they moved through the garden.

“I used to be able to help her,” Draco said, his voice frail. “I used to know how to calm her down and take her mind off of things. She used to *let* me help her.”

“Why do you feel like it’s your job to do so?” Narcissa prompted.

“Because I love her,” he replied as he turned his attention back to his mother.

“Are you sure that’s the only reason? Are you sure it’s not due to you feeling responsible in some way for what happened to her? For her being this way?”

Draco dropped his head into his hands. Of course he felt responsible. He could’ve done more. He *should’ve* done more. He should’ve taken a note from Ron’s playbook and left the Horcrux hunt, he should’ve forced her to leave with him. If he had, maybe things would be different.

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### ***Flashback - 'Until Then'***

***November 29, 1997***

Ever since Ron's departure, Draco had been spending more time with Harry and Hermione. There was one less person to keep watch at night and one less in the rotation when it came to wearing the locket. Draco's days had become even longer with the extended amount of time he was spending at the campsite but he didn't mind. At least he was able to use something there that he wasn't permitted to when with the Death Eaters - his brain.

After Hermione's recent discovery about the sword of Gryffindor being the key to destroying the locket, the three of them began working on how to get their hands on it. It seemed like a rather simple task at first, Draco remembered seeing it in Snape's office. He had curated a plan to convince Voldemort that another visit to the school grounds was necessary but before he got around to following through with it, he received word from Snape himself that the sword was no longer in his possession.

After that, the adrenaline of it all died rather quickly. Harry was defeated and his patience was running thin. Most days Hermione wore the locket until Draco arrived, to help alleviate Harry's frustration. Besides Ron, the Horcrux had affected him the most. Hermione wasn't immune to the effects but she could stabilise it and decipher between how she truly felt and what it was trying to convince her she was feeling. Draco, on the other hand, appeared to be unaffected entirely.

While Draco read through her copy of Secrets of the Darkest Art, Hermione couldn't help but stare at him. He looked different to her. Physically he had put on more muscle, his shoulders were broader and his hair was getting longer but that's not what she was focused on. It was something about him that she couldn't describe.

Hermione always knew that he was smart, he was her only real competition in school. But seeing him over the past couple of weeks, hearing his thought process, his ideas and watching him now as he sat across from her and scratched his jaw while reading, it was like she was seeing him with new eyes.

"Are you going to say something or are you just going to continue gawking at me, Granger?" Draco asked as he flipped to the next page, his gaze still trained on the text.

"Oh-er-sorry," she stammered, her cheeks turning a bright shade of red as she shifted in her seat.

Hermione was good at hiding a lot of things, especially when it came to how she was feeling. Except there was one thing Draco noticed she couldn't shield from him - being flustered. He felt the full intensity of it every time and as of late, Hermione seemed to experience it quite often.

So it was no surprise when he felt it again when he called her out for her staring. It pleased him to know that he could throw her off balance so easily, it seemed only fair. Over the last two weeks, Hermione had mastered the art of getting on his nerves with even the simplest of things.

Last week they were looking over runes to pass the time. All he said was that she was getting the symbol for content and travel mixed up, which was a common occurrence due to their similarities. Draco had asked for the quill to show her but she refused.

*“You wouldn’t be saying this if I were a man,” she had said.*

*“Yes, I would. Because even if you were a man, you’d still be wrong Granger.”*

He never did get the damn quill from her and gave up on the argument entirely.

And just three days ago they were gathering wood for the fire and she managed to make even that difficult, saying the logs that he had picked out were too damp and would never light. Then, when he returned with a new stack she had the audacity to complain that those were too dry and not thick enough.

She was a maddening witch.

But he enjoyed her company, as much as one could enjoy the company of an insufferable know-it-all that is. Hermione valued his input and she listened to his ideas. And not the fake sort of listening that his peers would do when they didn’t actually care but actually listened. He could tell by the way she looked at him and leaned in while he spoke.

She would hang on his every word and when he’d say something that piqued her interest her eyebrows subtly lifted and did a sort of dance. He could also tell when she hated an idea because the left side of her mouth would twitch and she’d shiver. It was childish, he thought, but he appreciated the transparency.

She was a breath of fresh air for him. There was no bull shit, no secret agenda or manipulation. That was a rare thing for Draco to come by. So even if it were Hermione Granger that was offering it, he gladly accepted.

“I just have a question,” Hermione said.

“You and your bloody questions,” he groaned as he snapped the book shut.

“It’s your fault for answering them each time.”

“I’m realising. Alright, what is it this time?”

“How come the locket doesn’t work when you have it?”

“It works,” he replied.

“But you don’t show any side effects from it? Even I get rather irritable whereas you seem to stay the same.”

“I said it works, I didn’t say I let it work on me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“The brightest witch of our age not understanding something? What a day to be alive,” he smirked.

“Shut up,” she smiled as she rolled her eyes.

“The locket works, I don’t magically disable whatever curse was placed on it. I just don’t grant it control over me,” he explained.

“You say that like it’s such a simple thing.”

“It is, for me at least. I’ve never been in a position where I could let my emotions control me, so why would I let a stupid locket do so?”

There it was, her eyebrows were doing their weird dance. Something he said interested her and he knew a stream of new questions were about to pour out.

“Would you look at the time, I better get going,” Draco said as he got up from the table and slipped on his jacket.

“You’re not even wearing a watch, how do you know what time it is?” Hermione questioned as she also got up and crossed her arms.

“When you’re as smart as I am you don’t need a watch. Do you see that bright round thing in the sky? That’s called the sun and based on its position I’d say it’s nearing noon which means I’m already running late. But don’t worry Granger, I’ll be back tomorrow. My face will be the first thing you see in the morning,” he grinned.

“I’d rather be Avada’d.”

“That can be arranged,” he winked. “Until tomorrow.”

“Until then. Try not to die, Malfoy.”

“I’ll do my best.”



Diagon Alley was never necessarily a bright and joyful place, besides the one day a year when first years flooded the streets as they gathered their items for school. But now after the Death Eaters had taken control of it and destroyed every other building, the lane was as unrecognisable as Hogwarts.

A few stores remained along with Gringotts so pedestrians still visited the area. A stupid choice on their behalf. Once every three days, Voldemort had Draco, Rowle, Greyback and Nott Sr. visit the area. Once there they would grab every individual who passed by and pull them into what used to be Ollivanders. From there, Draco would do his job - he would search their minds. It was a rare occasion that someone walked away afterwards. Those who were in support of Voldemort knew better than to be there that day.

“One more,” Nott Sr. said as he dragged a middle-aged woman in and pushed her forward, causing her to fall to the ground. “Such a pretty thing, wouldn’t you say?”



Draco took a moment to scan over the woman's face. She was most likely in her mid to late forties, her blonde hair was thrown up into a messy ball on her head held together by her wand and her eyes were a deep shade of green. She wasn't ugly but Draco had no interest in her.

"Sure," he replied before crossing the room and beginning his assessment of the individuals sitting along the wall. As he made his way down the line, Rowle and Greyback would wait for his signal before ushering them into the back room. It didn't take long for the screams to begin. Draco didn't care that the two felt the need to drag out what was meant to be a quick execution but he did care that it caused the remaining people to panic, making his job far more difficult than it needed to be.

Finally reaching the front of the room, Draco bent down and stared into the eyes of the woman that Nott Sr. had brought in. She was different. Unlike the others, she didn't squirm in place or try to bargain with him. Instead, she held his stare and sat up straight with her shoulders rolled back.

"Name?" Draco asked.

"Helena Frimley."

"Hello Helena, are you not afraid?"

"Why would I be afraid? You don't scare me," she stated confidently.

"I should," he replied.

She was a fighter, if it were any other circumstance he'd admire that trait but in this case, it was pointless. Pushing into her mind, Draco's breath caught in the back of his throat. Just before him was an old wooden door and a single glass window in the centre, bordered with flowers.

He had seen this before.

It was Hermione.

Looking over his shoulder, Draco checked the room for Nott Sr, Greyback and Rowle. Once he noted that they were alone, he gripped her arm, pulled her up to her feet and dragged her out of the store. Now in a dark alley between two buildings, Draco ripped off his mask and backed her into the brick wall.

"What the fuck are you doing here Granger?" he hissed.

"How did you-"

"You may have changed your physical appearance but I'd recognise your mind anywhere, now answer the damn question."

"I wanted to see if Flourish and Blotts had this one book that could help us," she stated, as if that were a valid excuse.

“Well you wasted your time and polyjuice.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because Flourish and Blotts is gone.”

“Gone?”

“Gone,” he repeated sternly. “Burned down, destroyed, nothing more than a pile of ash.”

“I... I didn’t know.” Her head lowered.

“Why would you? You’ve been off hiding in the woods this whole time.”

The sound of his name being called out by Greyback caused his breathing to once again come to a halt and his hand to fly up to cover Hermione’s mouth. Slowly, he guided her further back into the shadows of the alley and watched as Greyback walked out and searched for him. With his free hand, Draco raised his pointer finger to his lips to signal for Hermione to remain quiet.

“Useless little shit,” Greyback muttered before returning to the store.

Removing his hand from her face, Draco took a step back and said, “You need to leave.”

“But what if I just-”

“Dammit Granger!” he cursed as he punched the space beside her head. “No questions, not now. Leave,” he commanded, his eyes drowning in rage.

“Okay, okay,” she said as she raised her hands in surrender. “But how are you going to explain my absence to them?”

“That’s for me to worry about. Wait until you’re near Gringotts to apparate, it won’t draw as much attention over there.”

“Okay.”

“What’s the name?”

Hermione’s head tilted.

“Of the book,” Draco sighed. “What’s the name?”

“An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe,” she answered.

“Okay,” he nodded. “I’ll see what I can do. Now go.”

“She just snuck out?” Voldemort questioned as he circled Draco.

“Yes my Lord,” Draco responded. “The door wasn’t locked, it was an oversight on my behalf.”

“An oversight indeed,” he agreed. “You’ve been performing well lately, Draco.”

“Thank you, my Lord.”

“Which is why I find this error to be very uncharacteristic of you,” Voldemort continued. “Is there something that you wish to tell me?”

Draco stared into his eyes, knowing that Voldemort was currently trying to penetrate his mind. Placing an extra wall of security around his memories and bringing forth a handful of meaningless ones to misdirect him, Draco confidently answered, “No, my Lord.”

“I see,” Voldemort replied, his voice barely above a whisper as he continued to study Draco. “It’s unwise to lie to me. The truth always has a way of coming to the surface. But for now, I’ll take your word.”

“Thank you my-” Draco began but Voldemort cut him off.

“Split open your chest.”

“My Lord?”

“Yes, I am your Lord, so do as I say. Take out your knife and cut into your chest,” he commanded. “One for each minute of my time that was wasted with this conversation.”

Draco swallowed back his anger and shucked off his coat. Once his shirt was unbuttoned, he removed the dagger from the holster resting on his hip, pressed it into his chest and dragged it across his skin. Blood poured down his abdomen and covered his hand as he repeated the movement.

After the twelfth slash, the knife fell from Draco’s hand. The clinking sound of the blade hitting the ground synced with the cracking noise of Draco’s ribs breaking. Hunching over and falling to his knees, Draco clutched onto his side as he looked up at Voldemort who had his wand pointed at him.

“You’ll quickly learn that I don’t take kindly to failure,” Voldemort declared as he twisted his wrist, causing every muscle in Draco’s body to tense. “Fail me again and it’ll be you whose name is listed in the necrology.”

With another twist of Voldemort’s wrist, Draco collapsed onto the floor. It felt like his skin was on fire and every bone in his body was simultaneously breaking as he writhed on the floor in agony.

Draco had delivered his fair share of the cruciatus curse but he had never been on the receiving end before. It was unbearable. Each breath he took resulted in a surge of pain. The millions of nerve endings scattered across his body were on fire and his already mutilated chest felt like it was being torn apart.

The pain was crushing him and had claimed his body for its own.



Apparating caused an immeasurable amount of misery. His body felt like it had been cut open all over again and thrown into a pool of acid. Draco's legs shook as he struggled to hold up his weight. He wanted to fall onto the ground right then and there but he knew better. He was out in the open, it wasn't safe. But most importantly, he needed to reach the campsite so that he could yell at Hermione.

His vision was still blurry as he staggered his way through the forest but he knew the area well enough that he could navigate it with his eyes closed. Finally passing through the ward, Draco stumbled into the tent.

"Malfoy why are you- oh my god!" Hermione's voice was barely audible as he focused on regaining his balance.

Slowly, she came into view and he could see her. Every curl, every wrinkle on her forehead as she continued to frantically ask him what had happened. Reaching out, Draco firmly grasped her by the wrist and yanked her into him.

"You're the dumbest fucking person I've ever met Granger!" he seethed, the vein in his neck bulging as he clenched his teeth. "There was only one rule, don't leave the campsite! It's not a difficult one to follow!"

"I understand but-"

"You were reckless and put the both of us in a shit situation!"

"Malfoy I-"

"Do you know what happened to the others you were grouped with? They died. They were fucking tortured and then killed Granger! That could've been you, do you understand that?!"

"I'm sorry!" she cried out. "It was stupid of me and I'm sorry but please, Malfoy, you're hurt. Let me help you, let me try to heal you, please."

Throwing down her arm, Draco pinched the bridge of his nose as rage continued to pulse through his veins. He hated her. He hated that she was so careless over some stupid book. He hated that because of her, he had new scars added to his already heavily decorated body.

“Malfoy...”

“For one minute can you please not talk?!” he snapped. “My head is throbbing and my ears are ringing and I feel like I’m about to...” he trailed off as his body began to sway.

Rushing forward, Hermione grabbed his arm and draped it over her shoulders to help stabilise him. “Come on,” she said. “Let’s sit you down and then I’ll work on these cuts, okay?”

Too weak to verbally reply, Draco nodded and allowed her to guide him across the room. Once she managed to get him into the chair, Hermione inspected his injuries.

“Erm-can you uh-would you mind,” she stuttered.

“Just say it,” he demanded.

“I need you to take your shirt off,” she blurted. “So I can get a better look.”

A weak grin crept its way across his lips. “If you wanted to get me naked, you could’ve just asked Granger.”

“Please shut up and take off your shirt.”

“I’ve always liked a commanding woman,” he taunted as he struggled up to his feet, slid off his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt.

The colour quickly drained from Hermione’s face as he threw his clothes onto the floor and turned back around to face her. Her eyes scanned over every inch of his bare upper body, mapping every new and old laceration.

“Malfoy...”

“Spare me the pity, Granger.”

His tone was laced with disgust but Hermione could see it in his eyes, he was pleading with her. He was already in a vulnerable state and the last thing he wanted was to be on the receiving end of her sympathetic look.

“Sit backwards on the chair,” she instructed as she forced back her tears.

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“Fucking hell Granger!” Draco exclaimed, his knuckles turning white as his grip tightened on the back of the chair. “You have the delicate touch of a damn grindylow.”

"If you'd stop moving it wouldn't hurt as much," she proclaimed. "Besides, I thought you were immune to pain."

"And what gave you that bright idea?"

"Aren't you occluding?"

"Occluding only protects me from-god dammit Granger!" he hissed as she pressed her wand into his shoulder blade. "Occluding only protects me from mental and emotional pain," he continued. "It doesn't save me from physical-for fucks sake! Are you purposefully trying to make this as painful as possible?!" Draco ridiculed as he shot up from the chair.

"Would you look at that," she grinned. "You got up all on your own. How does your back feel now?"

Draco blinked a few times as he carefully rolled his shoulders back, his body relaxed when he wasn't met by shooting pain. There was still discomfort but he could live with that. At least now he could breathe without his ribs puncturing his lungs.

"Better?" she asked.

"Much," he replied. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," she smiled. "Let's work on your chest next."

Picking up the vial of dittany, Hermione removed the dropper and steadily applied the potion to each of the gashes. Noticing the frustration on her face as she waited for the wounds to heal, Draco said, "It's not going to work the same with these."

"Why not? I had to heat it in a pot instead of a cauldron this time but it should still work the same."

"It has nothing to do with your potion," he stated. "The blade I used is cursed. It cuts skin the same as any other knife but it also infects the bloodstream to delay the healing process."

"I've never heard of a curse that does that," Hermione replied.

"That's because my father invented it. It'll be fine, they'll heal in a week or so. Last time it took two but the dittany should help a bit."

"The last time?"

"You're not blind Granger, you saw the other scars that deface my body."

Hermione had come face to face with a lot of startling things through the years but nothing compared to the shock of how casually Draco admitted to his father abusing him. He was right, she did see the other scars and knowing where they came from caused bile to rise in the back of her throat.

“Is that where this one came from?” she hesitantly asked as she ran her finger along the thick faded line that stretched across his abdomen.

“No, that one was a gift from your lovely friend Potter.”

“Oh... what about this one?” Her hand barely grazed the skin of his left side before he snatched her wrist.

“Don’t,” he whispered as he tightly shut his eyes and winced slightly.

There were a lot of reasons for Hermione to hate Draco Malfoy. For starters, he made her and her friends lives a living hell at school, especially Harry’s. Then there was the fact that he was a blood supremacist who called her crude names solely because of the family she came from and of course the one that should’ve solidified her revulsion - he was a death eater.

But she couldn’t hate him, no matter how much she wanted to. Because while he was all of the aforementioned, there was a good person somewhere inside of him. She knew this because if there wasn’t, he wouldn’t have saved her today. Draco had to have known what was going to happen to him when helping her escape earlier and yet, he still did it. Draco willingly sacrificed his well-being for the sake of hers.

Even though he’d deny it, Hermione knew that he was working himself to the bone by spending extra hours to help them with their research. She saw the exhaustion in his eyes. He had a million things being asked of him but he still continued to gather everything Harry or herself requested, no matter how ridiculous some of the things may be.

“I almost forgot,” Draco said as he let go of her arm, picked up his coat and reached into the pocket. “I believe this is what you asked for.”

Taking the book in her hands, Hermione read over the title. “An Appraisal of Magical Education in Europe. Thank you, Malfoy,” she smiled. “I really think this might help us.”

“It better,” he replied. “By the way, where’s scarhead? I managed to find him that book on quidditch, though I don’t see how it’ll be of any use.”

“He’s down by the water. He left about an hour before you arrived. He just needed some space to clear his head, I think our recent plateau has taken a toll on him.”

“I see,” Draco nodded. “I’ll just leave it with you then.”

“Wait-you’re leaving?”

“That I am, even a Death Eater that is spying for the Order has to attend a family dinner every once in a while,” he joked as he slipped his arm through the sleeve of his shirt. “I’ll be back tomorrow afternoon.”

“Oh, okay. Until then?”

Draco paused for a moment. “Until then.”

Chapter 6

Flashback - 'Memories'

December 23, 1997

“It’s shocking to me that you managed to stay on your broom back at school Potter,” Draco mocked. “You have the coordination of a newborn baby.”

“We’ve been at this for two hours,” Harry groaned. “I’m tired. Can’t we just take a break?”

“Not until you manage to get a hit on me.”

“Why are you so adamant about this Malfoy? Besides, I know how to duel.”

“You know how to disarm and occasionally stun,” Draco corrected. “But this is a war. You won’t be going up against classmates and have a teacher to bail you out. Death Eaters are ruthless and won’t hesitate to rip the limbs from your body. So, if your wish is to survive then quit pouting, grow some balls and run it again.”

“You’re a dick, you know that?”

“I’m well aware but thanks for the reminder. Now go again.”

Letting out an irritated huff, Harry raised his wand. Hermione intently watched as he cast spell after spell, each failing to make contact with his opponent. Draco’s movements were fluid as he blocked each hex. He moved across the field with precision but remained casual enough to make it impossible for even Hermione to decipher what he was going to do next.

There was something addicting to the way Draco lazily moved his wand through the air. His arrogance bled into his fighting style and it greatly benefited him. Harry was the opposite, he was unsure of himself and let his feelings take over. As his frustration grew, he became sloppier and more predictable.

Hermione rolled her eyes and let out a soft chuckle as the boys began bickering when Draco managed to, once again, disarm Harry and knock him to the ground. They both swore up and down that they detested one another and while that may have held true in the past, the same couldn’t be said now.

Over the past month, she watched as they slowly began to open up to one another. Their meetings that once consisted of Harry primarily speaking to her had turned into all three of them bouncing ideas off of one another. And the insults they once threw in an attempt to wound the ego of the other had shifted into friendly banter. That’s not to say Harry and Draco were best friends by any means but they were cordial.

While Harry continued to accuse Draco of not playing fair and while Draco continued to reply to such accusations with snide remarks, Hermione turned her attention to the news

clipping hidden between the pages of her book.

During her short trip to Diagon Alley, Hermione came across an issue of the Daily Prophet on her way over to Gringotts. She was never one to care for the fatuous gossip that Rita Skeeter chose to publish but curiosity got the best of her. It had been ages since she had seen anything from the life she had once known and after her talk with Draco, she yearned for more information on the current state of everything.

The Grim: The Latest Deadly Weapon In Voldemort's Regime

The mention of Voldemort's name in the title was what caused her to rip out the article and shove it into her pocket before apparating back to the campsite. Hermione waited until Harry was asleep to read it. She wanted to figure out what this new weapon was before adding more fuel to the agitated-induced fire that burned within him.

Sneaking out of the tent and using the dim light emanating from the fire, Hermione unfolded the clipping and began reading. She was only halfway through when she felt her stomach drop. Her mind was racing as she scanned the first three paragraphs over and over and over again, hoping and praying that she was wrong, but she wasn't.

The deadly weapon that Skeeter was referring to was Draco.

Hermione had a hunch that it might have been when it stated that the Death Eater, though masked, was young and most likely fell between the ages of seventeen and twenty. But it wasn't until Skeeter mentioned "The Grim's" use of legilimency that it struck her. Only a few hours earlier that day Hermione was sitting against the charred wall of what used to be Ollivanders and watched as Draco performed the exact act that was mentioned. She knew then that for the first time in their friendship, she couldn't share her findings with Harry.

She was protecting Harry. She knew that the wound caused by Ron's departure was still fresh and he had only just begun to lower his walls when it came to Draco. She knew that if she told him that there was a new individual that people deemed worse than Voldemort, he'd demand to know who. And she knew that when she informed him that it was Draco, there would be no recovery from it. He would never trust Draco and would refuse his help.

At the same time, she was also protecting Draco. She didn't know what would happen to whatever deal he had with Remus if Harry refused his assistance. Would Remus then refuse his help as well? Would his partnership with the Order come to an end? Would he be forced to retreat back to the Death Eaters full-time? And then what would happen to his future plans post-war, should he come up with any?

No. She wasn't going to be the reason that even more of Draco's life was stripped away from him. She couldn't. She refused. He had already done so much and he deserved to reap the benefits.

Ever since then, Hermione often found herself worrying about Draco. She'd lay awake at night wondering if he was okay – if he was safe. The image of his torn-up body haunted her. He didn't deserve that. He didn't deserve the scars from his father and while she understood Harry's reasoning, he didn't deserve the one that stretched across his abdomen either.

Draco was rude, and condescending and seemingly got off on pushing people's buttons but he was far more complex than the arse he presented himself to be. More than once he had helped Hermione, even though she hadn't asked him to. He seemed to always know what to say or do to help calm her and not once did he ever make her feel ashamed or embarrassed afterwards. He was, to her surprise, kind and thoughtful... in his own special way.

"What do you say, Granger?" Draco asked, the sudden mention of her name pulling her from her thoughts.

"To what?"

"You and me."

"Y-you and me?" she choked out as she felt a burning heat crawl up her neck.

"Yes, I could use a duelling partner that *actually* knows what they're doing," Draco replied as he flashed a taunting smirk at Harry.

A duel, of course, that's what he meant, Hermione thought to herself.

"Unless you're scared," he added.

"You don't scare me, Malfoy."

"Actions speak louder than words, Granger."

Snapping her book shut, Hermione made her way over to where Harry was, removed her wand and asked, "What are the rules?"

Draco shook his head. "No rules but if you're going to sever a limb, I'd prefer for it to be my left arm."

"Why your left arm?"

"No particular reason," he lied. "Potter, care to count us down?"

"With pleasure," Harry stated as he stepped forward. "I hope she kicks your arse Malfoy."

"That makes two of us."

"On the count of three. One... two... three!"

The second Harry got out of the way, Hermione cast a stupefy but just like before with Harry, Draco effortlessly blocked it. Wanting to not only prove herself but also chip away at his ego, she sent another stupefy, then a *levicorpus* and then an *everte statum*.

"I'm getting bored here," Draco said as he let out an exaggerated yawn and continued to counter each of her hexes.

Beams of light flew through the air as Hermione muttered every spell that came to mind. With each snap of her wrist, she took a step forward. Draco matched each advance as his lips pulled into a cheeky grin.

Now with only a foot of space between them, Hermione threw one last hex. It was of no surprise to her when it failed to hit her cocky opponent but she never anticipated his next move. In one swift step, Draco positioned himself behind Hermione. His arm laid across her chest as he pulled her back into him and lightly pressed his wand into the side of her neck.

“Stay alert, Granger,” he whispered, his mouth brushing against her ear. The warmth of his breath caused a chill to trickle down her spine and goosebumps to cover her arms.

Breaking away from his hold, Hermione turned around and waited for him to look away before raising her wand and muttering, “Incarcerous.” Immediately, thick pieces of rope wrapped tightly around his body, binding his arms and legs together. As Draco toppled onto the ground, Hermione rushed forward, straddled his torso, pressed her forearm into his chest and positioned the tip of her wand under his chin.

“Stay alert, Malfoy,” she mocked, a smug look on her face.

“I didn’t realise you were into bondage,” he replied with a smirk. “Always so full of surprises.”

“I like to keep you on your toes. Keep things interesting, you know?”

“Ah yes, I would hate to see the day where you become predictable, Granger.”

Still on top of him with their faces only a few inches apart, Hermione found herself completely intoxicated by the close proximity. She could feel his heart rate slowly increasing to match hers and watched as the silver irises that always managed to fluster her faded into the darkness as his pupils dilated.

Aside from the occasional shoulder brush when passing by one another, the time Draco angrily grabbed her by the wrist after her less-than-wise choice to leave the campsite and the few times that she had healed him, any sort of physical touch had ceased to exist, until now. With her legs pressed against the sides of his torso and her chest against his, Hermione was finally able to answer a question that had been eating away at her for the last few weeks.

She was attracted to him.

Hermione knew that there had been... moments between them but she had always refused to give them a second thought. But now, it’s all she could think about. Every time she’d look in his direction just to find that he was already staring at her and all of the times she’d zone out while looking at his lips. The way his voice, specifically when saying her last name, caused her stomach to flip and turn like a young schoolgirl. Every glance, every moment of back-and-forth banter and shared silence spent under the night sky consumed her mind.

How did this happen, she asked herself. How did she go from threatening to shoot a hex through his skull that night at the burrow to now getting clammy hands and feeling her

cheeks turn pink when near him? It didn't make sense, it *couldn't* make sense and yet, it made perfect sense.

Everything about him was a mystery at first. He perfectly shielded his true self from the world, only allowing people to know what he wanted them to. But as he gradually began to open up and reveal himself to Hermione, she couldn't help but be intrigued.

Draco Malfoy was like fire – capable of destruction but also of providing warmth and light on the coldest of nights. And even though you knew it would burn you, you couldn't help but wonder what would happen if you reached into the flames.

“What's your next move here, Granger?” Draco questioned as his gaze shifted between her eyes and lips.

“I'm still weighing out my options,” she replied. “If I killed you right now then that would be one less Death Eater roaming the streets.”

“Surely you'd receive an award for such an honourable service.”

“Oh, I certainly would. It would be big, made entirely of gold and would hang above my fireplace.”

“Like a true war hero,” he smirked.

“And what a title that would be,” she replied with a playful grin. “Could you imagine the number of jobs I'd be offered?”

“They'd have to allocate an entire parliament of owls just to deliver them to you.”

“They would, wouldn't they?” Hermione smiled proudly. “But here's the thing,” she whispered as she leaned in closer. “I wouldn't be able to constantly remind you of the time I beat you in a duel if you were dead.”

“Well we can't have that, now can we?”

“No, we can not.”

“Surely that brilliant mind of yours would figure out a way to torment me with such a fact even if I were dead.”

“Most likely. Hate to break it to you Malfoy, but even death won't be able to keep you from me.”

“You two make me sick,” Harry interjected as he hunched over and pretended to throw up.

The truth was, Harry didn't mind. He wasn't a fan of third wheeling but if Hermione was happy, then so was he. It was odd though, seeing his best friend bat her eyes at the boy she used to have nothing nice to say about back at school. It was even more strange watching them fall for one another without even realising it. Harry constantly felt like he was intruding

on them when he was around. The lingering stares, the playful insults and apparently they've now upgraded to full-on dry humping in front of him.

Still, it was nice to have something that reminded him that even though they were in the midst of a war, they were still just teenagers. Teenagers who made mistakes, got angry with one another, said things that they didn't mean and fell in love - even if it was with a Death Eater.

Draco wasn't particularly someone that Harry would've picked for Hermione if he had a say in the matter. But he could see the way both of their energies shifted when with each other. Hermione had always been rather high strung and her mind was constantly going a million miles a minute but when Draco was around, she seemed to relax and settle into the leisurely lifestyle they were currently having to live.

When it came to Draco, he seemed to have a permanent look of boredom, except when around Hermione. Harry didn't notice at first but once he did, it was impossible to miss how Draco's eyes seemed to light up when talking to her and how his usually pursed lips would fade into a soft smile. It was unsettling for Harry to see Draco smile, he never thought the bloke was capable of such an expression. Aside from the urge to want to hurl when seeing them flirt and feeling his own heart ache as he wished he could have Ginny with him, Harry had almost forgotten a key factor.

Ron.

Despite Hermione making it clear several times that they were strictly friends, Ron had held onto the fantasy that they would one day be together. Harry knew that it was delusional and that once Hermione had her mind made up, there would be no changing it. But he also knew that Ron was the same. There was nothing Harry could do or say to convince him otherwise. Harry feared the day that Ron rejoined the group, he knew that it was bound to happen eventually but for now, he hoped that it would be later rather than sooner.

Harry wasn't in the mood to clean up Ron's insides off of the floor after trying to fight Draco for "stealing" his girl.

What he *was* in the mood for was a variety in their meals, at least for one day. Harry appreciated that Draco brought them any food to begin with but could only consume bread, potatoes and crackers so many times before the mere thought of them was enough to make him want to vomit.

He had discussed requesting a special meal a few days ago with Hermione. With Christmas approaching, Harry figured it would be the perfect time to ask for such. He thought perhaps even Draco Malfoy would tend to be more charitable around the holidays. He wasn't an idiot though, Harry knew that if he actually wanted a chance at getting Draco to say yes, Hermione had to be the one to ask.

"Hey Hermione, have you had that talk with Malfoy yet?" Harry asked as Hermione cut the ropes off of Draco.

"Talk? What talk?" Draco questioned.

“Harry...” Hermione said with a warning tone.

“The one about Christmas,” Harry replied, ignoring the death glare being shot his way.

“Christmas?” Draco’s head cocked as he looked at Hermione. “What talk did you need to have with me about Christmas?”

“It’s nothing important,” she said as she shook her head. Meeting Draco’s stare, Hermione realised that he wasn’t going to move on from the topic until she answered his question. Letting out a sigh, she said, “We were just wondering if it would be possible for you to bring some sort of Christmas meal. I understand that you have a lot going on and that you’ve already done so much for us. As I said, it’s not that important so I understand if you say n-”

“Okay,” Draco answered casually.

“Okay?”

“Yes Granger, okay,” he repeated. “I’ll have Bippy put something together. I have something to do in the morning but I can come by around six on Christmas. Does that work?”

“Y-yes, that’d be lovely. Thank you, Malfoy,” she smiled.

Draco felt a pressure in his chest like someone had grabbed onto his heart and squeezed it. “Er-you’re welcome,” he replied as he wiped the sweat from his palms on the back of his pants.

Present Day

As Draco made his way outside and approached Hermione, who was still sitting underneath the family oak tree, Draco felt his heart rate increase and his hands begin to sweat. Even after all of this time, he still found himself just as nervous when around her. She was so beautiful. For a moment, he considered turning around and leaving her alone but before he could, she caught sight of him.

“Hi,” she smiled.

“Hi,” he smiled back.

“Want to join me?” Hermione asked as she motioned to the space beside her.

Of course, he wanted to join her. Even while he destroyed his father’s study he couldn’t take his mind off of her. Even if she still refused his touch, being near her was enough. Crouching down, Draco joined her in the grass and followed her line of sight over to the peacocks.

“Did you know that-”

“I wanted to talk to you about-”

They said at the same time, causing them both to chuckle.

“You first,” Draco prompted.

“Did you know that the white peacock symbolises nirvana in Buddhism?”

“I didn’t.” That was a lie, he knew that. His father had given him a whole lecture on the history of white peacocks when he first bought them. Any fact that Hermione could say, Draco more than likely already knew. But the only thing he would gain from telling her that would be feeling like a proper prat. So instead, he sat back and listened as she shared her knowledge with him.

“... and they turn white as they mature,” Hermione finished as she looked over at Draco. “Sorry, I kind of went on a tangent there.”

“Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Apologise,” he explained. “There’s nothing to be apologising for.”

“Okay,” she nodded. “Sorry.”

“Granger...” Draco sighed.

“Sorry I didn’t mean to— sorry— shit—sor—okay I’m just going to stop talking now,” she giggled. “What about you? What were you going to say?”

“Right,” he exhaled. “I just wanted to talk to you about earlier. About why I had to walk away for a moment.”

“Oh, okay.” Hermione uncomfortably shifted in place and anxiously brushed her hands against her pants.

“It’s nothing bad,” he assured her. “I just wanted to be honest with you.”

“Okay, I’m listening.”

“I’ve been having a hard time, with a lot of things but specifically regarding us,” Draco began. “The distance between us has been tough and not just the physical distance but the emotional one too. You used to talk to me and other than today, we’ve barely spoken. I know that it’s not my fault but most days it feels like it is, like there’s something that I’m doing wrong. I’m by no means trying to make you feel guilty for such. I just wanted to tell you how I feel.”

“How long have you been holding this in?”

“A while. I thought that by keeping it all bottled in I was helping, that I was saving you from more pain but I realised that wasn’t true. If anything, I feel like pretending to be okay and

having it all together only made you feel even more isolated from your feelings. Of course, I could be wrong and you could tell me to go fuck myself by all means.”

“I would never tell you to go fuck yourself, Draco,” she said, her lips pulling up into a smile.

“Oh thank Merlin, I really didn’t feel like figuring out how to do that,” he joked which caused her to laugh.

He loved the sound of her laugh. He would do anything to hear it more often.

“Thank you for being honest with me,” Hermione said. “I know you told me not to but I am sorry if I’ve ever made you feel like any of this was your fault. We both know that it’s not.”

There was more that she wanted to say but was holding back, Draco could tell.

“What else is on your mind, Granger?”

“I’m just afraid of being like this forever,” she admitted. “I know that I should be grateful to be here with you in the first place but I’m scared that one day you’ll wake up and grow tired of the fact that I’ll never fully be the same girl you had fallen in love with. I know I suggested that you move on but the truth is, I think I’ll selfishly never want you to.”

“Can I take you somewhere?” he asked. “I promise it won’t be an empty field.”

Hermione nodded before standing and following Draco inside. As they walked down different corridors, Hermione realised that she had never seen this area of the manor before. She primarily stayed within the left wing where Draco’s room was.

“I had wanted to take you here a long time ago but it took some time to gather everything,” Draco said as they approached the black wooden french doors.

“What is it?”

“Why don’t you see for yourself,” he smirked as he turned the handle and held the door open for her.

Stepping in, Hermione’s eyes grew twice their normal size as she took in the hundreds of books that surrounded her. Each area was sorted by genre and within each shelf, the books were organised alphabetically by the author’s last name – just how she liked it.

“From Jane Austen to Bathilda Bagshot, it’s all in here,” Draco stated. “A majority of them are first editions but there were a few that I couldn’t find, I’ll keep looking though.”

It was an overwhelming feeling, the emotions that Hermione was experiencing. There weren’t enough words within the English language to properly explain how much she loved it and him. She wanted to cry but she swallowed them back, deciding that she had cried enough for one day.

“There’s one in particular that I wanted to show you,” Draco told her as he walked over to the left wall and retrieved a small green book.

“You still have it?”

“Of course I do, it’s the most valuable book in this entire room,” he replied. “I want you to listen to me very carefully, Granger. There will never be a time in which I grow tired of you. No matter how long it takes or even if you never do find your way back to who you believe is the girl that I had fallen in love with, I’m not going anywhere. Though, I’d like to argue that the girl I had fallen for hasn’t gone anywhere. You’re still her, Hermione.”

As she stared down at the book within his grasp, she felt a switch flip. She had two options at this moment; she could either continue to wallow in self-pity and rob herself of any sort of happiness or she could be grateful for the second chance, for the time she could spend with Draco – even if it wasn’t how she pictured their future together.

She knew that if her dad were with her, he would sit her down and pull out the very book that Draco was clutching onto and he’d tell her that the hard days don’t have to last forever if she didn’t want them to.

Hermione was tired of the suffering, the anger and the frustration. So, she released it all. She accepted all of the decisions that led up to this moment and reminded herself of why she made them in the first place. They were for him, they were for Draco. They were for the boy that helped ease her panic attacks, who delivered a home-cooked meal on Christmas and the boy who, without even being asked, brought her a piece of home to help cheer her up.

Flashback - 'Fallen'

December 25, 1997

Roasted turkey, potatoes, various steamed vegetables and Christmas puddings were easily secured by Draco. Bippy practically sang from happiness when she received the request and happily packaged it all into a small woven basket for him. But the one thing that turned out to be difficult to obtain was the address of Hermione’s childhood home.

Last week when Draco had informed Harry and Hermione of Luna’s recent capture, he saw the weight of the war begin to crush Hermione. Hearing that a classmate of hers, someone she even considered a friend, was now being used as bait to lure them out was what finally pushed her off the edge.

After an hour or so, and against Harry’s warnings, Draco left the tent to find her. Hermione was sitting down by the lake, staring out at the still water. He didn’t say anything, just took the seat beside her and waited for her to speak first. When she did, she didn’t talk about Luna or Voldemort or anything regarding the war. Instead, she told him about a book that her parents used to read to her as a kid.

“Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens, it was my absolute favourite,” she told him. “I remember hanging on to every word as my dad read about the fairies dancing to the music of the

panpipes and how they taught Peter to fly. All I wanted as a child was the ability to do so. It's ironic, really, the fact that I can fly now but absolutely detest it."

Draco remained silent, knowing that Hermione didn't want a conversation, she just wanted someone to listen.

"My parents would always read it to me when I had a nightmare or a hard day," she continued. "Even as I got older I refused to part with it. It remained in the same spot on my nightstand right beside the photo of my parents and I. It's times like these when I wish I had brought it with me so that I could have a piece of home, a piece of them."

Draco knew then that he needed to get it for her. After a few threats and an *imperio* or two, he finally got his hands on the address. Now standing in front of the brick house, Draco cautiously stepped up onto the front porch and knocked on the white door. He didn't know what he was going to say if her parents were home and answered the door, but he figured he'd cross that bridge when he came to it.

To his relief, no one answered. He knocked two more times for good measure before taking out his wand, unlocking the door and letting himself in. It looked exactly like he imagined it would. Warming, inviting and like a real family lived there. Draco could feel the love that filled the home as he looked over the photos that lined the fireplace mantel.

Making his way upstairs, he peeked into each room until he located what he presumed to be Hermione's. The books covering the walls are what validated his theory. Just like she had told him that night by the water, sitting on her bedside table was a green worn-down book with the words *Peter Pan in Kensington Gardens* in gold lettering on the cover.

Grabbing the book, Draco took one last look around her room before apparating back to the manor.

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"Surely you can take a day off, it's Christmas Draco," Narcissa stated as she trailed behind him while he moved through the kitchen.

"I already told you, mother, I can't," he replied as he grabbed a bottle of firewhiskey and tucked it into the basket of food.

"This important business of yours requires alcohol?" she questioned.

"I'm assuming Potter will give some sort of speech at one point tonight, so yes, it does."

"You're going to see them? That's who all of this is for?"

"I thought that was obvious. Did you think I was putting all of this together for the homeless?" he mocked.

“Oh darling,” she sighed. “It’s happened, hasn’t it? You’ve fallen for her, the Granger girl.”

“Have you gone mad?” Draco questioned as he spun on his heels to face Narcissa. “I haven’t fallen for anyone, *especially* not Granger,” he said as if it were the most ridiculous thing he’s ever heard. “I mean could you imagine? Me. Falling for *her*. That’s the most insane thing you’ve ever said, mother. She’s single-handedly the most stubborn, self-righteous, maddening witch I’ve ever met and despite her brilliance, she makes the dumbest decisions.”

“You’re right Draco, how could I be so foolish? You don’t like her.”

“Thank you for-”

“You’re in love with her.”

“What?! What in Merlin’s name has caused you to believe that? Did you not hear a word I just said?”

“No, I heard you loud and clear,” she replied. “And I know how to recognise when a man is in love. Please tell me that you have a gift for her in that basket of yours.”

“A gift?”

“Yes, a gift. A man can’t show up on Christmas day without a gift of some sort for the woman that he’s courting.”

“I’m not courting her,” Draco said defensively as he watched his mother search the contents of the basket.

“What’s this?” Narcissa asked as she held up the item he had retrieved from Hermione’s childhood home.

“A book.”

“Yes, I can see that it’s a book. But is it for her?”

“Yes?”

“Okay, so you do have a gift, good.” Placing the book back into the basket, Narcissa looked up at Draco. “I’m happy that you’ve finally found someone, Draco. I’m sure she’s a lovely girl, I hope you’ll allow me to meet her someday.”

“I’m not courting her, mother,” he reiterated.

“That’s what your father said about me in the beginning too,” she smiled as she gently placed her hand on his cheek.



“I’d like to take this time to give a speech,” Harry announced as he raised his glass.

Draco bit the inside of his cheek to suppress his laughter.

“Something funny, Malfoy?” he asked.

“No, no,” Draco replied as he shook his head. “Carry on with your speech, Potter.”

“Happily. I’d like to start this speech by thanking those who aren’t with us tonight. Remus, Tonks, Dobby, Ron, even that evil little shit Kreacher. I hope they’re all enjoying a meal that’s at least half as delicious as ours,” Harry stated as he swayed in place. “Now onto those who are in attendance. To Hermione, without whom I would’ve most likely misplaced my own head by now.”

Hermione let out a soft giggle as she raised her glass and took a sip.

“And to Malfoy!” Harry cheered. “You’re a real piece of work but if it weren’t for you we would’ve starved by now.”

“And we would’ve never gotten the information about the Deathly Hallows,” Hermione added.

“And we would’ve never gotten the information about the Deathly Hallows,” Harry repeated, slurring every other word. “So cheers to you, dickhead!”

Draco raised his glass in the air and nodded his head slightly, “Cheers, fuckwit.”

As the night continued and Harry grew more and more intoxicated, Draco couldn’t stop thinking about what his mother had said to him. What did she mean by knowing how to recognise when a man is in love? He wasn’t in love. He wasn’t even sure he was capable of loving. And if he was, he certainly wasn’t in love with Hermione Granger.

There were times he couldn’t deny that he had maybe stared for too long or that the witch had crossed his mind when he was meant to be focusing on something else. But feelings? Actual feelings? Draco never had feelings for anyone before. He had dated Astoria Greengrass for a few months during fifth year but that was only because his parents had arranged the whole thing. There were no feelings involved, not on his end at least.

Relationships and love as a whole never made any sense to him. His parents were supposedly in love but they weren’t exactly a prime example of a healthy relationship. If anything, they showed him how idiotic one might become when “in love” and he wanted no part in it.

No. Draco was certain that he was by no means in love with Hermione Granger.

She was pretty though, he could admit that. And not the, ‘spent three hours to look pretty’ but naturally pretty. And she smelled nice, which surprised him considering she hadn’t had access to a proper shower in months. He liked talking to her too. Whether it be about ancient runes or something as simple as the weather. Draco never found himself bored when with her.

Hermione could read off the encyclopaedia and he'd intently hang on her every word. He also liked who he was with her. She was one of the few people he felt safe enough to be his true self around.

But just because he could admit that a girl was attractive and Hermione was capable of holding a conversation didn't automatically mean that he had any sort of feelings for her. Right?

"Another, Malfoy?" Hermione asked as she held up the half-empty bottle of firewhiskey.

He also liked the sound of her saying his name.

"That'd be great," he replied as he held his glass out for her to fill.

As she sat down beside him and watched as Harry danced around the room with his pudding, Draco noted one last thing he liked. He liked her smile and even more so, he liked when he was the reason behind it.

Reaching over into the basket, Draco removed the small green book and said, "By the way, I got something for you."

Hermione's eyes went wide as she accepted the book, the bottle slipping from her other hand. Reaching out, Draco caught the bottle before it crashed onto the floor. When he looked back up, Hermione was gone.

Rushing out of the tent, Draco scanned the area until he spotted her small shadowed figure in the distance by the trees.

"Are you going to tell me what that was all about?" Draco asked as he approached her.

Spinning around, Hermione's eyebrows furrowed as she narrowed her eyes.

"Where did you get this?!" she questioned.

"From your house," he replied, confused by her hostility.

"Why? And how? How did you even know where to go?"

"It's called records, Granger. There are thousands of them at the ministry and in case you forgot, the Death Eaters are currently in control of it. So it wasn't that hard to find your address. Now are you going to tell me what has you so vexed or do I need to try and guess?"

"You didn't answer the why," she stated as she angrily crossed her arms.

Draco threw his head back and let out an exasperated sigh as he rolled his eyes before answering. "After the whole Lovegood situation, you told me that you wished you had it. To be honest, I thought you'd be less angry and far more grateful," he admitted.

"So you went to the trouble of searching the records at the ministry to figure out where my parent's house is and then proceeded to go there to get the book because I mentioned it one

single time?”

“Yeah,” Draco nodded. “That about sums it up.”

Hermione stared at him, her gaze shifting from his left eye to his right and then down to his lips. The only sound filling the thick air between them was that of her heavy breaths and the loud thuds of her heartbeat assaulting her ears. She wondered if Draco could hear it too. It felt like she was about to explode, like her heart was going to burst out of her chest at any moment. Everything in her was telling her that what she was about to do next was a mistake. That she should just walk away and ignore the urges but she couldn't.

Suddenly, Draco found himself backed into a tree with Hermione's body pressed against his. His mind went blank and his body filled with a euphoric feeling as his lips moved in sync with hers. His right hand snaked around to the base of her neck while his left pressed onto the lower part of her back, pulling her closer to him. He wanted more. He *needed* more. As his mouth travelled down the side of her neck, Hermione let out a small moan.

“Malfoy,” she panted as she tugged at the bottom of his shirt.

It was at that moment that Draco realised just how fucked he was. No matter how hard he tried, he could no longer deny the fact that he was completely and utterly devoted to the snippy curly-haired witch.

As her fingers grazed his lower abdomen and fumbled with the clasp of his belt, Draco was forced back to reality. Hermione wasn't some random girl that he wanted to use for a night of fun. She had managed to break down the steel wall that he had built around his heart and he'd be damned if he was going to have their first time be in some forest. He needed to, as his mother said, court her.

“Stop,” he said as he pulled away. “Not like this.”

Hermione's face filled with horror as she retreated into herself. “I-I'm sorry-I shouldn't have-I didn't mean to-we can pretend like it never-”

“Breathe, Granger,” he instructed as he caressed her cheek. “It's fine, you're fine.”

“But you said...”

Draco shook his head as he pushed a curl out of her face and tucked it behind her ear. “I know what I said,” he replied. “And I'm sorry if I made you think that I didn't want this, that I didn't want you. Because Merlin, if you knew the things that I wanted to do to you right now.”

“Then why did you tell me to stop? Why did you pull away?” she asked.

“Because you deserve better than some quick shag in the woods and I'd prefer it if you weren't drunk.”

“I'm not drunk,” she argued.

“You’re not sober,” he countered. “And neither am I.”

“So all of a sudden you have a moral compass when it comes to getting between a girl’s legs?”

“When that girl is you, yes. Besides, maybe you’ll change your mind in the morning and decide that you don’t even like me.”

“Is that what’s going to happen to you?”

It took everything in Draco to not laugh at the ridiculous question. “Granger, you have no idea how hard it is for me to restrain myself right now. I think it’s safe to say that come sunrise, I will still be completely bewitched by you.”

“No takebacks,” she smirked.

“That’s very childish but yes,” he smiled. “No takebacks.”



# Chapter 7

## *Flashback - 'Priorities'*

*January 3, 1998*

“Did you hear what I said?” Lucius asked.

“Yeah,” Draco lied.

Ever since Christmas, Draco’s usual sharpness had been hazy. Nearly every thought was consumed by the memory of Hermione’s lips against his - the way she tasted, how her body felt pressed against his and the angelic sound she made when moaning his name. His lack of focus wouldn’t have been an issue if Voldemort hadn’t suddenly decided to assign him a chaperone.

Ever since his misstep at Ollivanders, Voldemort had started watching Draco closely. He was an extremely paranoid individual, which made sense to Draco considering the majority of Wizarding England wanted him dead. If anyone gave him even the slightest reason to believe that they weren’t completely loyal to him, he would take one of two routes.

The first one was very fitting of his impulsive nature - he’d kill them.

The second was reserved for those he still deemed useful - he’d monitor their every move and test them every chance he could.

Draco would’ve preferred option one if he were being honest. There were many things that he didn’t enjoy and having someone breathing down his neck was one of them. Nevertheless, he knew that fighting against it would do him no good. So despite his extreme distaste for his newest babysitter, Draco suffered through the overbearing company of his best friend’s father, Tiberius Nott.

“Dinner will be served at six. Perhaps you might benefit from a shower, Draco,” Lucius stated as he disapprovingly scanned over the dry blood staining Draco’s arms.

“I have a previous engagement to attend tonight. You’ll have to give dear old Tiberius my regards, father.”

“I will be doing no such thing,” Lucius argued. “You will not be embarrassing me by running off to prance around town or wherever it is that you go. You will cancel your plans and attend tonight's dinner. His son, and your friend, Theodore, will be joining us as well.”

Draco didn’t care whether or not he embarrassed his father. He knew that no matter what he did, he would never meet the high expectations that were placed upon him. However, it had been some time since he had seen any of his friends. Attending the dinner would grant him a night of normalcy. It would be a way for him to return to a small piece of the life that used to be his own.

He was meant to go to the campsite, he was meant to see Hermione for the first time since Christmas, but he had no say in the matter. If he went against Lucius' orders then he would risk having his father discover his partnership with the Order. Draco knew what needed to be done. Besides, he would only be a day late, surely Hermione would understand.



"You owe me twenty galleons," a familiar voice said, causing Draco to turn around and face the door to his bedroom. "Pansy, Blaise and I had a bet about how long you'd last as a Death Eater. I gave you a month at most."

"You've always tended to underestimate me, Theo," Draco replied as he finished buttoning his shirt. "Must be why I have a whole jar of your money."

"Speaking of which, mind if I borrow twenty galleons from it?"

Draco rolled his eyes as the corner of his mouth tugged up into a smile.

"So, is this the part where we hug?" Theo asked.

"If you feel the need," he shrugged.

"I do."

"Then by all means."

Crossing the room, Theo lunged into Draco's arms and tightly gripped him, as if he were about to disappear into thin air at any moment.

"I missed you mate," Theo confessed.

"I missed you too," Draco replied as he relaxed into the embrace.

"Boys!" Narcissa's voice echoed from the bottom of the stairs. "Dinner will be served in five minutes!"

"Best to not keep her waiting," Draco said as he pulled away. "We'll find some time to talk before you leave."

"We better because I have a million questions for you. Specifically, in regards to that odd thing your mouth is doing."

"You mean smiling?"

"Yes, it's really weird to see you doing that."



Making their way downstairs, Theo greeted Lucius and Narcissa while Draco gave Tiberius a curt nod before taking his seat at the table.

“It’s lovely to see the both of you,” Narcissa smiled at the Notts.

“Likewise, Narcissa,” Tiberius replied before raising his glass, snapping his fingers and shouting, “Elf! My cup is still empty!”

“She has a name,” Draco glowered.

“What did you say to me?”

“Draco,” Lucius hissed as he gave him a warning glare.

Ignoring his father, Draco held Tiberius’ stare. “*I said* she has a name, it’s Bippy and it would do you well to refer to her as such. It would also be wise of you to remember that you are a guest in this house.”

“That’s enough Draco!” Lucius scolded.

“No, let the boy continue to feel powerful,” Tiberius smirked. “That’s what this is, isn’t it Draco? It makes you feel powerful to speak to me in such a disrespectful manner?”

“Not at all,” he replied as he shook his head. “Honestly, the only thing that I feel is pity for you.”

“Pity you say? And why’s that?”

“Well, your mother and father must’ve really neglected you as a child for you to possess such poor manners,” Draco explained. “I believe I have a few openings in my schedule this week if you’d like me to give you a crash course on proper pure-blood etiquette, Tiberius.”

Draco never did care for Theo’s father. Growing up he heard countless stories about his less-than-kind parenting style - he almost made Lucius look like a saint. Theo and Draco handled their similar strained relationships with their fathers in vastly different ways. Theo struggled to separate his emotions from it all and took everything to the heart whereas Draco naturally began compartmentalising at a young age. And while at the end of the day, they both would do as they were told, Draco would always make his displeasure known.

Usually, he would lose respect for someone who refused to stand up for themselves but this was Theo - he was Draco’s brother, he was the family that he got to choose. Draco would happily be the one to degrade Tiberius whenever he got the chance, even if it did mean he’d later suffer the consequences at the hands of his father.

For the remainder of dinner, Tiberius chose to ignore Draco’s scowl and focused his attention solely on Lucius. The two men discussed politics and the newest developments regarding the

war. It was, in Draco's opinion, the dumbest fucking conversation he had ever heard.

Who cared that Voldemort was searching for some old man and why even bother complaining about the current state of the ministry? Yaxley and Umbridge were practically running that place so of course, it would be falling to shit.

Thankfully, once dinner concluded both Tiberius and Lucius stepped away which allowed Theo and Draco to return to his room and catch up.

"Alright, tell me about the girl," Theo stated the moment they stepped foot into Draco's room.

"Why do you automatically assume there's a girl to talk about?"

"Because it's the only logical reason for the moronic smile that was on your face earlier. Unless, of course, you were simply overjoyed to see me, which I wouldn't blame you but I'm also not an imbecile."

"I'd argue with you on that one," Draco mocked.

"Piss off and stop avoiding the topic," Theo commanded as he took a seat in one of the chairs beside the window. "Is she hot?"

Claiming the seat opposite of him, Draco nodded and said, "The word hot doesn't even come close to doing her justice." As the image of Hermione appeared in his mind, the same smile that Theo had ragged on him earlier for reappeared. "She's extraordinary," he continued. "One of, if not *the*, most brilliant individuals I have ever met. Her choice of friends is questionable but that can be overlooked. Everything about her is perfect, Theo. I mean, Merlin, those eyes of hers - I could stare at them for days, months, years even. And when she says my name it feels like... it feels like time stops and the only thing that matters at that moment is her and I."

"Shit," Theo muttered as he fell back into the chair. "You're so fucked."

"Trust me, I know," Draco chuckled. "It may sound ridiculous but I think I've finally found my purpose - my reason for doing all of this."

"Are you going to tell me who this magnificent witch is that managed to melt the ice-cold heart of my best friend or are you just going to continue to edge me?"

"You're going to take the piss out of me."

"And? I always take the piss out of you. So get on with it and tell me."

"It's Granger."

"Ha ha, very funny," Theo said sarcastically. "Be serious mate, who is it?"

"I am serious Theo, it's Granger."

“You’re shitting my dick.”

“There are so many things wrong with that sentence,” Draco ridiculed. “But no, I’m not.”

“You swear it?”

“I swear it.”

Hundreds of questions began to spew from Theo, and to his surprise, Draco willingly answered each. If the happiness radiating from Draco wasn’t unsettling enough, his openness when speaking about Hermione made Theo question if the person sitting across from him was even his friend. He looked like Draco and his voice sounded like Draco, but nothing else added up.

He had known Draco since they were five and never once in all the years of their friendship did he speak of someone in such high regard, *especially* not a girl. And the fact that the girl he was talking about was Hermione Granger - the best friend of Harry Potter, a mudblood - was both fascinating and confusing as hell. Leaning forward, Theo pressed the backside of his hand against Draco’s forehead.

“What are you doing?” Draco asked.

“I’m checking for a fever, it’s a common side effect of amortentia,” Theo explained as he continued to press his hand against various parts of Draco’s face.

“Stop that,” Draco commanded as he swatted at Theo’s hand. “I haven’t been drugged.”

“Are you positive?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then that only means one thing,” Theo said as he sat back in his seat. “You’ve gone completely soft at the hands of Hermione Granger.”

“I can promise that I am anything *but* soft when in the hands of Granger,” Draco smirked.

Theo’s face twisted in disgust as the image of the pair doing indecent things cursed his mind. “You’re disgusting, you know that?” Settling back into his chair, Theo stared down at his hands and began bouncing his leg. “Did it hurt?” he asked, refusing to make eye contact with Draco.

“Did what hurt?”

“You know...”

“No, Theo, I don’t,” Draco said.

Theo let out a sigh, his shoulders dropping as he sheepishly met Draco’s stare. “Getting the mark,” he elaborated. “Did it hurt?”

“Why would you need to...” Draco trailed off. Suddenly, his eyebrows furrowed and his hands balled into fists as he sat up and clenched his jaw. “When is it supposed to happen?”

“Nothing is set yet,” Theo assured him. “But the second word got out about your oversight last month, the old man was rather quick to jump on the opportunity to outshine your dad. You know how competitive those two are.”

Draco nodded.

“Yeah, well, should you do something to lose the Dark Lord’s trust, my father is going to offer me as your replacement. It’s alright though, maybe I could get a cool nickname like you,” he joked in an attempt to lighten the mood.

Draco had noticed Voldemort’s trust in him already starting to falter but he hadn’t thought about how it would affect everyone else – he hadn’t thought about how it might affect Theo.

Tiberius had fully intended to force the dark mark upon Theo at the same time Draco got his but Voldemort was strongly against having more than one child within his regime. Not because he cared about the lives of the youth but because he viewed them as a higher risk. To Voldemort, teenagers were more likely to turn on him. Ironical that the one teen he did allow ended up being a spy for the Order but he could never know that. Draco would rather relinquish his pardon post-war that he’d gain from working for the Order than be the reason that his best friend becomes a Death Eater.

Draco had been distracted the last few weeks, he could admit that. He was too focused on what he wanted, on his happiness, on Granger. But he knew what needed to be done. He needed to prioritise his duties as a Death Eater – he needed to prioritise the safety of Theo.

“I won’t let it happen,” Draco stated confidently.

“That’s nice to hear mate but you only have so much control over everything.”

“No Theo, I mean it. No matter what happens, your father will not be forcing you into this shit. I’ll make sure of it.”

### ***January 25, 1998***

Just like he said he would, Draco prioritised his role as a Death Eater. He focused all of his attention on the tasks assigned to him and refused to give any reason to believe that his loyalties belonged to anyone but Voldemort. As a result, he hadn’t gone to the campsite.

It had been over a month since he last saw Hermione and while she may have a big heart and is far more forgiving than others, Draco knew that he was in for an earful. So as he approached the tent, he prepared himself to be met by an angry witch who would more than likely throw a hex or two his way.

“I’m going, Harry!” Hermione protested. “It’s been a month of no communication, something is wrong!”

“Will you please calm do—” Harry began but he was cut off by a wand to the throat.

“Do *not* tell me to calm down,” Hermione seethed as she pushed the tip of her wand further into his neck.

Carefully turning his head, Harry’s eyes landed on Draco who stood in the entrance of the tent.

“Erm, Hermione,” Harry gulped.

“I don’t want to hear it anymore Harry,” she said. “Nothing you say will stop me. I’m going to go find him.”

“I already did,” he said as he nervously pointed over at Draco.

Dropping her wand, Hermione turned around and glared at Draco. Knowing that a fight was about to occur, Harry cautiously swiped the book from the table and shuffled his way out of the tent.

The tension in the air was suffocating. Draco could feel the anger radiating off of Hermione. He could see the worry in the lines between her brows and he could hear the hurt in her voice when she finally broke the silence.

“Where have you been?”

“I’ve been busy,” he replied.

“You’ve been busy?” she scoffed in disbelief. “You’ve been busy?! Do you know how worried I’ve been?”

“Worrying is a waste of energy and will only cause premature wrinkles, Granger.”

“Don’t do that,” she criticised.

“Do what?”

“Revert to your old ways of being a dick and pretending that you’re some cruel human.”

“Have you ever considered the possibility that I wasn’t pretending?” he challenged as he took a step forward. “Have you ever considered that maybe *I am* a cruel human?”

“I know that you’re not,” she replied as she also stepped toward him.

“Then I guess you’re not as brilliant as people like to believe.”

“If I’m recalling correctly, you were one of the people who believed such.”

“Then I guess I’m just as foolish as they are,” he said, his eyes darkening as he stole another step toward her. “Tell me, Granger, what is it that you believe I do when I’m not delivering a Christmas meal or skimming through old textbooks with you and Potter? Do you think I sit at the manor knitting? Or perhaps you believe I simply just sit around and twiddle my fucking thumbs.”

“Of course I don’t think—”

“I kill people,” Draco interjected. “I kill *innocent* people. *That* is what I do when I’m not here and I do it with a clear conscience. Because at the end of the day, the blood isn’t on my hands. It’s on those of my father, who sold my life to the Dark Lord. It’s on the Dark Lord’s, who ordered me to take said lives. It’s on Remus’ and even my mother’s for asking me to play both sides. And believe it or not, it’s on yours too.”

“Please enlighten me on how I’ve played a part in you becoming a murderer,” Hermione sarcastically said as she crossed her arms.

“You,” Draco said as he closed the remaining distance between them. “You existed.”

“Fuck you!” she spat out. “You don’t get to disappear for weeks and then come waltzing back in and pin any of the lives you took on me because I simply existed!”

“Oh but I do,” he argued. “Because if it weren’t for your curly-haired, smart-mouthed self I would’ve resigned from this double agent bull shit a long time ago!”

“My apologies for giving you a reason to continue to fight for a future for yourself!” Hermione shouted. “Forgive me for making you give a damn for once in your life!”

“It was easier when I didn’t!” he shouted back.

“Because you’re a coward! You’re terrified of letting yourself have any sort of hope!”

“Hope?! Why would I ever be daft enough to possess something so juvenile as hope? I was shown at a young age that having hope for anything or anyone only leads to disappointment.”

“Just because your father—”

“You don’t know *anything* about my father,” he said sternly.

“How could I?! It’s not like you’ve been around for me to ask about him, Malfoy!”

The rustling sound of the tent opening was shortly followed by Harry excitedly saying, “Guys! I think I figured something out about the snitch!”

“Get out Harry!” “Fuck off Potter!” Hermione and Draco said simultaneously.

“Bloody hell, fine. Wankers,” he muttered as he walked away.

Turning his attention back to Hermione, Draco said, “You want to know about my father? Fine. The scar just under my right shoulder blade was given to me for failing to make friends



with Potter first year. My father was less than pleased to hear that scarhead would rather hang out with a Weasley and a mudblood,” the slur caused bile to rise in the back of his throat but he swallowed it back and continued. “The one on my lower abdomen was punishment for losing my first quidditch game – it didn’t matter that I nearly got beheaded by a bludger. And the one along my left side, the one that you tried to touch that day when healing me, that was for failing to kill our old headmaster.”

“Malfoy I didn’t–”

“But you know what’s worse than my father’s shit temperament and abusive parenting style? His ego. He can’t stand the idea of anyone being better than him. So when the time came and the Dark Lord needed a student to mend some stupid cabinet, he of course was the first to volunteer his child. And now here I am, a teenage soldier who spends his days killing and I’ll continue to do so that my friend doesn’t have to experience a second of what I have.”

“W-what do you mean?”

“It doesn’t matter, Granger,” Draco dismissed as he shook his head.

“Yes it does,” she said as she gently pressed the palm of her hand against his cheek.

“You don’t know what it’s like out there right now,” he said as he caressed her hand with his.

“Then explain it to me,” she requested. “Please.”

*Theo was right*, Draco thought. He had gone soft, because all it took was a simple touch from Hermione for his hardened stare to melt away and a single request for him to open up and tell her everything. He went on to tell her all about the situation with Theo and how if he were to fail then Theo would be the one to take his place.

“I had no idea,” she admitted. “So that’s why you haven’t come around?”

Draco nodded. “The Dark Lord was looking for any reason not to trust me, I needed to play it safe.”

Hermione never thought she’d live to see the day when she felt like an arse for yelling at Draco Malfoy but that’s precisely what was happening.

The first week when Draco didn’t show, guilt consumed her. She thought that maybe his absence was her fault. Despite what he had said to her, she thought that he had changed his mind and didn’t want to see her again after she practically threw herself at him. The second week it was fear that took hold of her. She spent all day every day sitting by the radio that Ron left behind, praying that she didn’t hear Draco’s name. The third and fourth week were filled with waves of anger. Hermione cursed his name more times than she could recall and would rant to Harry any chance she could. She was so angry with him for not writing. The last basket that they received from a random imperio’d civilian, Hermione destroyed everything within.

All of the emotions she went through and thoughts that crossed her mind and never once did she consider that Draco's hands might've been tied. She hated to admit it but she did often find herself forgetting that his main job wasn't visiting her. She had become so used to seeing him all of the time that, in her mind, when he left he would just go home, shower and sleep until it was time for him to return.

But he was here now and she had yelled at him. She knew that her feelings were valid, that she had the right to be upset with him, but that didn't make her feel any better. Now that she was looking at him without being blinded by rage, Hermione could see the exhaustion taking its toll on him. Draco resembled his state from his earlier days when working with the Order. His eyes were bloodshot which was most likely due to a lack of sleep and his hair was messily laid across his forehead, which was always an indicator that he had been working long hours and was stressed. While she was kicking dirt on his name, Draco was overworking himself to help protect his friend.

"It's very admirable of you to go to such lengths for Theo," she confessed as she swept the hair out of his face. "I'm sure he's very grateful. It's rare to find a friend that would kill for you, literally," she teased, which earned a small smile from Draco.

"I hope you know, what I'd do for him doesn't even come close to the things that I'd do for you," he stated.

"Are you saying you'd kill for me, Malfoy?" she playfully smirked.

"Kill for you?" Draco let out a soft chuckle. "That's child's play, Granger," he continued as he tucked her hair behind her ear and cupped her cheek with his hand. "I would burn this entire fucking world down for you."

Hermione's skin burned under his touch and filled her with an overwhelming want for more. Just like the first time, Hermione wrapped her arms around his neck and pressed her body against his as she crashed her lips onto his.

Draco grabbed onto her hips and guided her across the room until her back was met by one of the beams supporting the tent. As Hermione hungrily ran her fingers through his hair, Draco latched his mouth onto her neck – sucking down and lightly biting at her skin between every other kiss.

"Malfoy I..." she panted.

"If you want me to stop, I'm going to need you to say so right now," Draco said before trailing his mouth along her collarbone. "Because once I have you, Granger, I'm afraid I won't be able to stop." His eyes flicked up to hers and watched as her breathing hitched as he pressed the palm of his hand between her legs.

Leaning in, Draco whispered, "Tell me to stop," his lips just barely brushed against hers. He could feel the warmth of her breath against his skin and felt as her chest expanded and pressed into his as he moved his free hand around to the base of her neck. "Tell me to stop, Granger," he whispered again before kissing the space just below her ear and adding more pressure between her legs.

“Malfoy, *please*.”

Draco let out a deep and satisfied groan. “I love the sound of you begging,” he said as he lifted his head to look at her.

“Please,” she said once more.

“Please, what?” he asked as he unzipped her jeans. “Use your words, Granger. Tell me what you want.”

“I want...” she began, her eyes shutting and her head falling back as Draco slid his hand into her pants and slowly began rubbing circles on her clit. “I want you,” she continued, her voice broken and airy.

“You want me?” Draco tugged at the seam of her underwear.

“Yes,” she nodded.

“In what way?”

“A-all,” she stuttered as he pushed a finger inside of her. “I want all of you, in every way. *Please*, Draco.”

The second his given name fell from Hermione’s lips, Draco met them with his own. His left hand tugged down on her jeans while his right continued to thrust in and out of her while he swallowed each of her moans.

As he shucked off his jacket, Hermione’s fingers fumbled with the buttons of his shirt. Making it halfway down, Hermione found herself unwilling to wait any longer and ripped the remainder of his shirt open.

A whimper escaped the back of Hermione’s throat as Draco removed his lips from hers. Ignoring her pleas, Draco reached around to the centre of her back and unclasped her bra. Lifting her shirt, he lowered his head and lapped his tongue around her nipple. Hermione’s nails dragged along his back as she bit down on her bottom lip. Her body filled with such intense pleasure it was almost painful but she couldn’t get enough.

“More,” she begged, her tone dripping in desperation.

Lifting her, Draco carried her over to the centre of the room and placed her down on the table. Gripping the underside of her thighs, he dragged her to the edge of the table until her body met his.

“Do you have any idea what you do to me, Granger?” he asked as he knelt and draped her legs over his shoulders. “The things I would do for you,” he kissed her inner thigh. “The things I would do *to* you.” Hermione let out a sharp gasp as he gently sucked down on her skin.

“I’ll be so good to you,” he proclaimed in between kisses as he made his way up her leg. “Let me be good to you, Hermione.”

*“Draco,”* she moaned.

“Not a day will pass where you aren’t reminded of my loyalty to you. I will worship every inch of you from sunrise to sunset, until the day I take my last breath. Every last ounce of my energy will be spent on you,” he muttered as he kissed her hip and pushed her underwear to the side. “On your happiness,” he continued. “On your satisfaction.”

Hermione’s hand tightly gripped the side of the table as Draco slipped a finger inside. Her eyes rolled back and her hips snapped up into his hand as he entered a second finger and began thrusting in and out. Her mind was a fuzzy mess and she found herself incapable of forming a single coherent thought as she felt him curl his fingers, her walls clenching tightly around him.

“Just tell me that you’re mine, Hermione,” his voice commanding yet gentle as he leaned down, his face only inches from hers. “Say those two words and I’ll give you the world.”

“I’m... yours... Draco,” she panted between moans. “I’m all yours.”

“That’s my good girl,” he praised before caressing her lips with his.

It felt like her whole world was spinning as he continued to thrust his fingers in and out of her. Draco deepened the kiss with each moan that escaped her lips. Her hands explored his back, her nails digging into his skin as he quickened the pace of his fingers – matching the rapid rhythm of her heart rate.

No one had ever touched Hermione like this before. There was so much hunger, passion and possession in Draco’s touch. With every kiss, every thrust, he was claiming her and she happily submitted herself to him as she swelled with pleasure.

She wanted more.

She wanted to feel him.

*All* of him.

Hermione’s hands travelled down to his waistband and tugged at the buckle of his belt.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

Hermione was sure of a lot of things. She was sure that flying on a broom was a horrid form of transportation. She was sure that books should be organised alphabetically by the author’s last name. She was sure that, unless they found the sword of Gryffindor, they would never be able to destroy the locket, and she was sure that she wanted this with Draco. She wanted to give herself to him completely.

“Yes,” she nodded. “I’m sure.”

Hermione watched in awe as Draco removed his belt with one hand and tossed it onto the ground. Her eyes travelled up the length of his torso and over the muscular curves of his arms as he unzipped his pants. She stared at his lips as he pulled her closer into him and she

scanned his face as he sank himself into her. The initial pressure and discomfort quickly subsided when he asked, "Are you okay?" She had never felt more okay in her life. Draco carefully pressed deeper into her once he got her nod of approval.

He handled her with such care, such caution, like any sudden movement would break her. Hermione loved the concern he had for her comfort, but for a month all she had was the lingering taste of his lips and an endless stream of thoughts about what would've happened if he hadn't been a gentleman and stopped them on Christmas. Hermione was tired of wondering and waiting. She wanted him to throw away his pure-blood etiquette, at least for the night, and mark her as his.

"Do I have a fragile sticker on my forehead?" she asked.

"What? No?"

"Then why are you handling me like such?"

As if a flip switched in his head, Draco released all of the self-control he was struggling to hold onto and snapped his hips into hers. The muscles within his abdomen contracted as his pace quickened and his thrusts deepened.

Hermione couldn't deny that she had fantasised more than once about what sex would be like with Draco. She figured he would be rough, ruthless even, and unlike other men, he would be focused on *her* pleasure. Every theory she had was confirmed.

Draco worked her clit as he continued to fuck her with no mercy, each thrust harder than the last. Hermione was drowning in pleasure and each time she thought she'd get a breath of air, a moment to recover, his hips would meet hers.

As her walls tightened around him, Draco lowered himself onto her and tangled his hand in her curls. Grabbing a handful of her hair, he pulled her head back, granting him full access to her neck. His mouth trailed along Hermione's skin as her back arched. She was reaching the edge of her pleasure, ready to unravel beneath him. Draco gathered her wrists with his right hand, pinned them above her head and latched his mouth onto hers.

"Don't stop," she pleaded against his parted lips.

"Fuck," he grunted as he continued grinding as deep as possible.

Hermione buried her face in the crook of his neck and the muscles in her stomach tightened as she fell over the edge. With one last snap of his hips, Draco's body tensed as he came undone with her.

Hermione closed her eyes as she focused on steadying her breathing. She could faintly hear the sound of Draco fumbling with his belt over the ringing in her ears. She savoured the ecstasy-like feeling as she waited for him to hand her her clothes. But instead of being met by the slightly scratchy wool fabric of her sweater, she felt the heat of his mouth against her.

Her eyes snapped open and she propped herself up on her elbows to look down at Draco, whose top half remained bare as he positioned himself once again between her legs.

“Draco, what’re you doing?”

“What does it look like? Gods you’re so fucking beautiful.”

“But didn’t you just...” she trailed off, finding herself too embarrassed to finish the sentence.

“I don’t give a fuck.”

Her already sensitive nerve endings were shot into overdrive as he gently sucked down. Hermione’s lips parted as another moan prepared itself to escape from the back of her throat, but once her eyes travelled over to the front of the tent and landed on those belonging to the last person she expected to see, she instead choked out, “Ron.”

“Wrong name,” Draco said as he lifted his head to look up at her. “And a rather big insult, Granger.”

“No,” she shook her head and frantically searched for something to cover herself with. “I mean, *Ron*,” Hermione explained as she jutted her chin towards the front of the tent.

Glancing over his shoulder, Draco met Ron’s death glare. Shooting up to his feet to block Hermione’s bare body, Draco snapped his wrist and conjured a blanket from across the room. Without breaking Ron’s stare, Draco handed Hermione the blanket and remained standing in front of her.

“I always pegged you for the watching type,” Draco smirked.

“I’m going to kill you Malfoy,” Ron seethed.

“Now Weasley, didn’t your parents ever teach you to never make promises you can’t keep?”

“Guys! We destroyed the locke—what the hell is going on in here?” Harry asked as he looked between Draco and Ron.

“Why are you both soaking wet?” Hermione asked as she stepped out from behind Draco, her hands tightly gripping the blanket wrapped around her.

“Oh my god!” Harry’s hands flew up to cover his eyes as he spun around. “Hermione, are you... are you naked?!”

“Oh please Harry, everything is covered. You can turn around.”

Slowly, Harry turned back to face the group and peeked between his fingers to make sure that Hermione was in fact covered before dropping his hands from his face.

“Wait, were you two just..” Harry’s nose scrunched in disgust. “Are you kidding me?! And on our table?! You know people eat there, right? And that’s just brilliant guys. While I was out **drowning**, you two were in here shagging.”

Ron's eyes snapped over to Harry. "Why do you not sound surprised about that?" he asked. "Did you know that they were getting together?!"

"I mean, it was kind of hard to miss it," Harry unapologetically admitted.

Ron turned his glare back to Draco, his face matching the colour of his hair as he tightly gripped the sword in his hand.

"Oh! You found the sword," Hermione said, in an attempt to change the topic.

"You slimy git," Ron spat as he lunged for Draco.

Stepping to the side, Draco avoided Ron's attack altogether and grasped onto his right wrist. Twisting his arm back, he removed the sword from Ron's hold and threw it onto the ground.

The second he found his footing, Ron lunged at Draco again. Draco casually side-stepped to avoid him but this time he pressed his hand on the centre of Ron's back and slammed him face-first onto the table.

"Listen Weasley, I'm going to let you up but you have to promise that you'll calm down," Draco said.

"Get your hands off of me Malfoy!" Ron shouted as he wiggled his body to try and free himself.

"That doesn't sound like you're calming down."

"Fine," Ron said as he let out a sigh of defeat. "I'll calm down."

"Do you promise?"

"Yeah, yeah. I promise."

Just like he said he would, Draco removed his hold on Ron. Unlike what Ron said, he once again lunged at him only this time Draco didn't step aside and instead extended his arm out to stop him. Harry and Hermione both let out a small chuckle at the sound of Ron's forehead slamming into Draco's palm.

"Wow, who breaks a promise?" Draco ridiculed. "I really trusted you there, Weasley."

Taking a step back, Ron adjusted his sweater and tried to shake off the embarrassment. "You're a dick, Malfoy."

"So I've been told," Draco replied. "Now, should we discuss the fact that you idiots seem to have magically found the sword of Gryffindor?"

"Yes, why don't we focus on that?" Hermione suggested.

"Well it was a crazy story," Harry began but he was interrupted when Ron attempted to lunge at Draco one last time.

Slapping him across the face with the back of his hand, Draco shook his head in confusion. "The fuck are you doing Weasley? You're wasting a lot of energy."

"Fuck you," Ron bit out.

"Sorry carrot-head, but Granger beat you to it," Draco replied with a smug grin.

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### *Present Day*

Draco watched as Hermione threw her head back and clutched onto her stomach as the melodic sound of her laughter filled the space around them. He hadn't seen her in this sort of state in what felt like years, even though it had only been months. It was the simplest of things that caused it too.

As Draco followed behind Hermione as she explored the books that he spent weeks picking out for her, he pulled one on the history of quidditch. All he needed to do was hold the book up and quirk his brow to trigger a memory within Hermione.

She was barely able to choke out a single word in between laughs as she reminisced on that night during the Horcrux hunt. She remembered the horrified look on Harry's face as he stood drenched in water in the front of their tent as he clutched onto his copy of the quidditch book in one hand and the destroyed locket in the other.

Draco leaned against the bookshelf and memorised every last detail of this moment. He noted the small lines at the corner of her eyes, how her hand pushed the curls from her face as she struggled to pull in a steady breath and the choir-like sound of her laughter as it danced through the air.

He loved her. He loved her more than he could even begin to put into words. He loved her for all of her quirks and her highly intense opinions on certain pieces of literature. He loved her on her hard days but Gods did he love her on her good ones. If Draco had access to a pensieve, he would spend all of his days rewatching this moment over and over again. Because he felt it, he felt the change in her.

Hermione had finally dropped the veil between them and was opening up to him again. Draco knew that she would still have bad days but a thousand bad ones would be well worth it to him if it meant every once in a while he got one like today - if it meant that he got to experience falling in love with her all over again.

Taking a seat on opposite ends of the green sofa with a small collection of books sprawled across the area between them, Draco draped his arm along the back of the sofa - his hand resting less than an inch away from Hermione's.



These were the moments that Draco had imagined with her - these small, seemingly insignificant moments. He wanted a lifetime of these pockets of happiness with her.

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### *Flashback - 'Choices'*

*February 5, 1998*

Ron continued to sulk in hopes that eventually, one of his friends would break and apologise for betraying him. Harry had explained to him that just because he was cordial with Draco, it didn't mean that he didn't still value his friendship with Ron. And countless times Hermione tried to explain her relationship with Draco, even though she knew she didn't owe him any of the sort, but each time he stormed out.

By the third night after his return, Harry and Hermione grew tired of his tantrums and outbursts. There were more pressing things to tend to than patching together Ron's ego. The locket was destroyed and Harry had discovered a small stone hidden inside his golden snitch. It only took a few hours for them to figure out that it was the resurrection stone - an item from the Deathly Hallows that Draco had informed them about back in December.

After months of feeling stagnant, things were starting to move again. Harry's frustration had been replaced with a newfound motivation which resulted in him becoming even more insufferable, at least that's how Draco felt. Hermione was relieved to have finally made some progress and even though Ron was being... difficult, she was happy to have him back and know that he was safe.

Safety.

Safety was something Hermione was worrying about far more than she would've preferred. She was used to having to look out for and take care of Ron and Harry but it wasn't them she was worried about, it was Draco.

A few days ago he had told them that Voldemort would be setting out to continue his search for Grindelwald in hopes that if he locates him, he'll also locate the elder wand. It was useful information and helped the Order determine their next steps but the last detail in Draco's latest update was what concerned Hermione.

Draco was to join Voldemort.

She knew that Draco was physically strong, that he was fully capable of handling his own and that his occlumency was far superior to most so he would be able to protect his partnership with the Order from any legilimens - even Voldemort. But her mind couldn't help but explore the what-ifs.

What if he got hurt? Hermione knew that Voldemort wasn't the type to follow the 'no soldier left behind' rule.

What if they ran into Order members? Only a handful of people are aware of his deal with Remus and since he'd be with Voldemort, it's not like Draco would be able to fill them in on it. He'd have to comply with the role he would currently be in, which was a Death Eater.

And the one that haunted her the most, what if he died? What if he died and he was all alone, or even worse? What if he died and the only company he had was Voldemort? The thought alone was enough to make her body shudder and for her to become nauseous.

So as Draco slipped on his coat and walked with her outside to get some privacy, she took the time to memorise every single detail she could about him. She memorised every crease in his forehead and every curve in the muscles of his arms. Knowing that while he's gone, she can remember how he smelled, looked, sounded and felt brought her a sort of peace. They would be apart but only physically. Whenever she'd find herself missing him, she could just close her eyes and picture that he was there.

"Are you going to be alright?" Draco asked.

"Yeah," she said, her voice sounding just as unsure as she felt.

"It'll only be a few weeks, maybe even less if we manage to locate Grindelwald quicker."

Hermione nodded. There were so many things that she wanted to say but she knew that if she even attempted to, she'd crumble. She didn't want him to worry about her while he was gone, he needed to stay focused on his task. So, she concentrated all of her energy on keeping back the tears that were fighting to escape her eyes and she forced her lips into a smile.

As he wrapped his arm around her waist, pulled her into him and pressed his lips against hers, Hermione memorised one last thing - the way the rhythm of their heartbeats synced.

Everything she was too choked up to verbalise was communicated through the way that she kissed him. The initial kiss was her telling Draco that she'll miss him and when her lips parted, granting him access to deepen the kiss, she was telling him to be safe, to stay alive.

Hermione closed her eyes as he placed a final kiss on her forehead before walking away, his hand slipping from hers. As she watched him head for the perimeter of the ward, she called out for him one last time.

"Draco."

The sound of his name caused Draco to freeze in place and for his breath to catch in the back of his throat. No matter how many times she said it, he was sure he would never grow tired of hearing his given name roll off the tip of her tongue. He wanted to ask her to say it over and over and over again until her voice gave out. He wanted to say to hell with his orders and stay with her but he knew that he couldn't.

So instead, he turned around to look at her and said, "Yes?"

"Come back to me, okay?" she requested.

"I will."

“Do you promise?”

“I promise.”

Hermione nodded. “Okay, until then?” she smiled.

“Until then,” he smiled back.

### ***February 28, 1998***

Three weeks. It had been three weeks since Draco had departed to join Voldemort in the search for Grindelwald and Hermione was going insane. She assumed that it would be painful the first few days but that she'd eventually adjust but she was wrong. Starting the day after he left, Hermione threw herself into more research and planning for the remaining Horcruxes. The distraction worked until she'd turn to her right to share her recent findings with Draco, only to be met by empty space, reminding her once again that he wasn't there.

She could feel herself losing it more and more with each day that passed. She was drowning in misery. She hated not knowing where he was, what he was doing and if he was okay. Every time she laid down at night and closed her eyes, all she'd see was his lifeless body on the ground and Voldemort standing above him. Most nights she sat by Ron's radio and listened as the reporter listed off hundreds of names. It was a confusing feeling. While she felt for those who had lost loved ones, she was also relieved each time a name that wasn't his was announced.

Harry attempted to cheer her up by switching the channel and forcing her to dance with him one night. He was a dreadful dancer. She didn't think it was possible, but he had somehow managed to get even worse since the Yule Ball. She loved Harry and appreciated his efforts but for the entire three minutes that they foolishly danced around the tent, all she wanted was to change the channel back just in case.

Even Ron tried to help her, though he failed at masking his pleasure about Draco being gone. But still, he tried and she was grateful for that.

Hermione attempted to hide her sadness. She didn't want to ruin Harry's good mood and while she still struggled to see where Ron thought he had the right to be so upset about who *she* was dating, she was still sensitive to his feelings.

It was exhausting though. The back-to-back nights of tossing and turning chipped away at her patience, resulting in her becoming far more irritable than usual. Not even the locket had made her feel this way. She hated it. She wanted to crawl out of her skin and free herself from the constant feeling of doom that plagued her.

She wanted Draco to come back already.

Finding herself at her usual spot by the radio, Hermione pulled her knees up to her chest and intently listened to the reporter's latest update on the names of those who had fallen.

"Do you want to join us for dinner?" Ron asked.

"No thanks, I'm not hungry," Hermione replied.

"Come on Hermione," Ron groaned. "You've been locked in here all day. Give the radio a break. I mean, what do you expect to hear? You really think they'd announce the falling of some Death Eater?"

The way in which he spoke reeked of animosity. Anger curled in her gut and burned throughout her body as she shot up to her feet.

"What does Draco being a Death Eater have to do with anything, Ronald?" she bit out.

"Everything, Hermione!" he argued. "And Draco? You're on a first-name basis now? You let the guy between your legs once and all of a sudden you're a Death Eater apologist?"

"You better watch what you say to me," she warned through gritted teeth.

"Or what? What are you going to do Hermione? Run away with the prat?"

Hermione remained silent.

"You're kidding, right?" he scoffed.

"What's with the yelling in here?" Harry asked as he stepped inside.

"Hermione would leave us for Malfoy!"

"What? You're leaving?" Harry directed at Hermione.

"No," she sighed as she pinched the bridge of her nose.

"Then why did Ron say-"

"But she would," Ron interjected. "If it came down to it, she would choose *him* over us."

Harry's face dropped and the hurt in his voice as he said, "Hermione?" broke her heart.

"I-" her voice caught as she shook her head in disbelief. She wanted to tell Ron that he was wrong, that, of course, she wouldn't leave them, but she knew that would be a lie. "You don't understand Ron," she continued.

"Of course I don't understand!" he shouted as he threw his arms in the air. "I will *never* understand what in Merlin's name you could see in someone like him! He's a killer Hermione!"

"You think I don't know that?!" she snapped. "I'm fully aware of the things that he's done but I'm also aware that he's had no choice! If it came down to picking your life or someone

else's, you would do the exact same as him, you would choose yourself. Don't even try to deny it Ronald!"

"Hermione-"

"No! I'm so tired of this victim complex of yours! I'm sorry that I hurt you, I am, but no matter how much you guilt me and no matter how many times you continue to remind me of the blood on Draco's hands, it won't change my mind! *He* is who I'm with, *he* is who I want. Whether or not you like it, I couldn't care less."

"You've turned into a real bitch," Ron snarled.

"No, I just stopped tiptoeing around your feelings," she corrected. "We're not children anymore Ron, so stop acting like one."

Ron bit down on the inside of his cheek, for once making the smart decision to not speak. As he stormed out, Hermione let out a frustrated huff and fell back into the chair to her right and dropped her head into her hands. Bending down, Harry sat on the ground beside her and gave her a moment to calm down before speaking.

"So," he exhaled. "This thing with you and Malfoy, it's the real thing, huh?"

Lifting her head, she met Harry's stare. Unlike Ron, he wasn't asking just to push her buttons. He was genuinely curious and wanted to understand. She always admired that about him. Even if he didn't entirely agree with someone, he'd never shame them for their choices and he'd do his best to be as open as possible and try to see things from their perspective. Hermione always thought he'd make a good Minister or even professor. He had the ability to push aside his personal feelings, a trait that very few seemed to possess.

"Yes," Hermione replied. "He sees me, Harry. And that's not to say that you don't but it's different with him. He sees me for who I am, even the parts that I try so desperately to hide. I don't know how to explain it other than, with him, I feel safe and it just feels right, you know?"

Harry nodded understandingly. He knew exactly what she meant, it's how he felt when he was with Ginny.

"So Ron was right then," Harry said.

"Please don't make me choose, Harry," Hermione pleaded.

"I'm not and I never would, but just out of curiosity, if it came down to it and you had to choose... would you choose him?"

"Yes, I would choose him. I would choose him every single time."

## Chapter 8

### *Flashback - 'Before'*

*March 26, 1998*

“Tell me Grindelwald, tell me where it is. Tell me who possesses it,” Voldemort implored.

Draco had never heard him sound so desperate before. He had also never witnessed someone so openly laugh in Voldemort’s face but that’s precisely what Grindelwald had just done.

It took around two months but they finally managed to track down Grindelwald. Hidden within the Austrian Alps, the old man was imprisoned in the top-most cell inside Nurmengard. His cell was narrow and dark, with only a sliver of an opening acting as a window. Pushed up against the left wall laid a thin blanket and a poor excuse for a pillow – both drenched in what Draco hoped was water. It was disgusting and every second that he stood watch in the doorway, Draco felt a new disease seep into his skin.

As Grindelwald continued to mumble riddles to Voldemort about the location of the elder wand, Draco looked up at the stars dusted across the night sky. He thought about how much Hermione would’ve loved this view. Draco always wondered what life would’ve been like if he and Hermione hadn’t waited this long to come together. He would’ve taken her on dates in London. He would’ve asked her in the most nauseatingly cheesy way to be his date to the Yule Ball. He would’ve taken her up to the astronomy tower so she could spend all night telling him about the different constellations and he would’ve even considered joining her and her wretched friends for a butterbeer in Hogsmeade.

Maybe things would’ve been different for him now too, he considered. Maybe he never would’ve become a Death Eater in the first place. It didn’t matter though. No matter how much he wished he could, he couldn’t change the past. He was stuck being a Death Eater and doing all of Voldemort’s dirty work.

Voldemort had drained Draco of every last drop of magic day after day. Each town that they turned over in their search for Grindelwald, Voldemort had Draco execute every resident whose blood wasn’t pure. He had half a mind to take that as a command to kill Voldemort himself, considering he was a half-blood.

It was a rigorous schedule Draco had been following the past few weeks. Apparating from one place to another and then another and when Voldemort grew irritated, like he often did, and wanted to rest, Draco was to continue in his absence. The list of those whose lives were mercilessly ended by ‘The Grim’ had tripled within the first week.

The morality of it all wasn’t something that Draco had struggled with. He knew that what he was doing was necessary. Necessary to uphold his image as a loyal follower of Voldemort, necessary to continue aiding the Order in the war and necessary to provide Theo with the life that he deserved - one without any blood on his hands.

Draco was just relieved that they finally found the old bastard. Sure, it would cause a few more issues if Voldemort did manage to get his hands on the elder wand but at least Draco could return to Hermione. To be honest, he cared even less now about who won the war. The only thing that mattered to him was keeping her safe.

“But I gave you what you wanted,” Grindelwald argued, his voice weak and shaky.

“Yes, and now that I know that you’re no longer in possession of the wand, I see no use in keeping you alive,” Voldemort replied.

When Draco turned around, he was surprised to see that Voldemort already had his wand pointed directly at Grindelwald. He assumed that he would once again be given the task of disposing but apparently, he was wrong. As the beam of light slammed into the centre of Grindelwald’s chest and his limp body slumped back into the wall, Draco stared at Voldemort with a jaded expression.

“You’re dismissed,” Voldemort said. “Return to the manor and resume your regular duties.”

“Yes, my Lord,” Draco nodded before apparating.



Approaching the front door to the manor, Draco went over his mental checklist of things that needed to be done to ensure maximum efficiency. In his head, the quicker he got through everything, the sooner he could return to Hermione.

As he opened the door and stepped inside, he went over the first task on his list - take a shower. While he wasn’t ashamed of the blood staining his robes, he figured Hermione would prefer it if her boyfriend didn’t show up covered in blood after two months of being away.

Making his way through the foyer, he reviewed the second item - get Bippy to cut his hair. It wasn’t unpleasantly long but it had grown out enough to where it was tickling the nape of his neck which was extremely annoying.

Before he could go over the third thing on his list, he was stopped mid-stride by the very elf he was just thinking about.

“Master Draco!” Bippy exclaimed. “It’s so good to see you!”

“You too, Bippy,” Draco replied with a tired smile. “Can you inform my mother that I’ve returned? I’ll also be requiring your assistance before I head back out this evening.”

“Missus Malfoy already knows that Master Draco has returned. Missus Malfoy requests that Master Draco join them in the drawing room.”

“Them? Who all is here?” he asked.

Bippy lowered her head slightly and anxiously rubbed her hands together. "Missus Malfoy told Bippy not to say. Missus says that it's best if Master Draco sees for himself," she replied timidly.

"Alright," Draco sighed.

While he made his way to the drawing room, Draco continued going through his list. Number three, shave - he hated having facial hair, it was scratchy and made him look like a poor commoner. Number four, visit the home library - like mother had said on Christmas, he couldn't visit the girl he's courting without a gift. Number five, have Bippy prepare a meal basket - surely the unfortunate trio was famished. While he had arranged for their usual supplies to still be delivered, Draco was certain that Weasley scarfed down a majority of their food. Number six-

"Draco," Bellatrix sang, her thin and cracked lips stretching into a malicious grin. "We were so glad to hear that you had returned today."

"Bella," Draco nodded. "To what do I owe the displeasure?"

"Always so ungrateful this one," Bellatrix directed at Lucius. "One would've thought that being given the honour of working alongside the Dark Lord himself would help remedy that."

"Careful Bella," Draco warned. "Your jealousy is showing."

"I am not jealous!" she roared, her curls just as wild as the look in her eyes. "In fact, after today I might be replacing you as the Dark Lord's right hand."

"Is that so? Pray tell, my dear aunt, what will be taking place today that would grant you such? Don't tell me you're going to try and seduce him. Surely by now you've realised that he isn't interested," Draco taunted.

"Draco they've," Narcissa began as she stepped toward him but she was abruptly interrupted by Bellatrix.

"We've captured the boy," Bellatrix gloated. "He's being brought here now, and two of his little friends. You will be identifying him before we call upon the Dark Lord."

Draco didn't need her to specify which boy she was referring to, he knew that it was Harry. Amongst everything that Voldemort asked of his followers, capturing him has always remained a top priority. Even though Draco had grown to not completely loathe the scarhead, his well-being still fell far below that of Hermione, who Draco knew was one of the two friends that Bellatrix had mentioned. As for Weasley, Draco decided that he could use him as a distraction when trying to get Hermione out. If he could keep her safe *and* eliminate Weasley in the process, Draco would be satisfied.

While Bippy nervously informed Lucius and Bellatrix of Dolohov and Rowle's arrival, Narcissa crossed the room to where Draco was. Checking her surroundings to make sure that her sister and husband were out of earshot, she leaned in and whispered, "I fear that I must



remind you of the part you're meant to be playing right now, darling. Your aunt will be watching you closely. You mustn't give her any reason to believe that you have even the slightest bit of feelings for the girl."

Draco's jaw clenched. "Yes, I'm well aware, mother."

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### *Present Day*

Draco stared longingly at the space between their hands. Everything in him wanted to clear the inch that separated them but he also didn't want to push it. Hermione was starting to do better but he knew that it would still take time for everything to go back to normal - or at least for her to not jerk away whenever he'd reach for her. So for now, he kept his hand at a comfortable distance and instead looked down at her forearm. His eyes scanned over the faded scar that his aunt had gifted her that day at the manor.

#### *Mudblood.*

He hated himself for using that slur when speaking to and about her in the past. He was an ignorant boy who let his father's views affect his own. Hermione had told him that it didn't bother her, having the degrading word carved into her skin, at least not anymore. But he still wished he could've stopped it from happening. He wished he had done more that day, he wished he had protected her.

Hermione took note of his distressed expression and followed his line of sight over to her left arm. Most days she had forgotten that she had also been marked during the war. It was by no means something that she was happy to have, but it hurt Draco more than it did her. Even though he wasn't the one who carved it into her skin with a dagger, he still felt responsible.

"It's not your fault, Draco," she said.

Draco blinked a few times to snap out of his train of thought and looked up to meet her eyes. "What?" he asked.

"It's not your fault," she repeated. "There was nothing that you could've done."

Pain filled the creases of his forehead as he furrowed his brows. "I could've stopped her."

"We both know that it would've only caused more harm if you had."

"Yes but I-"

Hermione shook her head. "No Draco," she said softly. "You did everything that you could that day. Please, rid yourself of this burden."

He would do anything that she asked of him, he would, but this one he was struggling with. No matter how many times she told him that it was okay, that it wasn't his fault, he couldn't find it within him to agree. He remembered that day so vividly. He remembered the terrified

look on her face when Rowle dragged her into the drawing room by the back of her coat. He remembered being able to feel her fear as Bellatrix nearly killed Dolohov once she spotted the sword of Gryffindor in his hands.

And most of all, he remembered the desperate look in Hermione's eyes as she pleaded for him to get Harry, Ron and Luna when Bellatrix's and Lucius' backs were turned.

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***Flashback - 'After'***

"You can't be serious Granger," Draco whispered as he peered over his shoulder to make sure that Lucius and Bellatrix were still occupied with the sword.

"I've never been more serious," she whispered back. "Go and get Harry, Ron, Luna and whoever else is locked down there. I'll be fine."

Draco wanted to tell her no. That she was being unreasonable and that he'd rather let the whole lot die than leave her alone with his aunt and father. He had done his part for the Order, he refused to identify Potter. Now his focus was on Hermione and getting her out. If it were up to him, he'd leave Harry and Ron behind. He had a whole plan, let the two morons out of the cellar and let them distract Bella and Lucius while he snuck away with Hermione. In all honesty, it was a pretty foolproof plan.

"Don't even think about it," Hermione threatened.

"I wasn't thinking anything," Draco replied innocently.

"Yes, you were. I'm not leaving here without them."

"Why not?" he groaned. "Aren't you tired of babysitting? Besides, I'm sure if I came back in a few days they'd still be in one piece. The Dark Lord is off busy retrieving the elder wand, it's not like Potter would be executed by sunrise. As for Weasley, well, he might be dead by then but good riddance if you ask me."

"Draco..." she said sternly.

Even though she was saying it as a way to show her annoyance with him, hearing her say his name still made him weak in the knees. He really wished someone had warned him about the amount of power a single witch would have over him one day. He would've conditioned himself to not fold at the simple use of his given name. But he hadn't, so here he was. Against everything in him telling him not to, he left Hermione's side and made his way down to the cellar.

As he approached the gate at the bottom of the stairs, he spotted the back of Pettigrew's greasy head. Taking out his wand, Draco muttered, "Imperio," and observed as the silver hand made its way to Pettigrew's neck and slowly began strangling him. Once his body collapsed onto the ground, Harry and Ron spotted Draco standing in the doorway.

“I never did like that guy,” Draco said casually.

“Did you just kill him?” Ron asked.

“*Technically*,” Draco exaggerated. “He killed himself. Did I assist? Yes. But it was his own hand that did the job.”

Before Ron could reply, a cracking noise broke through the air and Bippy appeared at Draco’s side.

“Master Draco! Missus Malfoy said that you might need Bippy.”

“Yes Bippy, please go find Dobby and bring him here.” The second the command fell from his lips, Bippy was gone.

“Dobby? Why are you getting Dobby?” Harry questioned.

“How else are you going to get out? It’s not like I can just walk you out the front door,” Draco deadpanned.

Another crack echoed through the room, this time the elf that appeared at Draco’s side was Dobby.

“Master Draco!” he said cheerfully. “And Master Ron and Master Harry! Oh it’s so good to see you all,” he smiled.

“Likewise Dobby,” Harry smiled back.

“Yeah, always a pleasure,” Ron added.

Looking up at Draco, Dobby said, “Bippy told Dobby that Master Draco requested Dobby.”

“That’s correct,” Draco nodded. “I need you to get Potter, Weasley, Lovegood, Mr Ollivander and even the goblin out of here.”

“Where is Dobby meant to take them?” he asked.

Draco looked over at Ron and Harry. “I got the elf here, why don’t you two pitch in for once.”

“The cottage on the outskirts of Tinworth,” Ron stated. “Trust me,” he said to Harry. “It’s safe there.”

“Right, okay,” Harry nodded. “Dobby, take Luna, Mr Ollivander and Griphook first.”

Dobby shuffled over to the centre of the room and grabbed onto Mr Ollivander’s hand and Luna’s. Once Griphook grabbed onto Luna’s freehand, Dobby turned his attention back to Draco.

“Meet us upstairs when you’re done. Once I give you my signal, get the rest of them out,” Draco instructed.

“How will Dobby know when Master Draco gives his signal?”

“You’ll know,” he replied.

A sudden and high-pitched scream flew through the air as Dobby apparated out of the cellar. Draco’s head whipped around as he heard the agonising cry once more.

“Hermione.”

He felt his heart drop when he reached the main floor and took in the scene before him. Bellatrix was on top of Hermione and had her left arm pinned out to the side. Anger and fear swirled inside him and tears welled up in his eyes as he watched in horror as Bellatrix leaned over and began digging the tip of her dagger into Hermione’s skin - it felt like a burning hot knife was being twisted in his gut.

The sound of her pain was like a physical blow, and he felt his own heart breaking as her cries bounced off of the walls. He wanted to run to her, to hold her and make the pain go away.

But as he took a step forward, he locked eyes with Narcissa, who slowly shook her head - telling him not to do whatever it is that he was thinking of.

He felt his hands start to shake as anger began to rise inside of him. It was a slow burn that started in the pit of his stomach and spread throughout his entire body. His jaw tightened and he felt his heart pounding in his chest. His mind began to race as he thought of the million different ways he was going to kill his aunt.

It was at that moment that Draco knew he was done. He was done being a Death Eater and done being a spy for the Order. He finally had an answer for the question that Ginny had asked him months ago, whose side he was on. He was on Hermione’s. His loyalty was to Hermione. Who he would fight for was Hermione. Who he would kill for was Hermione. And who he would die for was Hermione.

Once Bellatrix got up, Draco moved forward again - his gaze locked onto Hermione’s small unmoving frame. Her eyes were vacant as she looked up at him. It felt like all of the air had been knocked from his lungs as he watched a tear roll down her cheek.

Bellatrix’s lips parted as she went to say something but before she could get a word out, Ron and Harry emerged and began throwing hexes her way. Draco wanted to rush to Hermione’s side, but he knew that he still needed to play his part as a Death Eater one last time.

Catching Harry’s attention, Draco nodded his head in Hermione’s direction. The look in his eyes was all Harry needed to know what was being asked of him. Running over to where she was, Harry helped Hermione up to her feet and slowly began moving her to the opposite side of the room.

Joining his mother's side, Draco stood opposite Ron, who was far too delighted to have a reason to throw a hex at him. Occasionally, Draco would half-heartedly throw one back, a piece of him hoping that one would land and knock Ron on his arse.

Spotting that Dobby had returned, Draco quickly glanced up at the chandelier hanging above them and whispered, "Diffindo," causing the chain connected to the ceiling to sever and the gaudy light to come crashing to the ground. As soon as the dust in the room settled, Draco felt a wave of relief wash over him as he stared at nothing but empty space.

They had gotten out.

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"Draco!" Hermione cried out as she lunged forward and wrapped her arms around him.

"Are you okay? Has anyone taken a look at your arm?" he asked frantically as he held her face in his hands. "Gods, I'm so sorry Hermione, I'm so fucking sorry."

"I'm okay," she assured him, but he could tell that she was lying.

"What happened?!" Draco snapped over at Harry and Ron. "Who caught you?"

Ron slumped back in his seat, falling timid under Draco's glare.

"It was Dolohov and Rowle, the Death Eaters that we encountered that night at the cafe," Harry stated. "We had just moved to a new campsite and-"

"Did you not cast a ward the moment you got there?!" Draco ridiculed. "Were you really that fucking stupid?"

"Of course we cast a ward!" Harry replied defensively. "But Ron and I-"

"I should've figured," he scoffed.

"You didn't let me finish," Harry groaned.

"Oh, my apologies Potter, how rude of me. Please, finish your little story."

"Thank you," Harry exhaled, not catching the sarcasm in Draco's voice. "Ron and I saw a rabbit when we first arrived and while Hermione was working on the ward, we thought that-"

"Mistake number one," Draco mumbled to himself.

"*We thought that,*" Harry continued. "If there was one rabbit then surely there were more and while they're not the ideal meal, it would be something. So, we headed a bit further into the

forest and began tracking one. The sound of us shooting at it must've drawn attention because before we knew it, Dolohov and Rowle had closed in on us."

The anger Draco had experienced when he saw Bellatrix torturing Hermione was nothing compared to what he felt now. He clenched his fists and he felt the heat flushing his face as the rage burned in his eyes. He was about to boil over.

"I have to go," he said through gritted teeth.

Hermione grabbed onto Draco's arm to stop him. "Wait, you're leaving?"

"Granger, I'm either going to kill Potter and Weasley or I'm going to kill Dolohov and Rowle, your choice. I'm fine with either. In fact, I prefer the former."

"Oh," Hermione's eyes widened. She'd seen him mad before but not like this. There was raw rage and she could see that it was taking everything in him to contain it. She knew that if she asked him to stay, he would, but she also knew that she'd end up writing a eulogy for both Harry and Ron. She had to let him go, even if she didn't want to.

"When will you be back?" she asked.

"Tonight or early tomorrow," Draco said.

"Okay," she nodded. "Until then?"

"Until then," he replied before kissing her forehead and apparating.



Draco leisurely paced back and forth as he spun his wand between his fingers. The single lamp in the middle of the manor cellar provided just enough light to see the frightened and bruised faces of Dolohov and Rowle, who sat back to back with their hands bound to their sides.

After leaving the cottage, Draco tracked both of them down in less than ten minutes. They were at a pub not far from the manor, drinking away their sorrows as they tried to recover from the beating that Bellatrix gave them. The moment he spotted them, Draco grabbed onto the back of their coats and apparated them back to the manor.

Silencing the cellar, Draco switched between using the cruciatus, and his own hands and feet to inflict pain on them. He continued to do so until the initial rage that had been consuming him had reduced to a level that allowed him to form a coherent thought. Dolohov and Rowle had almost preferred him drunk on anger. His cool and collected demeanour was far more unsettling.

“Here’s the thing,” Draco said calmly. “I’m going to kill one of you, obviously, but I’m also going to let one of you live. But who will it be? Well, that’s the fun part,” he smirked as he approached the pair. “That’s entirely up to you two.”

“Y-you want us to choose?” Dolohov coughed out.

“Precisely.”

“We would never-”

“Antonin!” Rowle blurted. “Kill Antonin!”

“Are you fucking kidding me Thorfinn?!”

“Fuck you Antonin, it’s every man for themselves.”

“You’re no man,” Dolohov spat back. “I hope you rot in hell.”

“I’m sure I will but I won’t be doing so today.”

“Final answer?” Draco questioned.

“Antonin,” Rowle nodded. “Kill Antonin.”

“Very well,” Draco shrugged as he raised his wand.

“Spineless cowa-” Dolohov’s sentence was cut short when Draco swiftly dragged his wand through the air, causing his neck to split open. His eyes rolled to the back of his head as he choked on his own blood. Rowle jumped at the sound of Dolohov’s body crashing onto the ground. As Draco stepped around, Rowle looked up at him with eager eyes.

“I swear I won’t say anything.”

“Oh, I know you won’t,” Draco said as he removed the knife from his back pocket and knelt down.

Rowle’s face filled with terror as he spotted the blade. “Wh-what are you doing?” he asked. “I thought we had a deal? We pick who dies and the other gets to live.”

Draco nodded. “Yes, and you will live. Though, I think you’ll find yourself wishing that you were the one who died.” Forcing Rowle’s mouth open, Draco grabbed onto his tongue and placed it against the edge of his knife. “You see, Rowle, while I did say that you’d get to live, I didn’t say you’d do so in one piece.”

Yanking his right hand upwards, blood instantly began pouring from Rowle’s mouth. Long and high-pitched screams filled the room as Draco tossed aside the severed tongue. While he kicked his feet and continued to spit out blood, Draco picked up Rowle’s right hand and wedged the tip of the blade under the nail of his pointer finger and pushed forward until the nail popped off. Rowle’s head fell to the side as he passed out from the immense amount of agony coursing through him.

“For Merlin’s sake,” Draco groaned as he raised his wand. “Rennervate.”

Rowle’s eyes shot open as he gasped for air, panic overtaking him as his eyes frantically searched the room. Slapping him and then tightly gripping his face, Draco’s eyes darkened as he said, “It’s going to be a long night, Rowle. Do try your best to stay awake, I wouldn’t want you to miss out on the fun.”

A threatening grin crept its way across Draco’s lips as he turned his attention back to Rowle’s hand and proceeded to slowly remove each nail from his finger and then doing the same to his left hand.

Blood painted the floor around them as Draco utilised his extensive knowledge of how to severely injure an individual, while still keeping them alive. Every ten minutes Draco needed to use the reviving spell to keep Rowle awake and alert. Draco wanted him to feel every ounce of pain that was being inflicted on him. Draco wanted Rowle to look him in the eyes as he broke every bone in his leg and he wanted to hear his pathetic pleas as he burned the skin off his chest.

He wanted Rowle to know how it felt when Draco saw Hermione laying on the floor of the drawing room. He wanted him to feel just as helpless as he had when hearing her cries and not being able to do anything.

Most of all, Draco wanted to send a message.

He wanted his father, his aunt, the other Death Eaters and Voldemort, to know what would happen if they ever hurt Hermione.

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After leaving the manor, and letting a disfigured Rowle go, Draco found himself sitting in the dark as he waited to take care of his final task of the night. Footsteps slowly grew louder as they approached the room and shortly, the door creaked open and the lights flicked on.

“Draco,” the man gasped as he attempted to collect himself.

“Tiberius,” Draco hummed as he continued to casually peel the apple in his hand with his knife. “You’ve been drinking, I can smell the firewhiskey on your breath all the way over here.”

“I don’t see how my drinking choices are of any concern to you,” Tiberius argued as he walked over to his desk and sat down.

“Usually it wouldn’t be. You’re a grown man, you’re allowed to take the edge off with a drink or four at the end of the day,” he replied as he looked up at Tiberius. “Except, you don’t just take the edge off. You get angry, violent even, and you come home and take it out on the one person who you know won’t fight back, your son.”



“I don’t know what you’re-”

“Don’t deny it,” Draco interrupted. “It would only be a waste of time. Don’t worry though, I’m not here to talk to you about your abusive tendencies, not entirely at least.”

“What are you here for then?” Tiberius asked as he folded his arms and leaned back into his chair.

“Theo told me that you plan on offering him as my replacement should I lose the Dark Lord’s trust.”

“That’s correct.”

“Considering I’ve just killed two of his men and mutilated a third, I’d say that time has come,” Draco casually said.

“Who were they,” Tiberius gulped, trying his best to hide any sign of fear.

Draco shook his head and got up to his feet. “The details don’t matter. What does matter is the fact that you now have the opportunity to turn Theo into a Death Eater. Unfortunately for you, I won’t be letting that happen.”

“You have no say in what I do with my son!” he shouted as he slammed his hands down onto the desk.

Driving the knife into his hand, Draco leaned into him and said, “You won’t have any say either if you’re dead.” Pushing up off of the desk and straightening his spine, Draco made his way around, dislodged the knife from his hand, gripped the back of the chair and spun Tiberius around to face him.

“I’ve grown quite bored of you and my father using us as pawns in your never-ending battle of the egos. Did you not get enough love growing up, Tiberius?” he said with mock sympathy. “Is that what’s caused you to become such a poor excuse for a father? Did your mummy not let you suck on her tit long enough as a child resulting in you becoming a pathetic alcoholic?”

“You’re a bastard,” Tiberius seethed.

“I wish. At least then my father would’ve had a valid reason to be such a prick.”

“You think that by killing me you’ll be saving Theodore? You think that he’ll be better off not becoming a Death Eater? It’s what he was raised to become, it’s in his blood.”

Draco let out a mocking chuckle. “You don’t know your son at all. That guy couldn’t even kill a fly. Trust me, I’ve seen him try, he nearly broke down at the mere thought. Just because you’re a heartless monster, doesn’t mean that he is too.”

“And what does that make you then?” he challenged. “Clearly you have no problem with killing. I guess that makes you just as evil as the rest of us.”

“That it does, which means I’m perfectly capable of doing what Theo had always wanted to do but never could. Don’t worry Tiberius, you’ll have Dolohov to keep you company in hell.”

Placing his hand around Tiberius’ throat, Draco tightened his grip before jerking his wrist, causing the bones in his neck to snap.

## Chapter 9

### *Flashback - 'Future'*

*April 15th, 1998*

It had been three weeks since Draco abandoned his duties as a Death Eater. He wondered if Rowle had crawled his way back to the Death Eaters to incoherently try and inform them of Draco's betrayal. He wondered how he would do it... would he write it down? Or would he offer Voldemort access to his memories? Regardless, Draco didn't quite care.

The only thing he didn't wonder about was Tiberius Nott. Draco received a letter from Theo the next day. He was nervous at first to open it, he worried that perhaps he had gone too far. He was relieved when the first words he read were *thank fucking merlin*. The letter went on for another two pages, where Theo sappily over-explained his love for Draco and gratefulness for their friendship. *I love you, you crazy psychopathic son of a bitch (no offence to Narcissa)* was the final sentence in his note.

There was a weight that had been lifted from Draco's shoulders. His friend was safe, he was free from the ruling of Voldemort and he was with Hermione.

Draco never thought he'd be so fond of mornings, but waking up each day to see her snuggled up beside him made him fall in love with rising before the sun. Most days he just laid there, lightly brushing his fingers through her curls as the golden tint from the sun would sneak its way through the curtains and cast a gentle glow on her skin.

He loved the way she'd make small soft groans in her sleep as she shifted and repositioned herself closer to him. If he could choose a way to live the rest of his life, it would be just like that. In bed with Hermione, her curls tickling his chin, her leg intertwined with his and her arm across his torso as her hand gripped onto his side. He would make a million sacrifices if it meant he could wake up every day to her.

"Good morning," she yawned as she rubbed her eyes and forced them open to look up at Draco.

"Good morning," he smiled down at her as he pushed the curls out of her face and tucked them behind her ear.

"How did you sleep?"

"Fine, you?"

"Not bad, it's nice to sleep in a normal bed again. I say," she said as she curled herself into him, her head resting on his chest. "that we stay in bed all day."

Draco let out a soft chuckle as he kissed the top of her head. "We can do whatever you'd like, Granger."

“I like that,” she hummed against his skin.

“Like what?”

“When you call me Granger.”

“Really?” he asked. He figured she’d prefer him calling her Hermione. He hadn’t consciously meant to keep referring to her by last name, he had just done so for so long that it came naturally. As if she could read his mind, Hermione repositioned herself so that she was facing him again.

“Everyone calls me Hermione,” she stated.

“Well, it *is* your name,” he teased.

“Yeah, yeah, I know,” she said as she rolled her eyes. “But only *you* call me Granger and I like that.”

“So you’d prefer that I call you Granger?”

Hermione nodded. “Except for when you’re professing your love to me, perhaps then you could use my first name.” The mention of the word love caused Draco’s breath to hitch and as much as he hoped she hadn’t, Hermione noticed. “I’m not implying that you need to do such a thing any time soon or that you ever will,” she explained. “It was just... a silly example.”

It wasn’t that Draco didn’t love Hermione that caused the specific reaction to the word. He was almost certain that he did love her, but at the same time, he wasn’t even sure what actual love was. He had never witnessed true and unconditional love before. None of his friends had ever been in a relationship that lasted longer than a few weeks and as much as Astoria loved to throw the word around when they were together, he knew she didn’t love him. How could she? She didn’t know him, not the real him.

But Hermione. Hermione knew Draco. She knew him better than most people. Except for his mother, who had a scary way of knowing even the things he didn’t want her to. But she was his mother, so she didn’t count.

No. Hermione was the only person who saw him for who he truly was. She was the first person he ever felt comfortable enough around to lower all of his walls. She was the person he would do anything for.

He had gone against Voldemort and his family, and it was all for her. When Hermione asked him to leave her side to get her friends out of the cellar, he did. And all of the times that she’d ask for him to get her a certain item, he did. All of the moments that he had glossed over and given no thought to. It all finally came together and he realised that Hermione had owned his heart for far longer than he could fathom.

So when the word *love* fell from her lips, it hit him like a stupefy to the chest because it was so casual to her – the idea of him loving her. She was okay with it. And he knew that it

shouldn't, but it shocked him.

Hermione Granger, the brightest witch of her damn age, was okay with Draco Malfoy, the former death eater, loving her.

He didn't care that he still wasn't sure what love actually was, he wanted to tell her that he did. He wanted to say it over and over until she grew nauseated by it. He wanted to climb to the highest tower and shout for everyone to hear that he loved Hermione Granger.

But before he could, there was a light knock on their door.

"Come in!" Hermione called out.

"Er—I'd really rather not," Harry's muffled voice said.

"Oh please, Harry, we're both decent," she replied.

"Yeah, I'd still rather not. I'm still scarred from last week when I walked in and Malfoy had you bent over the—"

"We get it!" Hermione interjected as she covered her face with her hands to hide the blush that shot up to her cheeks.

"Was there something that you needed, Potter?" Draco asked while Hermione continued to bury her face in embarrassment.

"Yes, right. There are a few people here who have requested your presence, if the two of you can be bothered to put on some clothes and join us for once that is."

Draco looked over at Hermione and said, "I mean seriously Granger, do you hear the words that come out of his mouth? It's like he's begging me to punch him."

"Hey! I heard that!" Harry shouted from behind the door.

"You were supposed to!" Draco shouted back.

"Okay, okay," Hermione said as she sat up. "We'll be down in five," she informed Harry.

"Brilliant, I'll let them know."

Draco watched as Hermione crawled out of bed and slipped into her jeans. "I thought you said you wanted to stay in bed all day."

"That I did, but we have guests who have specifically asked for us. It would be rude to not go downstairs. Now, come on," she said as she held her hands out to help him up.

Grabbing her hands, Draco gently yanked her forward, causing her to fall onto him. Flipping her over so that her body was now pinned underneath his, Draco began kissing down the side of her neck.

“I promise I’d make it worth your while if you threw away your politeness just this once and stayed in here with me,” he muttered as he firmly pressed his fingers into her hips.

“I... Draco...” she panted as an overwhelming amount of pleasure surged through her.

“Just say yes, Granger,” he whispered as he gently tugged at the skin of her shoulder with his teeth.

“Y—”

“I swear if you two are shagging in there!” Harry ridiculed from the hall.

“I’m going to kill him,” Draco warned.

Hermione let out a soft giggle and gave him a quick peck before shimmying out from underneath. “Let’s go,” she said as she encouragingly patted his shoulder.

Draco rolled over onto his back and ran his hands down the length of his face as he let out a deep exhale.

Fully dressed, Hermione made her way over to the door and looked back at Draco. “Aren’t you coming?” she asked.

“Just give me a minute, Granger,” he requested. “I don’t think our guests want to see the *full* effect you have on me.”

Hermione’s eyes travelled down his body and immediately stopped once she spotted what he was referring to. “Oh!” she gasped. “Right, erm, just come down when you feel up to it. Not up to it! I mean—er—”

“I’ll be down in a few minutes,” he laughed.

“Okay, right. I’ll uh, see you down there.”

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“Well look who finally discovered what pants are,” Harry mocked as Draco joined them downstairs.

As he passed by him, Draco smacked Harry in the stomach with the back of his hand.

“Ow! That hurt!”

“It was supposed to,” Draco replied as he walked over to Hermione.

“Hi,” she smiled up at him.

“Hey,” he smiled back as he leaned down and kissed her cheek.

“What, no kiss on the cheek for your cousin that just pushed a whole human out of her?” Tonks scoffed.

Admittedly, Draco didn’t even notice Tonks or Remus on the other couch.

“Hi Dora,” he replied as he leaned over and kissed her cheek. “Remus,” he nodded. “So, you finally did it huh? What name did you settle on? Don’t tell me, it’s Draco, isn’t it?”

“Even if you gave me a million galleons, I still wouldn’t have named him after you,” Tonks said.

“What about two million?” Draco questioned as he lifted a curious brow.

Tonks’ head cocked as she thought the offer over. “Okay, maybe for that much.”

“Wait, do you *have* two million galleons?” Hermione directed at Draco.

“On me currently or at Gringotts? Because if it’s the first, then no.”

“And if it were the second?”

“Let’s just say, if you married him and he *mysteriously* died, you’d be set for several lifetimes,” Tonks stated.

“Merlin,” Hermione gasped as she slumped back into the couch. “I didn’t realise you had that much. I mean, I knew you were well off, but *Merlin*.”

“If we’re done discussing the amount of money Draco has to his name,” Remus said. “I believe we had something to talk to him about,” he directed at Tonks.

“Oh, right! Hermione, would you mind holding Teddy for me?” Before Hermione could voice any objections, Tonks promptly placed her son in her arms.

“You named him *Teddy*?” Draco asked as he bit the inside of his cheek to hide his laughter.

“Piss off,” she said as she slapped his chest, following him to the bedroom at the end of the hall. “He’s named after my dad.”

Once inside the room, Remus closed the door behind them. Draco looked between Remus and Tonks, impatiently waiting for one of them to speak instead of just staring at him.

“Well? Did we just come in here to awkwardly stand around or did you have something that you wanted to discuss?” Draco asked.

“We want you to be Teddy’s godfather,” Tonks blurted out excitedly.

“What?!” Draco’s brows pulled together. He was certain he heard her wrong. His hearing must be going because there was no way that she wanted him to be—

“We want you to be Teddy’s godfather,” she reiterated.

Draco’s eyes shifted over to Remus who just smiled back at him, shrugged and nodded his head.

“You’re joking, right?” he asked.

“Why would I joke about something like this?”

“I don’t know! Because... well because why would you pick *me* to be his godfather?” Draco began pacing back and forth as he ran his hand through his hair. “I mean, what if something happens to both of you? Then I’m the one who has to raise him? What do I know about raising someone? What do I know about being a father?!”

“Remus, will you give us a moment?” Tonks requested.

“Sure,” he said understandingly before leaving the room.

“Draco,” Tonks said but he ignored her and continued spiralling. “Draco look at me!”

Finally, Draco stopped his pacing and looked over at Tonks who was now sitting on the twin-sized bed and patted the spot next to her, signalling for him to join.

Once Draco took the seat beside her, Tonks’ eyes softened and she said, “Do you remember that time during Christmas when my parents were fighting?”

Draco nodded. “Of course, you wouldn’t stop crying because you were so scared.”

“And do you remember what you said to me?”

“I said that my parents fought a lot,” he answered.

“And after that, you said that there was no reason to be scared because—”

“Because I was there and I would never let anything happen to you,” Draco finished.

“I’m seven years older than you, Draco. I was somewhere in my early teens and you were just a young boy but you still took care of me. *That* is one of the many reasons why I want you to be my son’s godfather.”

Draco shook his head and looked down at his hands. “I still don’t know, Dora. What if I end up being like my father?”

“You are *nothing* like Lucius,” she stated. “You’re a good person, Draco, and you’re not as damaged as he likes to make you believe. You have a good heart and would do anything for those you care about.”

“You know that he cleared your family’s records, right?”

Tonks slowly nodded. “It was very kind of Lucius to do that. I’m not saying that he’s the most malicious person I’ve ever met, he has some moments of redemption, but you’re still a far better man than he will ever be.”

Draco and Tonks comfortably sat in silence for a few minutes. Draco still couldn’t see why she would choose him out of all people, he was sure Remus would advocate for someone like Harry. Someone who people didn’t need to try so hard to find the good in. But she was right about one thing – Draco would do anything for the people he cared about and she was one of them.

“Okay,” Draco said.

“Okay?”

“Yes, okay. I’ll accept being Teddy’s godfather.”

Tonks excitedly clapped her hands together before flinging her arms around Draco’s neck and pulling him into a hug.

“Just so you know, if you die, I’m legally changing his name to Draco.”

“I will quite literally rise from the dead to kill you if you do,” Tonks threatened, which caused him to laugh.

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Rejoining everyone in the living room, Draco froze in place and felt something tug at his heart as he looked at Hermione with Teddy. She was a natural as she lightly rocked him and the look on her face made him want to drop to his knees right then and there.

There was a spark in her eye that he hadn’t seen before. He wasn’t saying that a woman’s only purpose in the world was to be a mother, but it was certainly one of Hermione’s. Draco couldn’t help but stare at her and imagine what life would be like for them five, ten, or even twenty years from now. He pictured their entire life together. What their kids would look like and how gentle and patient she would be with them.

Teddy’s eyes slowly peeled open and landed on Draco, who was still preoccupied with envisioning his future with Hermione.

“I think someone wants you,” Hermione said.

“What?” Draco asked as he refocused his attention.

Hermione stood up and walked over to Draco. As she got closer, he noticed that Teddy’s small arms were reaching out for him. He also noticed that Hermione was preparing to hand the child to him.

“Granger, I really don’t think that I–”

“Oh hush and hold your arms out.”

Reluctantly, Draco copied the formation in which Hermione’s arms were and prepared himself for the transfer. Once he felt the full weight of Teddy in his arms, every muscle in his body tensed – afraid that if he moved, he’d break him somehow.

“You can relax, you know?” Hermione giggled. “He’s not going to fall apart.”

“You don’t know that,” Draco replied. “How’s his head? Am I supporting it well enough?”

“You’re doing great, Draco,” she reassured him.

Teddy let out a small yawn as he stretched out his arms and legs before curling back up into Draco’s arms. Something about this action caused Draco to relax and become more comfortable.

“Oh, this isn’t so bad,” he said as he gently began rocking him. “What’s up, little guy? You know, Teddy is a cool name and all but you know what’s even cooler? Draco. Do you like that name?” A small smile appeared on Teddy’s face. “I thought you would,” Draco grinned. “I’ll work on getting it changed.”

“You’re not changing his name,” Tonks groaned.

“But the kid likes it,” he argued. “Isn’t that right little Draco? Yeah, that’s right,” he cooed. “Don’t worry, your mum just has a shite attitude and can’t appreciate a good name when she hears one.”

Hermione couldn’t help but feel the slightest bit of baby fever as she watched Draco with Teddy. She didn’t want children soon by any means, they were still just kids themselves, but still, seeing how he so naturally tapped into his paternal instincts and channelled his soft and gentle side caused something to rise within her.

He would be an excellent father, she decided. He would love and care for his kids so deeply. She had only hoped that perhaps one day in the future she’d be lucky enough to witness it.

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Once Tonks, Remus and Teddy departed after dinner, Hermione and Draco called it a night and retreated to their room. As Hermione climbed into bed and curled up into Draco’s arms, she couldn’t help but notice the look on his face. Something was on his mind.

“What is it?” she asked.

Draco let out a deep breath before saying, “You once asked me what I saw when I envisioned my future.”

Hermione propped herself up on her elbows to look at him. “I remember. You said that you didn’t know.”

“And I didn’t, but I do now. It’s you. *You* are my future, Hermione.”

“You used my first name,” she noted, her head tilting slightly as her lips pulled into a soft smile.

“You said to when professing my love for you, didn’t you?”

“I—I did,” she stuttered as her heart began to race.

“Well that’s what I’m doing, so I’m simply just following your orders,” he playfully grinned.

“So this means that you... you know?”

“Yes,” he replied. “I love you, Hermione. The moment our lips first touched I knew that I would spend the rest of my life loving you and that’s precisely what I want to do. Though it’s worth mentioning that I could spend the rest of my life with you and it still wouldn’t be enough.”

“Are you—you’re not—”

“Calm down,” he chuckled. “I’m not asking you to marry me.”

“Oh, okay,” she said with a sigh of relief.

“I don’t think I’ll ever want to get married,” he added, which caused her head to shoot up.

“What?! Like, never?”

“Probably not.”

“But, why? Don’t you want to one day be a husband and have a wife?”

“I just don’t see the point in the titles, rings and big ceremonies. And that whole ‘till death do us part’ thing,” he scoffed as he made air quotations with his fingers. “I mean, please, even in death my heart would still only beat for you, Hermione.”

“It would still be nice though, don’t you think?” she asked.

“Is that what you dream of? Having a husband?”

“Not often but it’s crossed my mind.”

“And have I been the one you thought of when it crossed your mind?” he nervously asked, afraid that she’d say no.

“Yes, of course,” Hermione stated. “Draco, all of my life I have prided myself in knowing everything. Of always being certain of what was to come and having a plan for every possible situation. And then came you. And I’m not talking about the slicked-back hair, pompous little bully you. I mean the *real* you. To be honest, I never really understood the meaning of love. Sure, my parents are in love and it’s very obvious that they are, but still, it was a hard thing to wrap my head around when I hadn’t experienced it for myself. But now, I get it. Because when I’m with you, nothing else matters. When I look at you, I see a life filled with love and happiness. I’ve never felt that way about anyone before. I love you, Draco.”

I love you.

The second those words fell from Hermione’s lips, it felt like time had stopped as an indescribable feeling of happiness, warmth and belonging filled Draco’s chest. He had always felt so alone in this world, like he would never find someone who truly understood him, damning him to a life of solitude. But here he was, listening as someone told him that they saw a life with him and that they loved him. And the fact that it was Hermione Granger made his head feel like it was about to explode.

Never in a million years would he have thought that this was what life had in store for him. Countless times he had cursed the world for his situation, for the family he was born into. He never understood what he had done so wrong to be sentenced to a life that seemingly had no happy ending. If only he could go back and tell his younger self that it’ll all be worth it. That every punishment, every lesson, every scar, would be worth it, because one day, he’ll be laying in bed with the most magnificent woman he had ever met, and she’d be confessing her love for him.

Present Day

As Draco fiddled with the ring on his left pointer finger, his thumb brushing over the sharp edge of the stone, he found himself thinking back on those last few months of the war. The manor, him leaving the Death Eaters, and those nights at the cottage.

He wondered how Tonks, Remus and Teddy were doing. He hadn’t heard from them in some time. Though, that was partly his fault as he had been focusing all of his energy on Hermione and hadn’t reached out to them.

He hoped they were doing well.

He remembered how he felt when he saw Hermione holding Teddy, how *he* felt holding Teddy and he vividly remembered how he felt when Hermione told him that she loved him for the first time.

In his time of reminiscing his mind wandered to how they stayed up until four in the morning planning their future together and playfully argued over the interior of their house. They had it all planned out, every last detail.

They were going to move far away from London, perhaps even relocate to a new country. They would build a house in a remote area where the only noise they'd hear was that of the waves crashing. They would also purchase a flat in a small neighbourhood so that on the nights that they were feeling more social, they could go out and interact with others.

Draco even gave in and agreed for it to be within a Muggle town.

He liked the idea of separating themselves from the world that caused the both of them so much pain. It would be a fresh start. They could start their life without the judgement of others and could leave behind the mistakes they had made.

And after Hermione had learned about how much money Draco had, she took it upon herself to decide for them that it would be used to start a nonprofit of some sort. She went on for hours listing off the several causes they could advocate for. Draco didn't care about which one they'd end up going with, as long as she was happy.

It all seemed so much simpler back then, even though they were in the middle of a war. Draco considered that it was easier then because they *needed* something to look forward to, to have hope for. Whereas now, the urgency wasn't there. There was no longer that need to escape the turmoil.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, the familiarity of her question causing the corner of Draco's mouth to lift into a smile. She always knew how to tell when something was on his mind.

"Nothing," he said. "I was just thinking about us."

"Well now you *must* tell me," she implored as she adjusted her position so that her legs were crisscrossed and her hands folded in her lap as she smiled and eagerly waited for him to speak.

"I was just thinking back on our days at the cottage."

"Bill and Fleur's?"

Draco nodded. "Specifically, the night when we first met Teddy."

"Oh, you mean the night you confessed your undying love for me?" she teased.

"Yeah," he chuckled as he rolled his eyes. "That night."

"What about it?"

"I don't know," he shrugged. "Everything and nothing at the same time. Mostly just how we felt then and the excitement that we had for our plans for after the war."

"We were going to have a cottage of our own," she smiled as she reminisced on the memory. "We were going to build a garden in the backyard and learn how to grow our own vegetables."

“Well, *you* were going to learn how to grow your own vegetables. I was just going to offer my support from the sidelines,” he playfully smirked.

“Please, we both know that I would’ve had you on your hands and knees planting seeds by the third day.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” he laughed. “I’d do anything that you asked of me, Granger.”

Hermione couldn’t help but let out a small laugh as his words triggered a memory.

“What?” Draco asked.

“Nothing,” she giggled. “It’s just, do you remember that time at the cottage, with Ginny and Luna?”

“With Ginny and Luna...” he trailed off when suddenly, embarrassment washed over him as he recalled the memory that he had tried so hard to suppress. Covering his face with his hands and sinking back into the sofa, Draco let out a groan, “Please don’t remind me.”

“Why not? I thought you looked nice,” Hermione teased.

Flashback - 'Hope'

April 23, 1998

“Hermione!” Ginny shouted as she sprinted into the cottage.

Setting her book down and getting up from the couch, Hermione grabbed Ginny by the shoulders to stop her.

“What is it Gin?” Hermione asked, her tone laced with concern as she took in Ginny’s frantic state.

Before she could answer, Draco’s voice roared through the house. “Weasley, I swear to Merlin, I’m going to kill you!”

“What did I do?” Ron asked as he stepped out of his room.

“Not you,” Draco replied before turning his death glare over to the redhead taking shelter behind Hermione’s curls. “You little witch,” he seethed. “I know you did it on purpose!”

“Did not!” Ginny argued. “It was an accident!”

“Oh yeah? Then you falling off of a cliff will be an accident too.”

“Will someone please tell me what’s going on?!” Hermione requested.

Ginny and Draco began to speak at the same time, their voices fighting for dominance and providing Hermione with no answers and one nasty headache.

“One at a time!” Hermione commanded.

“Ginny and I cut Draco’s hair,” Luna stated, her voice light and dreamy - a stark contrast to those of Draco and Ginny. “I think he looks quite handsome,” she admitted as she absent-mindedly looked around the cottage. “But I can see where he might be upset.”

“You let them cut your hair?” Hermione asked Draco.

“You told me to,” he replied.

“I was half-joking when I suggested that.”

“Well shit, Granger, how was I supposed to know that?”

Hermione let out a sympathetic sigh and reached for the baseball cap covering his hair. Draco flinched at the action as if it had caused him physical pain. “Don’t be a baby,” she mocked. Reaching for it again, Hermione removed the cap to reveal the damage.

“It’s dreadful, I look like someone who sleeps on the street,” Draco pouted as he folded his arms across his chest.

It wasn’t terrible but it definitely wasn’t him. His hair was extremely short on the sides and long and choppy on top. Hermione thought that if someone who had actual training in the craft had been the one to have cut his hair, it would look rather nice. But it was Ginny and Luna who had done it, and it was obvious.

“You’re not saying anything,” Draco said. “That’s never a good sign.”

“It could be worse,” Hermione shrugged as she ran her fingers through the longer section.

“See! It could’ve been worse,” Ginny stated.

“I’m going to shave your head in the middle of the night,” Draco threatened.

As Luna gently rocked back and forth on her heels and watched as Draco and Ginny bickered, Hermione massaged her temples. Nearly every day Ginny and Draco found a reason to fight. Hermione regretted stating that she had hoped they would become friends because, over the last week, she discovered that a friendship between them entailed childish disputes.

The morning after Remus and Tonks visited, Ginny and Dean arrived at the cottage. Someone outside of the Order had been helping the remaining members of Dumbledore’s army sneak in and out of Hogwarts. While Harry believed Ginny’s sole purpose for joining them was because she missed him, the reality was that she was there to help.

Breaking into Hogwarts had become a frequent topic of discussion. Figuring out the logistics was where Ginny and Dean came in. Alongside Neville, they were the ones leading the

student-based resistance. If anyone knew the best way to get inside undetected, it was them.

The relaxing evenings they were granted the first few weeks had turned into late nights and early mornings as they prepared for the inevitable battle that was to come. While Draco would gather around the dining room table with the others, Hermione would find herself in the living room as she brewed various potions and constructed different weapons. From small vials containing a liquid that would cause the ground beneath an enemy's feet to cover in a cement-like paste, to small baubles that, when thrown, would cause hundreds of metal shards to shoot out.

Hermione knew that if they wanted a chance at beating Voldemort and the Death Eaters, they couldn't rely on just their wands – they needed to play dirty. She had created hundreds of different items over the past two weeks, all capable of maiming and or possibly killing someone. Harry was frightened by her ability to create such, Ron was appalled and Draco was inexplicably proud.

But none of her work or anyone else's mattered if they didn't destroy the remaining Horcruxes. Until they accomplished that, it would be impossible to kill Voldemort once and for all.

As much as they wished they did, they had no clue where to even begin looking. What they did know was that Voldemort was most likely in possession of the elder wand. Hermione was originally against the idea of disturbing Mr Ollivander. Months of rationed meals had weakened his already frail state. Most days he struggled to even get out of bed. But Hermione realised that if anyone could truly tell them what they were up against, it was him.



“Thank you for meeting with us,” Hermione smiled as she sat down in the old rocking chair.

Mr Ollivander dipped his head slightly in response, finding it far too exhausting to channel the energy necessary to smile back.

“We were hoping you might be able to share some of your knowledge on wands,” she explained.

Mr Ollivander's gaze shifted up to Harry and Ron, who were standing behind Hermione and then slowly, he looked over at Draco, who was leaning against the closed door.

“Sir,” Harry began. “You've always spoken about wands as if they have feelings and can think.”

“The wand chooses the wizard, Mr Potter,” he replied. “That much has always been clear to those of us who have studied wand law.”

“And what do you know about the Deathly Hallows?”

“It is rumoured there are three. The elder wand, the cloak of invisibility, to hide you from your enemies, and the resurrection stone, to bring back loved ones from the dead. Together they make one the master of death. But few truly believe that such objects exist.”

“Do you?” Hermione questioned. “Do you believe that they exist, sir?”

Mr Ollivander shook his head and rubbed his trembling hands together. “I see no reason to put stock into an old wives tale,” he replied.

“He’s lying,” Draco stated as he approached the group. “He’s the one who told the Dark Lord about the elder wand. Isn’t that right, *Garrick*?”

“Well I—”

“Your physical condition and mental cognizance deteriorate with each passing second. Let’s not waste the limited time you have left and get straight to the point,” Draco urged. “Why was the Dark Lord so adamant about finding it?”

“The elder wand will defeat any witch or wizard in a duel, no matter who is on the other end. If the Dark Lord manages to come into possession of it,” Mr Ollivander nervously gulped. “I’m afraid it would be unwise to go against him.”

“He *is* in possession of it,” Draco informed him. “He found Grindelwald and got him to tell him where it was.”

“Then I believe all there’s left to do is pray that its allegiance does not lie with him.”

“What do you mean by that?” Hermione asked. “Would it be possible for the elder wand to reject him?”

“It’s possible,” he replied. “Just like any other wand, it will remain loyal to its original owner, unless someone else wins it from them.”

“You mean in a duel?” Ron questioned.

“That, or even with a simple disarming spell.”

“Do you happen to know who the last owner of the elder wand was?” Harry asked.

Mr Ollivander slowly nodded. “The late Albus Dumbledore.”

Draco felt his stomach drop. The collection of Hermione, Harry and Ron’s voices all bleeding together and turning into nothing but muffled noise in his ears.

Turning on his heels, he rushed out of the room and slammed the door behind him.



With his eyes closed, Draco focused on the world around him as he attempted to collect his thoughts. The deep and rolling bass of the waves crashing against the jagged rocks echoed in his chest and the salty tang of the sea that laced the air caused his nose to burn. The distant sound of birds chirping and the high-pitched screech of the wind whipping through the trees brought an odd sense of solace. It perfectly matched how he was feeling – free but tortured.

His mind felt like a battlefield, torn between what was necessary and what he desired, each vying for dominance.

Draco thought that he had already done the hard part. He had turned his back on his family and Voldemort and freed himself from the shackles that were placed upon his wrists the day that he received the dark mark. He served his time and suffered in the process and now he was supposed to take a backseat to it all, to just exist, instead of being crushed by the weight of responsibility.

The future he had once seen so clearly with Hermione became nothing more than a hazy blur as he explored his different options because no matter which one he chose, he knew it wouldn't end well for him. He could take every precaution known to man and it still wouldn't make a difference.

He didn't want to give up his happiness. He didn't want to give up his life with Hermione. He had just regained control over his future and it was now being ripped away from him all because of a stupid fucking disarming spell he cast in the astronomy tower a little less than a year ago.

Draco didn't want to tell her, he didn't want to see the look on her face or hear the hope in her voice as she told him that they'd figure something out because he knew that he'd believe it. He'd believe *her*. After conditioning himself to not be naive enough to have hope for something, he knew that Hermione had the power to force him to. She already had.

He had hope for them.

He had hope that they'd see the other side of the war and that they'd follow through with all of the ridiculous plans they made. He had hope that, after a few years of nagging, she'd change his stance on marriage. He had hope that they would spend their Sunday mornings having tea with his mother, who he was certain would also fall in love with Hermione.

He had more hope than he thought one man was capable of having and he couldn't bear the idea of adding another to his already lengthy list. Because then, he would have one extra thing to be disappointed about when it didn't happen.

Draco prayed that the footsteps closing in on him weren't Hermione's, but he knew that they were. He watched her approach out of the corner of his eye, a thin blanket wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

Over the last few months, Hermione began to lower her walls, whether she was aware of it or not. The emotions and thoughts that she had once secured behind occlumency were out in the

open for him to access. So, as they both watched as the birds flew further and further away, slowly reducing to nothing more than a speck in the sky, Draco discovered that Hermione was well aware of his situation.

“He’ll kill me once he figures it out,” Draco choked out, still refusing to look at her.

“I know,” she sighed.

“I have to tell them, don’t I?”

Intertwining her fingers with his, Hermione lightly squeezed his hand and said, “We can do it together.”

Taking a deep breath, Draco turned his head and met her tear-filled gaze.

“I love you, Hermione.”

“I love you too, Draco.”

Chapter 10

Flashback - 'Rescue You'

May 1, 1998

Once Draco informed everyone of what had happened that night in the astronomy tower - how he had disarmed Dumbledore, meaning he was now the owner of the elder wand - chaos quickly settled in. Everyone split into three groups, each assigned a different task to work on. Ginny and Luna were in charge of organising their entry into Hogwarts. Harry, Ron, and Dean put together a war strategy and Draco and Hermione worked on a plan to break into Gringotts.

After a conversation with Griphook about the sword of Gryffindor and how Bellatrix seemed to think that it should be in her vault, Harry was convinced that a Horcrux was being hidden there. For the first time, Draco agreed with him. Bellatrix would give her own life if Voldemort asked her to, she was the most loyal of any of his followers. It seemed logical that if he were to entrust anyone to protect a piece of his soul, it would be her.

With Hermione now polyjuiced as Bellatrix, Draco dressed in the Death Eater robes that he had once considered burning, Ron's appearance altered and Harry and Griphook hidden underneath the cloak of invisibility, the group entered the bank. Every goblin stared them down as they approached the head teller. While she physically looked like Bellatrix, Hermione's mannerisms still shone through as her legs wobbled, unaccustomed to the heeled boots.

"Mister Malfoy, Madam Lestrage," the old goblin nodded. "What can I do for you today?"

"I wish to enter my vault," Hermione stated, trying her best to channel Bellatrix's crass tone.

"Would you mind presenting your wand?"

"And why should I do that?" she asked.

"It's the bank's policy. I'm sure you understand given the current climate," the goblin replied.

Draco knew that the polyjuice alone wouldn't be enough to get them past the front desk. He had originally suggested that they start slaughtering them the moment they entered. Hermione wasn't entirely opposed to the idea, it would save them a lot of time, but Harry rejected it. He said that it would only draw attention and possibly earn them a visit from Death Eaters or even Voldemort himself. Draco argued that no matter what approach they took, the Death Eaters would be alerted.

Goblins didn't pick sides but they would do what was necessary to not be on the receiving end of a killing curse. After the ministry fell, they made an agreement to send word if certain individuals entered the bank, in exchange for them being left alone. And considering Draco had turned on Voldemort, he was positive that his name was now on that list. It didn't matter

though, Draco was fully prepared for a fight. He was also fully prepared to balance out Hermione's manners with a threat or two.

"You'd like to see a wand?" Draco questioned.

Draco could visibly see the goblin's throat bob as he nervously swallowed and recoiled a bit. If there was anyone that the goblins feared more than Voldemort, it was him. Even though they refused to get involved, they always took it upon themselves to stay up to date with the recent news. Which meant they were well aware of Draco's reputation.

"Y-yes," the goblin replied.

"Okay." Draco calmly nodded his head as he reached into his cloak. As he removed his wand, he reached forward and gripped the lapel of the goblin's coat and shoved the tip of his wand into the side of his neck.

"There, you have your wand," he said. "Now escort us to Madam Lestrage's vault." His voice was deep, commanding and each syllable emphasised the unspoken threat.

"Right away, Mister Malfoy," the goblin answered, flinching slightly when Draco lowered his wand.

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Bellatrix's vault was just like her state of mind - a fucking mess. When Ron tripped over an old broomstick and knocked into a table, a large gold chalice crashed onto the ground and split, causing an identical chalice to appear. Griphook informed them that a Gemino and Flagrante curse must've been added to the room.

"Everything that you touch will burn and multiply," Griphook shouted.

From there, it was like a never-ending domino effect. One item would split into two, those two items would then duplicate and so on until they were neck deep and struggling to hear one another as the clanking grew louder and louder.

"I got it!" Harry exclaimed as his hand shot up into the air.

As he pushed his way through the sea of gold, a tower of stacked books came crashing down. Lunging forward to avoid being hit, Harry's grip on the Horcrux slipped. Hermione attempted to reach for the cup but before she could, Griphook snatched it.

"We had a deal, Griphook," Harry scolded.

"The cup for the sword!" Griphook demanded as he held out his other hand.

Harry let out an irritated groan and rolled his eyes before looking over at Hermione and saying, “Just give it to him.”

“But Harry-”

“It’s fine,” he interjected. “A deal is a deal.”

Reluctantly, Hermione reached into her small beaded bag, retrieved the sword and threw it over to Griphook. A satisfied and devious grin crept its way onto his face as he eyed the blade.

“Pleasure doing business with you all,” Griphook said as he tossed the cup to Harry.

“Yeah, whatever, now get us out of here,” Ron demanded.

Griphook shook his head. “That wasn’t a part of our deal. I said I’d get you in but I never said anything about getting you out.”

Before Draco could spit out a single insult, Griphook grabbed the other goblin’s hand and pressed it against the door to unlock it. The second he could, Griphook slipped out and slammed the door shut, locking the rest of them inside.

“Well that’s just bloody brilliant,” Ron scoffed. “Now what?”

“I told you to never trust a goblin,” Draco ridiculed. “People speak poorly about them for a reason.”

“Can we save the I told you so’s for a later time?” Harry clipped. “There are more important things to worry about right now.”

“Yeah, like the fact that we’re all about to die in this vault,” Ron complained.

“Oh please, Ronald,” Hermione groaned. “We’re not going to die here.”

“I’m pretty certain we are. Unless you have some brilliant idea on how to get-”

“Reducto!” Hermione shouted, causing the door to fly off of its hinges.

Once the group managed to crawl out of the vault, they heard the distant sound of Griphook screaming, “Thieves! Thieves in the vault!”

The two bells needed to get passed the dragon that guarded the area were nowhere to be seen, leaving them stranded.

“I’m going to kill him!” Ron snarled.

Spotting a group of security guards rounding the corner with their wands at the ready, Draco kicked Ron in the stomach, causing him to fall back and barely avoid the curse that was shot his way.

“What the fuck was that for Malfoy?!” Ron coughed out.

“You should be thanking me, Weasley,” Draco said. “I just saved your life.”

Peeking out from behind the pillar, Draco took a quick count of the lot. Hex after hex was being thrown at them. While Ron slumped onto the ground and Harry took shelter behind the wall, Hermione met Draco’s eyes. She knew him well enough to know what he was thinking. Once she nodded her head to signal that she understood and was ready, Draco rushed off.

“Where is he going?” Harry asked.

“Don’t worry about it,” she replied. “Do you have the cup?”

Harry nodded.

“Good. I have a plan to get us out of here, you may think I’m crazy but I need you to just trust me. But for now, stay put and wait for my signal, okay?”

“Okay,” Harry and Ron said simultaneously.

Carefully, Hermione poked her head out, looked out over the railing and spotted the basket of bells on the opposite end of the room beneath them. Raising her wand, she levitated one of the devices and cast a charm to cause it to subtly shake. Once the dragon recoiled and was at bay, Draco stepped out from the shadows and got to work.

Hermione had seen him duel at the campsite but he rarely did anything other than block. But now, Hermione was seeing him on the offensive side. She was seeing the side that earned him the name ‘The Grim’. Admittedly, she had always been curious as to what he was like as a Death Eater. It was hard for her to comprehend the fact that so many people were terrified of him. That he frightened them so much that they deemed him worse than Voldemort. She understood now though. He was ruthless, unforgiving and efficient as he made his way across the floor and casually switched between using his wand and nonverbal magic.

For the first time, Hermione found herself agreeing with Rita Skeeter.

Draco was deadly.

As soon as the final guard’s neck snapped and his body fell to the ground, Draco turned around and signalled Hermione.

Blasting the handrail to pieces, she looked at Harry and Ron and said, “Jump.”

“Are you out of your mind?!” Ron asked.

“You can’t be serious,” Harry said.

“No, I’m not and yes, I am,” she replied. “Now jump or I swear to Merlin I will hex the both of you into oblivion!”

They both raised their hands in surrender before taking a few steps back to get a running start and jumping off of the ledge and landing on the dragon's back. Hermione waited for them to situate themselves before joining them.

"Come on Draco," she called out. "It's time."

Draco looked over his shoulder as the sound of footsteps echoed in the air. He was surprised it took them this long to arrive. Hermione's pulse quickened and her stomach dropped as Draco turned his attention back to her. She knew what he was about to say.

"No," she objected. "We're not leaving you!"

"I'll hold them off and meet up with you afterwards," he replied. "But if I'm not back within the hour, move forward with the plan and go to Hogwarts."

"I'm not leaving you Draco!" Hermione cried out.

"I'm sorry, Granger," he sighed as he pointed his wand at the chain binding the dragon to the ground.

Hermione's eyes shot over to the other end of the room and she felt her heart break as a sea of black robes and silver masks came into view.

"Draco, get up here right now!"

"I'll find you, I promise," he said. "*Relashio*."

The instant the metal severed, the dragon began clawing its way up the walls and out of the room. Hermione watched in horror as Death Eaters closed in and Draco surrendered.

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"I'm going to go get him!" Hermione declared.

"Hermione, will you please just listen to me," Harry pleaded as he chased her up the hill and into the small shack.

Angrily stomping her way into the kitchen and slamming her bag onto the table, Hermione reached inside and removed the dry clothes she had packed and forcefully shoved them into his chest.

"I did listen to you, Harry, and I get that we need to destroy the cup and do a million other things but we can't just leave him with them! Have you forgotten that he's the owner of the elder wand? What if *you know who* figured that out? He'll kill him... he'll kill Draco," Hermione's voice cracked as she choked on her tears. "I *have* to go."

“Go? Where are you going?” Ginny asked as she stood in the doorway. “Where’s Malfoy?”

The mention of his name caused a sharp sting in Hermione’s chest. Grabbing her bag and turning on her heels, Hermione stormed off into the bedroom. She allowed herself two minutes to worry, overthink and cry before she collected herself, slipped out of her soaking-wet dress and changed into her fresh pair of clothes. She had just finished tying her shoes when there was a knock on the door.

“Hermione? It’s me, it’s Ginny.”

Hesitantly, Hermione let her in. Stepping inside, Ginny closed the door behind her and silently watched as Hermione threw on her jacket.

“Hermione—”

“Please Gin,” she begged. “I really don’t think I can handle hearing another person tell me that he’s going to be okay or that I have other responsibilities to tend to. You’re not going to change my mind.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“You weren’t?”

“No,” Ginny said as she cautiously approached Hermione as if any sudden movements would cause her to flee. “You love him. I mean, you *really* love him, don’t you?”

Hermione wiped the tears from her cheeks and said, “I do. I know that he doesn’t come without flaws and is far from perfect but I love him. I have to go and get him, Gin.”

“Alright but I’m coming with you.”

“You don’t have to do that,” Hermione said. “I’ll be fine on my own.”

“Consider it my apology to him for botching his hair,” Ginny replied. “Now, shall we go save your boyfriend or what?”

~~~~~

“Traitorous little shit,” Greyback snarled as he pushed Draco into a room.

The sound of the door slamming shut synced with the thud of his body crashing onto the cold and damp floor. Pushing through the pain that coursed through his body, Draco crawled his way over to the wall and propped himself up. Letting his head fall back, he closed his eyes and listened to the slow dripping of water that echoed through the room.

He hadn't intended on playing prisoner for this long. He was going to let Greyback and Yaxley have their fun beating him and then he was going to rip out their throats and return to Hermione, but then Bellatrix arrived.

Draco surpassed Bellatrix in every skill, except for legilimency. The way in which she forced herself into another's mind was brutal and caused more pain than any curse ever could. She was relentless and would exhaust the individual's energy until their walls would falter. The moment she'd find a weak spot, she'd mercilessly rip through.

He tried so hard to fight back. As soon as she'd knock a wall down, he'd repair it over and over again, but eventually the back and forth grew too much for him. He was too tired, too weak. His brain felt like it was on fire as she tore through every last memory. He was done, he didn't have it in him to shut her out anymore. But then, Bellatrix started to close in on the only thing he still wanted to protect – Hermione.

Bellatrix could sense his panic and he knew that if he wanted to divert her attention, he needed to offer her the one thing that would sign his death certificate. Draco didn't give it a second thought and pushed the memory forward.

As soon as Bellatrix reviewed the information given to her, she retreated from his mind and apparated. He was certain that by now Voldemort had already received word that Draco was the owner of the elder wand. So now, as he sat in the dark and grimy cellar, he came to terms with his death.

He was okay with dying, that part didn't scare him. What did scare him was never seeing Hermione again. All he wanted at this moment was to feel her touch, hear her voice and tell her how much he loved her. With his eyes still closed, he used the last of his energy to picture her.

"Draco," he heard her voice say.

It was so clear, so real.

"Draco," she said again.

"I love you, Hermione," he whispered.

"Draco, open your eyes!"

A pair of hands gripped his shoulders, causing his eyes to snap open. Immediately, a combination of panic and rage filled within him. His hand flew up, tightly wrapped around the individual's neck and slammed them onto the ground.

"Draco," she choked out. "It's me, it's Hermione."

"No you're not!" he seethed.

Bellatrix was in his head again, he thought. He was being manipulated. She wasn't real. She wasn't Hermione. She couldn't be. Bellatrix had already made him believe that he was

burning alive at one point. She must've found out about Hermione somehow and was using her as one final torture method before Voldemort came and killed him.

"You're not her, you're not her, you're not her," he kept repeating.

"Please, Draco," she begged as she gently placed her hand on top of his, which was still pressing down on her throat and cutting off her air supply.

"Get out of my head!" he screamed.

"What the fuck is going on?!" Ginny asked as she rushed forward and drew her wand.

Hermione held up her hand to stop her and looked back at Draco. She didn't know what they had done to him but she knew that it was bad. There was so much pain in his eyes. He had suffered so much in the short amount of time that they were apart and it broke her heart.

"I love you," she said to him as she slowly reached for her wand. "You're going to be okay, Draco. I promise." With a slight flick of her wrist, Draco's body went limp and he released his hold on her.

"What was wrong with him?" Ginny asked as she helped move Draco's body off of Hermione.

"I don't know," Hermione replied. "Let's just get him out of here."

~~~~~

Ginny graciously answered the hundreds of questions Harry and Ron began spewing out the second they returned to the shack, giving Hermione the space and privacy needed to work on Draco, who was still unconscious.

The second she laid him down on the bed she began running diagnostics. There were no signs of curses and aside from a broken rib, a gash across his abdomen and one on his right thigh, all of which Hermione healed, he was physically okay. His nervous system, however, was a mess. It was a miracle that he was capable of still forming a coherent sentence.

Countless times Harry and Ron tried to come and talk to her. She felt bad for snapping at them each time but she wanted to be left alone. She understood that they were behind schedule, she understood that others were waiting on them and that there were important things that needed to be done but all she cared about at the moment was Draco.

"Hermione?" Ginny called out as she knocked on the door. "Can I come in?"

Closing her eyes, Hermione took a deep breath and stepped away from Draco's side to go and answer the door. She didn't mind Ginny's company because she understood. She saw the way that he was in the cellar.

“How is he?” Ginny asked.

“I did what I could,” Hermione said as she returned to her spot on the edge of the bed and grabbed Draco’s hand. “I won’t know for certain until he wakes up.”

Ginny nodded her head and lowered herself into the chair against the wall.

“I know what you’re thinking, Hermione,” she said. “What happened to him, whatever those psychopaths did, it’s not your fault.”

Hermione winced at her words.

“I should’ve made him leave with us,” Hermione replied, her voice breaking.

“I may not know him as well as you do but I think it’s safe to say that there was nothing you could’ve done to make him leave.”

“I could’ve bound his arms and legs and forced him up onto the dragon or I should’ve jumped off the dragon and stayed with him. He would’ve fought against them then.”

“Maybe,” Ginny said. “But it doesn’t do you or him any good to focus on that right now.”

Hermione knew that Ginny was right but she couldn’t help it. Guilt had been eating away at her ever since they returned to the shack. She knew that if the situation at Gringotts was reversed, Draco would’ve never left her.

He had sacrificed himself for her multiple times and she hated that she never did anything to stop him. That she never did anything to try and save *him*.

Hermione was done standing idly by. She was done being the one that needed saving.

~~~

Harry, Ron, Ginny and Dean left for Hogwarts half an hour ago. It took a lot of repeating herself but Hermione managed to convince them that she’d be okay on her own.

“*We’ll catch up with you,*” is what she had told them. Because they were. Draco was going to wake up soon and he was going to be himself again and then they’d join everyone at school, she was sure of it.

Ginny was the most hesitant to leave. She was worried that Draco *would* wake up and that he *wouldn’t* be himself. She knew that Hermione wouldn’t be able to do what was necessary if he was violent towards her again. Ginny didn’t hate Draco, she had actually grown rather fond of him during their time together at the cottage. But if she had to choose between saving an unstable Draco or her best friend, she’d choose the latter.

Hermione understood where Ginny was coming from but she couldn't afford to think like that.

She was going to be fine.

He was going to be fine.



A small groan caused Hermione's head to shoot up from her hands. As soon as she saw Draco's eyes begin to open, she moved up the bed and leaned into him.

"Draco?" she said softly, her heart racing as she anxiously waited to see which version of him was waking.

"Granger-" Draco whispered.

"Yes, it's me, Draco. It's Hermione."

"No, I know that it's you," he softly chuckled. "I was trying to tell you that your elbow is digging into my chest."

"Oh!" Hermione quickly sat up and lifted her arm off of him. "Sorry."

Finally, Draco fully opened his eyes and looked up at her. "Hi," he said, his lips stretching into a soft smile.

"Hi," she smiled back, tears instantly rolling down her cheeks as a wave of relief washed over her.

"Why are you crying?" he asked as he wiped the tears with his thumb and caressed her cheek.

She shook her head. "I just-I was worried that I had lost you."

"You'll never lose me, Granger."

Leaning her head into his palm, she said, "I love you, Draco."

"I love you too, Hermione."

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### ***Present Day***

There were certain memories from the war that Draco refused to remember, they were too painful. The ones like the manor and Bellatrix torturing him would occasionally slip through

the cracks but other ones, like when he had nearly killed Hermione, were buried so deep that he had no recollection of them.

It was his way of coping. He needed to be strong for Hermione, even if that meant suppressing traumatic events instead of working through them. Draco had decided that perhaps when Hermione was better he'd finally process everything that he went through. But until then, he was content with not remembering.

A sharp crack caused Hermione and Draco's heads to turn.

"Master Draco, your guests have arrived!" Bippy informed him.

"They have?" he asked, surprised by the statement. "Who all is here?"

"Miss Ginny Weasley and Mister Harry Potter are in the foyer and Bippy saw Mister Blaise Zabini, Miss Pansy Parkinson and Mister Theodore Nott approaching the gate," Bippy said, her cheeks flushing as Theo's name fell from her lips.

"Very good," Draco nodded. "Please tend to our guests and offer them refreshments. Then in ten minutes, escort them all to the west wing."

"Yes Master Draco," Bippy replied before apparating.

"Miss Granger," Draco said as he got up from the sofa. "Would you mind accompanying me to one last place this evening?"

"It would be my honour, Mister Malfoy," Hermione playfully replied.

As they walked through the manor together, Draco fiddled with the black stone on his ring as the nerves began to settle in. He had been planning this moment for months. The week after the battle ended he purchased her ring. He didn't tell anyone, knowing that they'd say he was being impulsive and should take time to think about it but he didn't want to. He understood that they were still young but they had done it. Against all odds, they had made it out alive, and if surviving a war taught him anything, it was that he wanted a life with Hermione.

He never thought the day would come when he would be excited about the idea of marriage but that's what he was, excited. Sure, some things still needed to be worked on and he knew that there were several hard days ahead of them, but he was ready. They may not be in the cottage they talked about or had bought the flat in a muggle neighbourhood but that didn't matter. The only thing that mattered to him was being with her.

Reaching the west wing, Draco felt his hand shake as he gripped the handle and opened the door for Hermione.

"Don't tell me you've put together a second library," Hermione jokingly said.

Draco let out a small laugh as he tried his best to hide his nerves. "Unfortunately, I did not," he replied. "Do you remember that time when we stayed up all night planning out our future?" Draco asked as he guided her through the room.

“Of course.”

“And do you remember telling me your dream proposal just in case some miracle happened and I managed to remove the broom from my arse and change my stance on marriage?”

“Yes,” Hermione giggled.

Snapping his fingers, the lights in the room shut off and hundreds of small dots began to glow in the space above their heads to form the Orion constellation. While Hermione looked up at them, Draco removed the small box from his pocket and got down on one knee. The sound of the box snapping open caught Hermione’s attention.

Her eyes widened in shock as she stared at the ring in his hands. “Draco, what are you doing?”

“I know that I said I’d never want to get married. That I didn’t see a point in the titles or the rings or the ceremony, but I do now,” he began. “I know that we’re still young and by all means, we can wait as long as you’d like to make it official, but I want this, Hermione. I want this with you.”

“Draco...”

“Wait, please,” he requested. “I’ve rehearsed this speech a million times but if I don’t get it all out I’ll probably forget something and I really don’t want to.” He took a deep breath, gathered all of his courage and continued. “You are the most amazing woman I have ever met, Hermione. If everyone viewed the world as you do, and was in the possession of the heart that you have, it would be a far better place. I kick myself daily for taking so long to make my way to you but Gods, I am so happy that I eventually did.”

Hermione stared down at him with glossy eyes. She knew that she should stop him but she couldn’t bring herself to. Selfishly, she wanted to hear everything that he had to say.

“Before you, I was nothing more than a product of my father. I was a child who was raised like cattle to serve a single purpose, to act accordingly and carry out the family name. I had never dreamt of a future for myself because I had no reason to. But now, all I dream about is my future... *our* future. You have shown me that it’s okay to be vulnerable, to let people in and to have hope. There are a lot of things that I can’t promise but the one thing that I can is that I will always love you, Hermione. I will love you on the easy days and I’ll love you even more on the hard ones. Whatever challenges that may arise, we will face them together. There is nothing that I want more in this world than to build a life with you. Marry me, Hermione.”

She didn’t know how to respond. He had done the one thing he said he’d never do and it was for her. He had given Hermione her dream proposal and poured his heart out and it was perfect, *he* was perfect. Her heart broke as she looked down at him on one knee. It was everything that she wanted and it killed her to know that she couldn’t have it.

“Draco I—” she began but she was cut off.

“Draco?” Pansy chimed as she and the rest of the group walked in.

“Pans, good to see you,” he replied. “If you could just give us a moment.”

“Us? Draco, who are you talking about?” she questioned.

“Did your travels fry your brain Pans? I’m referring to Granger and me, obviously. And if you couldn’t tell by the ring in my hand and the fact that I’m on one knee, I’m kind of in the middle of something important. I didn’t expect Bippy to be so prompt with getting you all here.”

“Mate,” Theo said as he stepped forward. “Hermione isn’t here.”

“What are you talking about Theo? She’s standing right in front of me,” Draco said as he turned and looked up at Hermione, who had an almost horrified look on her face.

“No, she’s not,” Theo replied.

“Yes, she is,” he argued.

“Draco,” Theo’s voice was gentle as he slowly approached him. “Hermione isn’t here.”

“What the fuck is wrong with you?!” Draco ridiculed as he got up to his feet.

Theo’s heart ached as he stared at his best friend. He knew that Draco was struggling but he didn’t realise just how bad it was.

“Draco, listen to me,” Theo said as he placed a sympathetic hand on Draco’s shoulder.

“Hermione *isn’t* here.”

Smacking his hand away, Draco said, “Look, I get it if you think I’m being impulsive or that we’re too young to get married or whatever but stop, Theo. This isn’t funny.”

“I know that you’re hurting but you need to accept it,” Theo said. “Hermione is gone.”

“Fuck you!” Draco spat before connecting his fist with Theo’s jaw, causing him to stumble backwards. Grabbing onto the front of his shirt, Draco pinned Theo against the wall.

“Hermione never came back from the war,” Theo coughed out.

“Shut up!” Draco shouted before punching him in the stomach.

Everyone was too stunned, too busy trying to process what was happening to say or do anything. Except for Ginny, who was already rushing forward.

“Look at me!” she commanded as she ripped Draco away from Theo. “I know you’ve probably blocked a majority of the battle out, I know I have, but you *need* to remember.”

“What are you talking about?” Draco scoffed. “I remember the war. Potter died, then he came back to life and killed Voldemort.”

“Actually, I wasn’t the one who-” Harry began but Ginny raised her hand to silence him.



“Just fucking humour me and do it,” Ginny said. “You don’t even need to remember all of it, just the last half. Where were you when Harry jumped out of Hagrid’s arms?”

Annoyed but wanting to move on from the topic, Draco’s brows pulled together as he thought back on the war.

“I was with Granger,” he replied. “We were on the steps in front of the school.”

“Good, yes,” Ginny nodded. “And then after Harry ran off and Voldemort followed him, what happened?”

Draco took another moment as he tried to remember.

“We got separated for a little, ” he said. “I got hit in the arm by a hex while I searched for Hermione. Eventually, I found her in the courtyard, a Death Eater was approaching behind her.”

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### *Flashback - 'The End'*

“Down, Granger!” Draco shouted as he rushed forward, covered her face with his arm and sent what was most likely his hundredth killing curse of the day. Once the Death Eater fell to the ground, Draco placed his hand under Hermione’s chin, tilted her head back and checked for any wounds.

“Are you okay?” he asked, the look in his eyes just as frantic as the tone lacing his words.

“Yes,” she replied. Her jaw fell open and her eyes widened as she took note of the gash in his left arm. “But you’re not. You’re bleeding, Draco.”

“I’m fine,” he reassured her. “We have to keep moving, okay?”

“Right, okay,” she nodded.

“Stay close, Granger. I can’t lose you.”

Draco and Hermione were prepared for the inevitable battle against Voldemort, at least they thought they were. They knew that there would be people who died in the process but they didn’t expect a full-on blood bath.

As they manoeuvred their way across the courtyard, Draco gripped tightly onto Hermione’s hand as he nonverbally slaughtered every individual that he spotted dressed in black robes while Hermione blocked the hundreds of hexes flying towards them.

They had been fighting for hours, exhausting every last drop of their magic. They were rarely offered a moment to catch their breath before having to turn and do it all over again.

Sharp and agonised screams pierced Hermione's ears as they made their way across the battlefield. Every three steps she had to slightly jump to avoid stepping on the lifeless body of one of her former classmates.

Every professor, student and their family members were fighting alongside them but many lacked the skills and training needed to properly defend themselves. After the first half of the battle, when Voldemort called for the Death Eaters to retreat, Hermione took count of the bodies that lined the Great Hall.

Eighty-five.

Eighty-five men, women and children had already been lost and the war wasn't even close to ending. She did her best to help Madam Pomfrey and the other healers with patching wounds and mending broken bones but she was drained physically, mentally and emotionally and she could see that Draco was too.

He had been through so much already and barely had time to recover from the side effects of Bellatrix's abusive legilimency. And to top it off, he was grieving. Remus' and Tonks' bodies were in the centre of the Great Hall. They would've walked right past them if Molly Weasley hadn't stopped them.

Draco's expression remained emotionless as Molly offered him her condolences but Hermione could see how much he was hurting. She could see it in the way his jaw clenched and how his eyebrow twitched.

It destroyed him.

Draco had never felt pain like that before. He was so angry at Tonks. She was supposed to stay home with Teddy and Andromeda. She was supposed to stay alive. He didn't even get to see her one last time, though if he had he would've dragged her back home immediately. He wanted to scream. He wanted to break everything within the vicinity, but he didn't. He kept his composure because if he broke, he wasn't sure he would be able to put himself back together and he couldn't afford to fall apart, not yet.

While Harry and Ron were busy trying to kill the snake, and with Remus and Tonks now gone, everyone turned to Hermione and Draco to lead them.

Hermione had just lost so many people. Remus, Tonks, Fred, Padma, the list went on. So when everyone turned to her for guidance, she, for the first time, didn't know what to do. She was out of dittany to distribute, out of weaponised vials and she was wiped clean of all hope. The fire that had previously burned so passionately within her had died along with her friends. Despair hung heavy in the air and every breath that she drew suffocated her.

But then Draco stepped forward and spoke. It wasn't an award-winning speech by any means and it was probably far too hostile and contained too many swear words but still, it worked. The spark reignited within their peers and within Hermione.

There was one part of Draco's speech that continued to replay in Hermione's head.

*“They deserve to have their sacrifice mean something. If we give up now, then we’re only insulting them,”* he had said.

Hermione knew that he was referring to Remus and Tonks. It was at that moment that she decided that she couldn’t give up, no matter how tired she may be. She had to keep pushing forward, she had to keep fighting. And most of all, she had to make sure Draco lived and made it to Teddy.



Rounding the corner, Hermione and Draco stepped out into what used to be the entrance hall of the castle. Before them, standing amidst the carnage and destruction, was Voldemort.

“You need to leave, Granger,” Draco commanded as his grip tightened on the handle of his wand, his eyes never leaving Voldemort’s cold, unfeeling and snake-like gaze.

Hermione squared her shoulders, her own wand at the ready. “I’m not leaving you, Draco. We’re in this together.”

“Young love,” Voldemort drawled. “Pity that it should end so soon.”

With a flick of his wrist, a beam of light escaped the tip of Voldemort’s wand and soared towards Draco. Dragging his wand through the air, Draco deflected the curse and immediately threw one back. The tension was palpable, and the air was charged with magic as Hermione and Draco faced off against Voldemort. Their wands moved in perfect synchronisation as they matched him spell for spell. The room filled with the sound of curses and lit up with bright flashes of light as their magic collided.

“Working with the Order, concealing the location of Harry Potter, falling in love with a mudblood,” Voldemort seethed, each fact emphasised with a hex. “Your list of betrayals seems to go on forever, Draco.”

“Call me an overachiever,” Draco shrugged as he countered the curse.

Hermione and Draco remained focused as they continued to circle Voldemort, taking turns muttering enchantments, praying that one would finally hit their target. The elder wand was a powerful match but its allegiance wasn’t with Voldemort. Draco could see it beginning to fail him. Draco’s lips parted as he prepared to send another curse but then he heard a scream. His eyes shot over to the left to investigate the source of the sound. Every muscle in his body was taut with tension as he stared at Greyback, who had his wand pressed into the side of Hermione’s neck.

With his focus on Hermione, Draco didn’t see Voldemort raise his wand and cast a killing curse. The cracking sound of the magic caused his head to turn. To his surprise, the green beam was intercepted by a far more powerful stream of red. Looking to his right, Draco

watched as Lucius slowly stepped out of the shadows. Lucius quickly glanced over at Draco, checking for any injuries, before turning back to face Voldemort.

Another crack to his left earned Draco's attention. He remained still as Narcissa moved forward with deadly grace. Her movements were slow and controlled, each step measured and precise as she disarmed Greyback, offering Hermione a chance to slip from his hold and run over to Draco.

With Hermione now in his arms, Draco's eyes flicked back and forth between his parents, watching as the scene unfolded before him. Narcissa and Lucius stood tall as they faced their opponents, determination etched into their faces. Vibrant colours soared through the air as curses and counter-curses were exchanged.

Draco didn't know what to think as he watched Lucius stand against Voldemort. He was fighting to protect Draco, to keep him safe from harm. It was the first time that Draco had witnessed his father prioritise his family, prioritise *him*. So when his wand flew out of his hand and a blinding light crashed into Lucius' body, Draco experienced an unfamiliar emotion when it came to his father - admiration. He didn't have time to feel any sorrow or grief in regard to his father's passing because immediately, he heard his mother call out his name.

Rushing to her side, Draco held Narcissa in his arms and removed the dagger from her abdomen. The clinking sound of the metal hitting the stone floor harmonised with Bellatrix's deranged laugh.

Everything was moving at lightning speed as Draco cast a spell to dismember Greyback and another to split open Bellatrix's throat and then suddenly, time slowed and everything went silent. His eyes tracked his wand as it left his hand, flew through the air and landed in Hermione's grasp.

Draco's throat constricted and his heart felt like it had been ripped from his chest as her lips formed the words "I love you," and tears fell from her eyes.

"No!" he screamed as he lunged forward, but before his left foot could even touch the ground, a deadly beam of light slammed into the centre of her chest.

Rage and anger boiled within him, a fiery inferno that consumed him entirely. As Draco's gaze met Voldemort's, something snapped within him. Drawing upon every last drop of his magic, he channelled all of his hatred and fury and released it with a roar of defiance. The ground beneath their feet shook and the walls around them came crumbling down as Draco advanced, unleashing a barrage of spells, each one striking its target with devastating precision. Voldemort staggered against the weight and relentless force of Draco's magic until finally, he fell to his knees and his body began to disintegrate. Draco felt the flame within him die down as he watched his former master turn into nothing more than specks of ash, floating away in the wind.

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## *Present Day*

Draco dropped to his knees. It felt like he had been hit with a thousand crucios and like his body had been dismantled - each limb torn from its place and his heart thrown into a pool of acid. His throat was narrow as he struggled to draw in a single breath. His ears were ringing, his head throbbing, and even the slightest bit of light caused his eyes to burn.

None of that was real.

It couldn't be real.

He didn't *want* it to be real.

"Draco," he heard a muffled voice say. The gentle pressure of a hand on his shoulder caused his head to snap over to his left, hoping and praying that it would be Hermione looking down at him, but it wasn't.

"Draco," Ginny said once more, her voice soft and compassionate.

"No," he choked out as he shook his head. "No no **NO!**" his voice broke as he tightly covered his ears and hunched over, his forehead pressed against the cold marble floor. "She's not dead, she's not dead, she's not dead," he kept repeating.

"It's going to be alright."

"No!" he snapped as he shot up to his feet, his eyes frantically searching the room for the witch that he was certain he had just spent the last four months with.

"See!" he said as he pointed over at Hermione, who was still standing in the centre of the room. "She's right there, she's fine."

Everyone looked in the direction he was pointing, only to see empty space.

"Draco," Pansy said delicately. "There's no one there."

"Yes there is!" he argued as he began walking towards Hermione. "Look, I'll even grab her-" Draco's heart fell into his stomach as his hand passed straight through hers. He shook his head in disbelief as he reached out for her again. Draco desperately tried to grab onto her hand, her arm, waist, face, anything. He just needed to feel her, to know that she was there. But each time, his hand moved through her like thin air.

"This can't-I don't-" he stammered as he stared at Hermione, waiting for her to say that it was just a joke, a stupid trick that they were all playing on him, and that of course she was there, but she didn't.

Tears streamed down her face as she looked into Draco's eyes. "I'm sorry," she whispered, her voice cracking with every word.

Bile rose in the back of his throat as he ran his fingers through his hair. They were all coming back, the memories. All of the moments that he had suppressed for the last four months and

the emotions that came with them.

Anger.

Frustration.

Sorrow.

Loneliness.

But the one that consumed him the most, the emotion that had left him completely debilitated and forced him to compartmentalise in the first place, was guilt. It ate away at him and each breath that he'd take would send a sharp and agonising pain through his chest, and now he was experiencing it all over again. It felt wrong to be still breathing, to be still alive. What good had he done that earned him the right to still live and not Hermione? The answer was none, which he decided was the reason that he was in this circumstance in the first place.

What better way to condemn him for his wrongdoings than to force him to live without the only person who gave his life meaning?

He stumbled backwards, reaching out to grab something, anything, to keep from falling. The room spun around him, and he felt as though he was suffocating. He couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't feel anything but the excruciating pain in his chest. He heard someone speak but their voice was muffled by the loud ringing in his ears.

He felt a scream building inside him, a scream of loss, grief, and anger, but before he could release it, he felt another hand on his shoulder. He wished people would stop touching him. He didn't want to feel them, he wanted to feel *her*.

"Mate-" Theo said.

Draco grasped Theo's wrist and twisted his arm back. "Where were you?" he asked. "Where were you this entire fucking time?! Why didn't-why didn't you tell me?" Draco turned to look at the rest of his friends. "Why didn't any of you fucking tell me?!"

"We tried," Harry sheepishly stated. "We all took turns coming to visit you, but each time you had Bippy turn us away. After a month we sort of just..." he trailed off as he looked down at his hands.

"You sort of just, what, Potter?" Draco snarled. "You sort of just moved on with your life? You sort of just went on your merry little way and moved on from *her*?"

"That's not fair, Draco," Hermione said.

Turning around, he looked at the ghost of the woman that he loved. "Fair?" he scoffed. "You think I give a damn about fair? None of this is fair, Granger! You're not even-" his voice caught in the back of his throat. Closing his eyes, he drew in a deep breath before continuing. "You're not even real."

It felt like she had been hit with the killing curse all over again as the words fell from his lips.

“Just because you can’t touch me doesn’t mean I’m not real, Draco,” Hermione said quietly. “I’m still here with you, doesn’t that count for something?”

“That’s not good enough! I don’t want some conjured version of you that only I can see, I want the *real* you! I want to take your hand and put this stupid fucking ring on it,” Draco said as he angrily held up the small box. “I want to stand with you before our friends and say those damn vows and kiss you. I want to build our cottage, buy our flat in the muggle neighbourhood, and start a family with you, but I can’t, *we* can’t!”

“Draco, please,” she said as she took a step toward him.

“No,” Draco said as he raised his hand to stop her. “Don’t come any closer. I can’t... it’s too much and I... just don’t.”

His mind was a mess, a tornado of emotions that were all screaming at him. He wanted to destroy everything, to lash out at the world and make everyone pay for taking Hermione away from him. He felt the anger welling up inside him and he couldn’t take it anymore, he was about to explode. Turning, Draco walked straight past his friends, ignoring their questions as to where he was going, and slammed the door behind him.

As he stormed through the manor and out to the gardens, Draco began piecing everything together. It was right in front of him the whole time. Hermione would back away whenever he’d reach for her not because she didn’t *want* him to touch her, but because he couldn’t. She’d never eat the food Bippy would prepare because she couldn’t even pick up the damn fork. Even her breakdowns and the things that she would say - she was practically screaming it in his face and he never saw it. He ignored it all so that he could continue living in his fantasy world, and in the process, he made her suffer.

For the last four months, Draco thought that everything he was doing was for Hermione. He believed that he was helping her through the healing process but instead, he was destroying her. She died and he forced her to continue to remember the life that she wouldn’t get to have.

He felt like he was about to throw up.

Bursting through the door of the greenhouse, Draco looked around at the place that he had worked so tirelessly on. He walked to the centre of the room, his eyes fixed on the rows of flowers and plants, stopping when he reached the orchids. He had built this for Hermione in hopes that it would be a place that would bring her peace, but now Draco could see that all it did was bring her anguish. He had single-handedly tainted one of her favourite memories with her parents by building it.

Taking out his wand he whispered, “Incendio.”

Stepping outside, Draco stood back and watched as the greenhouse went up in flames. He felt so foolish for believing that he would be able to live a happy life with Hermione. He wasn’t deserving of happiness and this was the world’s cruel way of reminding him of that. He couldn’t stand the thought of living in a world without her, of having to face a future that was devoid of her warmth and love.

Finally, he allowed himself to scream. All of the rage, frustration, and heartache poured out of him as he strained his vocal cords until they gave out. He wanted to destroy everything that reminded him of the love that was ripped away from him. He wanted to rid himself of the memories, of the torment, of Hermione.

Heading back inside and now finding himself in the library, he scanned over the hundreds of books that lined the shelves. Draco had spent weeks tracking down the first editions of every book that he knew she loved. He had built Hermione her own personal library as a symbol of his devotion to her and of his admiration for her thirst for knowledge. But for what? She would never be able to read them. She wouldn't even be able to pick up one of the bloody books.

Draco rushed towards the nearest shelf and made his way down the line of books, ripping the pages from within and throwing them across the room. He continued this cycle until he was surrounded by hundreds of shredded pieces of paper. He had just removed his wand and was preparing to set the room on fire, to cleanse himself of the memory of her, just like he did with the greenhouse, but then he heard his mother's voice.

"Perhaps we don't start a fire in the house," Narcissa said as she stood in the doorway, her hands elegantly folded in front of her. "It would be an awful shame to lose a place that's been in the family for centuries."

A surge of pain coursed through Draco as he looked at his mother. He had been so consumed by the loss of Hermione that he had forgotten about the others he lost as well.

His mother, Remus, Tonks, and even his father. He hadn't blocked out his death but he did suppress how Lucius died. He died protecting him. It was too much, there were too many people that he had lost, too many who had sacrificed their lives and it was breaking him. It felt like the weight of the world was on his chest and it was crushing him, breaking every bone in his body.

He was alone.

Everyone that he loved was gone.

Falling to his knees, Draco dropped his head in his hands and let everything surface. He could hear the screams of the dying and the clash of the spells ringing in his head like a never-ending chorus. He could vividly see the image of his father being hit by the killing curse, he could feel the warmth of his mother's blood on his hands after removing the dagger from her abdomen, and he could remember the weight of Hermione's lifeless body as he held her in his arms.

He couldn't shake the feeling that it was all his fault. If he had just done what was asked of him, if he had played his part as a Death Eater, and never searched for a way out, then he wouldn't have fallen in love with Hermione and she would've never given her life to save him. His father and mother would've never had to fight to protect him and maybe, somehow, Remus and Tonks would still be alive too.



“Darling,” Narcissa said as she crouched down beside him. “I know it might not feel like it right now, but this feeling will pass. You will piece yourself back together and you’ll be alright.”

“I don’t understand,” he choked out between sobs. “If you’re gone then how can I... how can I still see and hear you?”

Narcissa pointed to the black stone on Draco’s ring.

“The resurrection stone,” she said. “Powerful enough to bring back loved ones but not powerful enough to do so fully.”

Draco remembered Harry talking about the resurrection stone during the Horcrux hunt. He had discovered it hidden within the golden snitch that Dumbledore had left to him. What he didn’t remember was how he came to be in possession of it.

As if Narcissa could read his mind, she said, “It was a week after the battle. You were so distraught. You would start your morning with a bottle of firewhiskey and then you’d end your evening with enough calming draught to sedate a troll. It broke my heart to watch you suffer so much, Draco.”

“You were watching me?” he asked.

“Of course I was, all of us were. Your father, Tonks, Remus, and Hermione. Although it may have seemed like it, we never once left your side,” Narcissa replied. “We also watched as you shut everyone out and locked yourself away. I think it was the loneliness that finally did it for you.”

“What are you talking about?”

Narcissa let out a sigh. “One day you sort of just snapped. I wanted so badly to reach out and hold you at that moment, to tell you that everything was going to be okay and that none of this was your fault, because it isn’t Draco.”

“But mother I-”

“It doesn’t matter what you did or didn’t do,” she said, cutting him off. “We all chose to do what we did out of our own free will, out of our love for you.”

Draco wanted to argue with Narcissa. He wanted to list off all of the reasons as to why it *was* his fault, but he had no energy and no fight left. He was drained. He was numb.

“It still doesn’t make any sense,” Draco said. “Potter had the resurrection stone before the war.”

“That he did, which is why you broke into his flat one day and demanded that he handed it over.”

As if her words were the key, the memory rushed forward and played out in Draco’s head.

*"I know you have it, Potter!" Draco shouted as he pinned him against the wall.*

*"I told you that I don't have it!" Harry replied. "I dropped it somewhere in the forbidden forest."*

*"Where?"*

*"How the bloody hell am I supposed to know?! In case you forgot, I literally died in that forest."*

*"Shame it didn't stay that way," Draco quipped.*

*Ignoring his remark, Harry asked, "What is it that you want with the stone anyways?"*

*"The fuck do you think, Potter?"*

*Harry's eyes softened. He recognised the pain in Draco's face, it was how he imagined he looked when he lost Sirius.*

*"Malfoy," he sighed. "The stone won't bring her back, you know? Not fully at least."*

*Draco's grip on Harry's shirt loosened, his shoulders dropped and he clenched his jaw.*

*"I'm well aware," Draco replied, his voice strained. "But a piece of her is better than nothing at all."*

Draco's head pounded as the memories continued to assault his mind. He remembered it all. Leaving Harry's flat. Searching the forbidden forest for hours. Finally finding the stone and seeing Hermione and the pang in his chest when he heard her say his name.

And then he remembered losing her all over again.

He had returned to the manor and was in the middle of talking to Hermione when he set the stone down on the table and turned around to see that he was, once again, all alone. He remembered taking an old ring of his and fusing it with the stone so that he could have it on him at all times, so that he could have *Hermione* with him at all times.

His hand shook as he reached for the resurrection stone. He was ready to have her back but was fearful that his alterations somehow interfered with the magic that made it possible for him to summon her in the first place. To his relief, when he picked up the ring, Hermione materialised before him.

He had gotten her back.

Then, the breakdowns began.

Hermione would voice her pain and frustration. She didn't want to be confined to the restrictions of the resurrection stone. She wanted to be alive fully or she wanted to remain dead. Hermione and Draco fought for hours on end for the first few weeks.

*"I know that I'm being selfish, I understand that!" Draco shouted as he frustratingly ran his hand down the length of his face. "But we can be together this way."*

*"We can't even touch, Draco!" Hermione argued.*

*"I know but—"*

*"And what about your future?" she asked. "What about all of the plans that you made?"*

*"The only plans I made are the ones with you!"*

*"You can't just throw away your life, Draco!"*

*"You are my life, Granger," Draco replied. "Without you, there's nothing. I'm nothing."*

A majority of their fights contained the same argument, just worded differently. Hermione would say that he needed to move on and start building his life and Draco would shut it down by saying that there was no reason for him to do so if he couldn't do it with her.

It was an exhausting first few weeks, but eventually, Hermione conceded. Draco was in an unimaginable amount of pain and she thought that if she just leaned into the situation and gave it some time, he'd heal. She had hoped that by her being there, she could help him process everything and then he could start living again.

Instead, Draco ended up suppressing everything. All of the traumatic events throughout the Horcrux hunt and a majority of the war were filed away and safely hidden behind occlumency.

He had changed the ending to their story.

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Notes

### Part One of Hermione's Version

***May 2, 1998 : 139***

"Expelliarmus!"

Hermione watched as Draco's head whipped around and tracked his wand as it flew through the air. She saw devastation and horror consume his eyes as the long piece of wood landed in her grasp. And as the words, "I love you," fell from her lips, she visibly saw his heart shatter into a million pieces.

Then, everything went silent.

When Hermione opened her eyes, she was met by a blinding light. She blinked a few times, trying to adjust to the brightness that surrounded her. Once her vision cleared, she took in her surroundings. She was at King's Cross, only it was different.

For starters, it was clean, almost sterile. Then there was the energy radiating in the air. The students weren't excitedly running around and muttering quick goodbyes to their parents before rushing onto the train. Instead, they were reuniting. The platform was crowded with individuals of various ages, all of whom had tears streaming down their faces as they tightly held onto their loved ones.

"Hermione," an elegant voice echoed from behind.

Turning, Hermione's gaze landed on the source of the sound - it was Narcissa. She felt a pang of apprehension in her chest. Was she angry with her for being with her son? Was she angry at Hermione for threatening to ruin the purity of their bloodline? Did Narcissa even know that they were together?

There were too many unknowns that left Hermione unsure of how to approach the situation. So instead, she remained silent and prayed that Narcissa would break the silence between them.

"I was hoping I wouldn't see you here today," Narcissa sighed. "Though, I'd be lying if I said that I was surprised."

"P-pardon?" Hermione stuttered, confused by her statement.

"Love is a powerful thing," she replied before turning and making her way down the platform.

Hermione didn't know if she was meant to be following. That was until Narcissa glanced back at her and tilted her head slightly, signalling for her to do so. Once Hermione caught up and was at her side, Narcissa continued speaking.

"As I was saying, love is a powerful thing, Hermione. It can be beautiful, magical even. It can also be so strong that one is willing to give their life to save the one that they love. With that being said, it can also sometimes blind us, cause us to make poor decisions, and ignore certain signs that are telling us to run the other way. Take me, for example."

"Oh, I-well, I don't-" Hermione fumbled over her words as she found herself, once again, unsure of what to do.

Was this a test?

Did Narcissa want to see if she'd speak ill of her husband?

"You needn't filter yourself around me, Hermione," Narcissa said with a soft smile. "I'm aware that my husband is many things, a good man rarely being one of them."

Hermione offered her a smile in return and a slight nod, still feeling hesitant to verbalise her own opinions. As the pair continued their way down the platform in silence, Hermione took the time to observe the people surrounding them.

To her left was an elderly gentleman who was holding a woman, who looked to be in her mid-thirties, in a tight embrace. Based on the tears staining their cheeks and the few coherent words she overheard the man say, Hermione felt safe in her assumption that they were family members - perhaps even a father and daughter reuniting.

Straight ahead were two men in their mid to late twenties. For a moment, they just stared at one another, each refusing to speak because they knew that once they did, they'd break. Hermione watched as the taller blond finally took a step in and placed his hand on the other man's shoulder. Immediately, the slightly shorter brunette threw his arms around him.

*They were friends, Hermione decided. Best friends even.*

For each group of people that they passed, Hermione intently observed their interactions and conjured a backstory for all of them. It made things easier for her, to imagine a full life for them, because she couldn't bring herself to admit that a majority of them, especially the younger ones, were robbed of their futures - that *she* was robbed of her future.

Hermione's observation of everyone was interrupted when Narcissa came to a halt and said, "May I ask you something?"

"Sure," Hermione replied.

"You loved Draco, yes?"

"Yes," she replied confidently. "I've never loved someone as much as I love him."

"You say *love* as in, you still do?"

Hermione nodded. "I'm always going to love him. Death will not change that."

"Thank you," Narcissa said quietly with tear-filled eyes. "All I ever wanted was for him to see that he was capable and *worthy* of being loved. It brings me peace to know that someone was able to see what I've always seen in him."

"That he's good," Hermione added.

"Yes."

"Then I feel like it's important for *me* to thank *you*."

"What for?"

"For raising him to be the good man that I fell in love with," Hermione explained. "He always spoke fondly of you, and I can see why."

"You're too kind, Hermione," Narcissa smiled, her voice cracking slightly. Letting out a deep breath, she stepped off to the side and elegantly raised her arm, gesturing for Hermione to board the train.

"Where does it go?" she asked nervously.

"I'm not sure, but from what I've heard, you aren't the type to be scared off by the unknown."

Hermione always thrived on having a plan for everything. A plan for her day, month, and year. A plan for how to get out of whatever sticky situation Harry and Ron manage to get them into, and a plan for how certain moments in her life were supposed to go. Dying at the age of eighteen wasn't a part of that plan nor was meeting her boyfriend's mother for the first time in the afterlife. She had always planned for her and Draco to go over to the manor on the weekend for tea or dinner one evening. *That* was how she was meant to meet Narcissa. And most importantly, she had always planned for Draco to be with her, but he wasn't.

There was no need for plans anymore. Everything that Hermione had carefully mapped out for herself was thrown out the window because her circumstances had changed. The things she had anticipated to achieve and the memories she looked forward to making with Draco were no longer attainable.

So, as she closed her eyes, she started new.

Her hopes for getting a secluded cottage or a flat in a Muggle town with Draco were discarded and replaced with the hope that Draco would live a full life, a *happy* life. And then, when the time was right, she would meet him here and they could begin their life together. It wouldn't be the one that they had planned for, but it would be theirs.

Opening her eyes, Hermione let out a deep breath and boarded the train.

***May 5, 1998 : 137***

"How is he?" Narcissa questioned as she and Hermione joined Lucius by the fireplace.

"He's on his second bottle," Lucius replied with an exhausted sigh.

Narcissa claimed the seat next to her husband while Hermione opted to remain standing. Even though Narcissa had insisted that there was no animosity, Hermione found herself still walking on eggshells when around Draco's parents. As far as she was concerned, they were complete strangers. Lucius refused to even acknowledge Hermione's presence, and while Narcissa was nothing but nice to her, there was still this formidable essence to her.

Leaning forward slightly, Hermione focused her attention on the orange flames. It was all so odd to her, watching Draco this way. This wasn't how she thought it would be. Hermione always thought that if an individual was capable of watching over their loved ones in the afterlife, it would be similar to using a pensieve. She assumed that she'd be able to walk by his side. She assumed that, in a way, she would be able to be with him.

Instead, Hermione and his parents gathered in front of some tiny fireplace and watched him like he was some sort of character in a movie, and it was breaking her.

It was a rare occurrence for her to step away from the fireplace. The only time she did would be when she'd sleep for a few hours or when she'd go check in on her friends and parents. Hermione wanted to make sure that they were okay as well, but it was different. Her parents had no recollection of her, so her passing had no impact on them. As for Ginny, Harry, and Ron, they had each other. They were hurting, of course, there were a lot of lives lost, but at the end of the day, they weren't alone in their grief.

But Draco.

Draco was alone.

His isolation, however, was not a result of having nobody wanting to be there for him. Two days ago, Blaise, Pansy, and Theo went to visit him, and just yesterday, Harry and Ginny went to go see him, but Draco ordered Bippy to send them all away.

Everyone expected him to be in poor condition as he grieved. They even prepared themselves to watch as he spiralled. Draco had lost so many people: his parents, his cousin, and *his* Granger. But Hermione knew grief. She had seen Harry struggle with it after he had lost Sirius, and then later, Dumbledore.

No.

What Draco was experiencing wasn't grief.

It was something far more painful than that.

It was guilt.

And the forced isolation was him punishing himself.

From the second he'd wake and begin drinking, until the moment the calming draught would knock him out, Hermione would watch and listen as he blamed himself.

*"It's my fault, it's all my fault. If I had just done what I was told then none of this would have happened. They would still be here. **She** would still be here."*

Guilt had consumed him so much that at this point, Hermione wouldn't be surprised if one day she overheard Draco blame himself for the entire war. It was painful for everyone to watch, but someone who seemed to be affected by it the most was surprisingly, Lucius.

"He's not getting any better," Lucius muttered to Narcissa.

"Give him some more time, darling. His wounds are still fresh. He'll heal eventually," she replied. Narcissa's words might have been convincing if it weren't for the crack in her voice.

"I need a break," Lucius stated, frustration lacing his words.

Growing up, Hermione always wished she had the power to see inside of someone's mind. Of course, when she started attending Hogwarts, she discovered that she was capable of it. She had tried a few times to perform the act of legilimency in an attempt to help Harry decode the visions of Voldemort he was seeing. To her displeasure, the skill didn't come naturally to her.

The idea of being able to read someone's mind was appealing mainly because Harry and Ron were absolute shit at expressing their feelings. But now, it would help her understand individuals like Lucius. Since he didn't speak to her or even look in her general direction, Hermione was left to come up with her own conclusion as to why seeing Draco struggle so much was so upsetting.

There was the obvious reason - his son was in pain.

Though, Hermione found it hard to believe that was it. She remembered the stories that Draco had told her about his father and based on those, Lucius seemed to enjoy inflicting pain on his son.

Then there was the second possible reason - Lucius was annoyed that his son was letting his emotions control him. Based on a conversation she remembered having with Draco during the Horcrux hunt, this reason made the most sense.

*"The locket works, I don't magically disable whatever curse was placed on it. I just don't grant it control over me," Draco explained.*

*"You say that like it's such a simple thing."*

*"It is, for me at least. I've never been in a position where I could let my emotions control me, so why would I let a stupid locket do so?"*



That was it, Hermione had decided. That conversation, combined with the stories Draco had shared with her, it was obvious that Lucius was the one who taught Draco that it wasn't okay to show your emotions, let alone allow them to control you. And right now, Draco's emotions had full power over him.

"He'll heal," Narcissa stated, snapping Hermione from her thoughts. "One day, Draco will heal and he'll be okay, right?" her glossy eyes flickered up to meet Hermione's.

Hermione didn't have a definitive answer for her. How could she? Sure, Harry healed, was able to find peace, and move on after losing Sirius and Dumbledore, but Draco wasn't Harry. He didn't process things the same way. As much as Hermione hated the saying, she knew that only time could tell. But, as she looked into Narcissa's eyes, she could see the desperation. Narcissa needed someone to tell her that her son was going to be alright, even if it were a lie.

"Yes," Hermione nodded. "He's going to be okay."

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An hour or so passed before Narcissa excused herself, leaving Hermione alone. With no one else around, the muscles in her shoulders and neck relaxed and she felt like she could finally breathe. She wanted to stay strong for the others but it was exhausting.

Hermione was now sitting on the floor, her legs pulled into her chest, her arms wrapped tightly around them and her chin propped up on her knee as she sat in silence with Draco. He had reached the part of the evening where the calming draught had started to kick in. Draco was curled up on the couch, his hands tightly clutching on the book that he had given Hermione for Christmas.

It was moments like these where Hermione allowed herself to slip into a state of delusion.

Into a state that let her pretend that they were together.

That he could hear her.

"I remember the day that you gave me that book. It was the same day I realised just how screwed I truly was when it came to you," she lightly chuckled as she reminisced on the memory. "Every time I thought I had you figured out, you'd surprise me with a new intriguing, charming, and endearing side to you. I fully believe that even if we were lucky enough to spend an entire lifetime together, it still wouldn't have been enough time to learn everything that makes you, you. You're an impossibly complicated individual, Draco Malfoy. But Gods, what an adventure it would've been navigating life with you."

Reaching out in front of her, Hermione closed her eyes and imagined that she was sitting on the couch beside him. She tapped into the details of his body that she had committed to memory during the war. She remembered how it felt to run her fingers through his hair, the warmth of his body against hers, the areas of his skin that were soft and the patches that were rough. She remembered the smell of his cologne and how it used to intoxicate all of her senses.

And lastly, she remembered how his heartbeat would sync with hers.

"I love you, Draco," she whispered as tears burned their way down her cheeks.

### ***May 7, 1998 : 135***

Life after death was overly predictable. Hermione knew what to expect every day that she woke. First, she'd roll over in her bed and bury her face in her pillow to steal just a few more minutes of silence. Then, when she finally mustered enough energy, she'd drag herself out of bed and join everyone downstairs. Mornings were odd. They didn't sit together at a table and enjoy some eggs or a glass of tea. There was no need to. Food served no purpose to them now because their bodies no longer relied on it to survive.

Instead, Hermione would awkwardly stand off to the side while Narcissa and Lucius sat on the couch and watched over their son. At least once a day his parents would get into some sort of argument. It was always the same thing, Lucius would voice his agitation regarding his son's mental state, Narcissa would try to calm him down, and then Lucius would storm off. Narcissa would always stick around for a little bit longer, but eventually, even she'd state that she needed a break.

For the rest of the day, Hermione would be left with the privacy that she yearned for. She'd take small breaks here and there, mostly when Remus and Tonks would stop by. Hermione knew how close Tonks and Draco were so she'd always take that time to go check in on her parents and friends to provide Tonks with some space.

"Hermione?" a soft voice spoke. Lifting her head, Hermione met Tonks' kind eyes. "Have you been here all night?" she asked.

Hermione nodded as she gently rubbed her eyes. "I can go for a walk to give you some privacy," she offered as she let out a yawn.

"Nonsense," Tonks said as she sat down next to Hermione. "I find it comforting to have someone with me," she smiled softly.

"Is Remus not coming?"

"No, he's with Teddy right now. It's been... one of those days, you know?"

Hermione knew exactly what she meant. There were days where she could do all of this without getting choked up a single time, and then there were days where she found it difficult to pull in a single breath without feeling like she was suffocating. That's why it was nice to have Remus and Tonks. Not that Hermione was happy that they both lost their lives during the war, but selfishly, she was glad to have someone she knew and who knew her.

Tonks was like a sister to her, which is why she was the one who Hermione would rant to about how maddening Draco was during the Horcrux hunt. And since Remus was married to Tonks, he was also present for a majority of the speeches. They'd both sit, nod their heads, and bite their tongues as Hermione would complain about how maddening Draco was.

Hermione remembered the day that she had awkwardly informed them that she and Draco were dating. The second the words fell from her lips, Remus shot up from his seat, clapped his hands and said, "Took you two long enough!" Both of their reactions to the news confused Hermione. She thought that they would've been surprised, but they weren't because they knew Hermione. They knew her so well that they could see past the complaints at the surface and notice the feelings developing. They knew her so well that they could tell based off of the way her demeanour shifted at the mention of Draco's name, that she loved him.

This was why she was glad to have them with her.

They knew how much she loved Draco.

Which meant that they knew how sitting here, day after day, watching him break, was the cruelest form of torture for her. But because they knew how much she loved Draco, they also understood why she'd continue to put herself through it by staying with him all day.

"What about Draco?" Tonks asked. "What kind of day is he having?"

The question made Hermione's chest ache. All she wanted was to be able to say that he was doing better, even if it were only slightly, but she couldn't.

"Not well," Hermione replied.

"Survivor's guilt is a debilitating thing. He blames himself for everything that happened, for losing all of us."

Hermione nodded.

"I just wish he'd realise that it wasn't, that it was *our* decision."

"Yes, well, you know Draco, always the stubborn sort," Tonks lightly chuckled.

He was definitely stubborn. At one point, Hermione had almost found that side of him endearing. She liked how determined he was once he had his sight set on something. Of course, there were times where his stubbornness would be a major pain in her side, which is exactly what it was right now.

Hermione couldn't take it anymore. All she wanted to do was grab him by the shoulders and shake some sense into him. She wanted to scream at him, to tell him that she didn't sacrifice

her life to save him so that he could waste away in the manor. She wanted to tell him that drowning himself in alcohol each day wouldn't bring any of them back.

She wanted to tell him that she loved him.

That she was okay.

And that it was *okay* for him to heal and move on.

But no matter how loudly she yelled into the burning flames, he wouldn't hear her. He wouldn't hear her because she was no longer a part of his world, and he was no longer a part of hers. Instead, all Hermione *could* do was sit and watch and hope that someday, Draco would find the strength and courage to forgive himself. She knew it wouldn't be easy and that there would be hard days he'd have to combat, but she believed in his resilience.

She believed in *him*.

So, Hermione continued to sit with him in his darkness and hoped that somehow, someday, Draco would eventually find his way back to the light.

Tonks and Hermione sat together in silence and watched as Draco rocked back and forth, his sobs echoing in the stillness of the afterlife. When Hermione's breath hitched, Tonks reached for Hermione's hand and squeezed it tightly.

"Hermione," Tonks said softly. "Can I ask you something?"

Peeling her eyes away from the fireplace, Hermione looked over at Tonks and nodded her head.

"What keeps you here? I think it's safe to say that there is more to this whole afterlife thing than sitting in front of fireplaces all day. So what keeps you from moving on?"

Hermione didn't need time to think the question over, she knew why.

"I already left him once, and even though he wouldn't know, I can't leave him a second time," she replied.

The corner of Tonks' mouth tugged up into a small smile as tears gathered in her eyes.

"What about you?" Hermione asked. "What's keeping you here?"

"I want to move on and so does Remus, but we both fear that when we do, we won't be able to see Teddy," she admitted. "I think one day we'll be strong enough to let go but right now, we just want a little more time with our son."

"Wake up," a deep voice commanded. "I said wake up!"

Abruptly, Hermione's eyes snapped open and she shot up in her bed. She didn't know who she expected to see, but the man standing before her would've never been someone she would've considered. Lucius stood tall, his shoulders rolled back and his chin tilted up slightly as he stared down his nose at her.

"Mr Malfoy, what are you-"

Lucius raised his hand to silence her. "We don't have the time, nor do I wish to conjure the energy needed to answer whatever question you were about to ask," he stated. "You're needed downstairs."

Spinning on his heels, he headed for the door. When he heard no movement from behind informing him that Hermione was following, he glanced over his shoulder at her and said, "That wasn't a request, Miss Granger. Get up."

Pushing the blanket off of her, Hermione swung her legs over the edge of the bed, slipped on her shoes and followed him out. As she descended the stairs with Lucius, her mind began racing with a million different questions.

*What's going on?*

*Did something happen?*

*Were Remus and Tonks okay?*

*Was Draco okay?*

*Why the hell was Lucius the one they sent to retrieve her?*

Before Hermione could explore any possible answers to her endless list of questions, Narcissa ran up to her.

"He's left the manor," she stated.

"W-what?" Hermione's brows furrowed in confusion.

She was certain that she had heard Narcissa wrong. Just yesterday, Draco had locked himself in his father's study and drank his way through every bottle of liquor that he came across until he eventually passed out. Showering was a task in itself for him most days and she couldn't remember the last time she saw him consume anything other than alcohol or calming draught. There was no possible way that Draco woke up today and had suddenly decided to leave the manor for a nice stroll.

"Come, take a look," Narcisa urged as she grabbed Hermione's hand and dragged her over to the fireplace. "See," she said as she pointed at the flames, "that's not a room in the manor."

Hermione couldn't believe it. Draco *had* left the manor. But the thing that shocked her the most was where he was instead. She recognised the interior because she had seen it yesterday

when she checked in on her friends.

"He's at Harry's," Hermione gasped.

Narcissa, Lucius, Tonks, and Remus snapped their eyes over to her.

"Harry, as in Harry Potter?" Narcissa asked.

Hermione nervously nodded.

"Why would my son be there?" Lucius questioned.

"I don't know-" Hermione began, but Remus cut her off.

"He's going to ask Harry for the resurrection stone."

Hermione's stomach instantly dropped. She felt like she was about to throw up.

"My son is not foolish enough to seek out such a dark artefact," Lucius sneered at Remus.

"I don't think Draco is foolish at all," Remus replied. "But I do think that he's desperate enough. I think he's finally been pushed over the edge and the only way for him to get what he wants would be through the use of the resurrection stone."

"What is it that you think he wants?" Narcissa asked.

"The person that made his life worth living," he sighed as he looked over at Hermione.

"No," Hermione said as she shook her head. "No, he wouldn't-Draco knows how dangerous-he wouldn't-"

"Hermione," Tonks' voice was gentle as she cautiously walked towards her.

"No!" she shouted. "You're wrong! Draco wouldn't do that to me!"

Tonks held her hands out in a calming gesture, as if to say, "It's okay," but Hermione kept moving backwards. She didn't want to hear it, she didn't want to be told that it was okay because it wasn't. It was offensive, the claim that Remus had made. It was offensive to her and it was offensive to Draco. For the first time, Hermione found herself agreeing with Lucius. Draco wouldn't be foolish enough to do something like that. There had to be another reason as to why he was at Harry's. Maybe he was finally asking for help, maybe he was finally starting to heal.

"We should talk about what will happen should he find the stone," Remus stated.

"He's not looking for it!" Both Hermione and Lucius shouted at the same time.

Remus and Lucius continued to argue back and forth and Tonks attempted to step in to help diffuse the situation, but it wasn't until Narcissa spoke that everyone finally quieted down.

"Love is a powerful thing," she murmured in a quiet and calming tone as she looked at Hermione with a sympathetic gaze. "Powerful enough to sometimes blind us and cause us to make poor decisions."

She remembered Narcissa saying that to her when they were at King's Cross and while the statement held some validity, Hermione refused to believe that it did right now because if it did, then that would mean that Draco would be forcing her into a life that she didn't want.

When Tonks took another step toward her, Hermione jerked away and said, "I'm sorry but you're wrong, Remus. You're all wrong. You don't know him like I do. Draco would never put me through something like that and I'm not going to sit here and listen to you argue otherwise."

Hermione bolted up the stairs before anyone had the chance to respond. As soon as she reached her room, slammed the door shut and locked it, her legs gave out. Tears streamed down her face as she collapsed to the ground and released all of her pain through gut-wrenching sobs.

She had always been a fighter, someone who never backed down in the face of danger. Even in death, Hermione remained steadfast. But for all her strength and bravery, there was one thing that she had never allowed herself to do - feel her own grief. Hermione had buried her pain deep inside, refusing to acknowledge the weight of her own loss. The loss of her parents, of her friends, and of her future with Draco. She never felt like she was allowed to feel any of those things because they were all a result of the choices that *she* had made.

*She* was the one who decided to obliviate her parents.

*She* was the one who chose to give her life so that Draco could continue his.

What right did she have to sit around crying and cursing the world for taking away her life when it was *her* decision? But there was one additional thing that she refused to acknowledge - the fact that she was human. After years of being called '*the brightest witch of her age*' and having people turn to her for all of the answers, Hermione started to view herself as more of a resource, sometimes even a weapon, more than a person.

Whenever they hit a wall during the Horcrux hunt and found themselves unsure of what to do next, Hermione would blame herself. She was supposed to know what to do, to have a plan, to fix things. She knew that no one ever meant to make her feel that way and that it was just how things turned out over the years but that didn't stop her from feeling like the only thing she was good for was her knowledge.

And then came Draco.

He mocked her for being a '*know-it-all*' and he didn't rely on her to come up with a plan. He was arrogant, rude, conniving, and he was also one of the very few people who never expected anything from her. With him, Hermione didn't have to always have the answers.

With him, she was allowed to make mistakes.

To be scared.

To be human.

Hermione knew that Remus was right when he said that Draco was desperate but she couldn't bring herself to believe that he was desperate enough to use the resurrection stone to bring her back. He was smart, smarter than she cared to admit most of the time, which meant he was aware of the dangers of the stone and of the pain it would inflict on her.

Her breathing had started to steady and her eyes were beginning to dry when suddenly, Hermione felt a strange tug in her chest. Then, the room around her warped and she felt herself being pulled away.

Hermione gasped for air as she struggled to find her balance. Her head was pounding as she tried to figure out what had just happened. She was in her room just a few seconds ago, and now she stood amongst hundreds of trees that stood so tall they touched the clouds. There was something familiar about her surroundings but she couldn't figure out why.

She could've sworn she'd seen these trees before or had she just dreamt of them once?

What was this place?

How did she get here?

Was this even real?

The questions were enough to worsen her already painful headache. Everything hurt. Her head, her eyes, her legs, arms, neck. She wanted it all to stop; the questions, the pain, all of it. Everything in her was telling her to run, to get as far away from this place as possible. Everything except one small, quiet, and calm voice that was telling her to wait.

So, she did.

And then, she heard it. Hermione heard the voice that once yelled at her for being reckless, the one that talked her through multiple panic attacks, and the one that once whispered declarations of love in the quiet of the early morning.

"Granger."

She had never heard her name spoken with such raw emotion before, it was almost as heartbreaking as the look on his face.

"Draco?"



## Chapter 12

"*Are you dead?*" was the question that immediately popped into Hermione's mind as she stared at Draco. She was hoping that he was because if he wasn't, then that meant he had done the one thing that Hermione had prayed he wouldn't.

"Granger," he said again before rushing forward, his arms reaching out for her. Draco cleared the distance between them in three long strides, but instead of his arms wrapping tightly around her waist, they passed through her like thin air.

"I-what's happening? Why can't I touch you?" he asked, panic filling the creases of his forehead.

Hermione's stomach dropped. Remus was right, Draco *was* desperate enough. He had found the resurrection stone and used it to bring her back. The only thing was, she wasn't actually back. She was still dead and he was still very much alive.

"Draco, you have to send me back," Hermione said calmly.

"What?! No. I just got you back, Granger."

"But you didn't get me back.."

"Yes I did," he argued. "You're standing right in front of me and you look and sound the exact same. The only difference is that I can't-"

"Touch me," she finished.

Draco nodded his head slowly, his eyes cast downward. "Why can't I touch you?" he asked, his voice breaking with each word.

"Because I'm dead, Draco."

It looked as if she had just hit him with a crucio. His usually sharp and piercing eyes were now clouded with a sheen of tears as he choked out, "No." His face was twisted in a grimace of agony and his lips pressed together tightly as he fought to hold back the emotions that Hermione had watched him struggle to survive the past week.

"Y-you're not d-dead," he stammered. "Y-you can't be."

As he continued to shake his head in disbelief and choke out incoherent words, the look of heartbreak etched on his face grew more pronounced. It was as though each short and ragged breath that he drew in was tearing him apart from the inside out, and Hermione's chest ached as she watched Draco crumble under the weight of grief.

*Make it stop*, she mentally pleaded.

*Make it stop.*

Make Draco's pain stop.

*Please make it stop.*

*Make it stop.*

Make *her* pain stop.

*Why wouldn't the pain stop?*

Merlin, **make**.

***It.***

***Stop.***

Standing with him here in the forest was unbearable because all she wanted to do was hold him in her arms. She wanted to comfort him and ease his pain like he had done for her so many times before, but she couldn't. Even though she was *technically* with him, their circumstances hadn't changed. They were still separated by an unassailable barrier - death - something that no amount of magic could repair. It was a strange dichotomy, the feelings that were coursing through her. On one hand, she was overjoyed to see him again, but on the other hand, it was agonising because she still couldn't touch the world of the living. She couldn't touch *him*, and it reminded her of what she was missing out on.

Hermione closed her eyes and let out a deep, shaky breath, exhaling all of her anger and hurt. She knew that one of them needed to be strong, and as Draco's sobs echoed through the trees as he fell to his knees and dropped his head into his hands, Hermione knew that it had to be her. Bending down, Hermione clasped her hands together to restrain herself from reaching out for him.

"Draco," she said delicately. "I need you to look at me."

When his eyes met hers, she could see something in him that she hadn't in a long time - hope. It was as if just being in her presence was enough to heal a small piece of him. There was a voice in her head telling her that what she was about to say was a bad idea, but she pushed it away. While it was torture for her to be with him this way, she was willing to set aside her own discomfort if it meant there was a chance at helping Draco.

They might not be able to build the cottage that they had talked about, buy the flat in the Muggle neighbourhood, have kids, grow old together, or even *touch*. But what they could do was steal a few minutes back and be together for just a little longer.

Hermione could tell him that he wasn't responsible for their deaths.

Hermione could tell him that she had met his parents.

She could tell him that Tonks and Remus were okay.

She could tell him that *she* was okay.

She could tell him that she loved him.

And, hopefully, she could help him find peace.

That's all she wanted for Draco - peace.

"Let's go home," Hermione whispered.

"Home?" he asked.

"Yes, home."

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The manor was just as she remembered it; cold, dark, and unwelcoming. There was a moment of hesitation as Hermione stepped through the front door. The memories of her lying on the drawing room floor assaulted her mind but she buried them. She wasn't here to face her demons, she was here to help Draco, even if it meant hurting herself in the process.

"Do you want something to drink?" the question poured out of him before he had time to process it, but once he did, Draco's eyes widened. "Shit, I'm sorry. I forgot that-I didn't mean to-"

"It's okay," she said with a soft and reassuring smile.

"I'm sorry, I'm not thinking straight. This is all just so..." he trailed off.

"Strange?"

"Yeah," he nodded, "and difficult. You're here but at the same time, you're not and I just-" he paused for a moment and took a deep breath in an attempt to compose himself. "I missed you, is all. Gods did I fucking miss you, Granger."

"I missed you too, Draco," she smiled, tears threatening to fall from her eyes. "Can we sit?"

"Of course."

As they made their way over to the couch, Draco slipped off his jacket and placed the resurrection stone on the table.

"I wanted to tell you that I-" she was abruptly cut off when the familiar tug in her chest reappeared and the room around her warped.

In the blink of an eye, Hermione was ripped away from the manor and thrown back into the afterlife. Still disoriented, she stumbled out of her bedroom and down the stairs. The second Hermione descended the last step, Tonks lunged forward and pulled her into a tight embrace.

"Are you okay, Hermione?" she asked.

"I'm fi-"

"Hermione!" Narcissa exclaimed as she rushed forward and following closely behind was Remus.

Before she knew it, Hermione was surrounded and countless questions were being thrown at her. All of her senses were in overdrive. The light creeping in through the windows was too bright, the air too thick, and the voices too loud. She had never felt so small and trapped in her life. The only person who wasn't suffocating her right now was Lucius, who was still staring into the fireplace.

"Are you okay?" Tonks asked again.

"Was the stone in good condition?" Remus questioned.

"How is Draco?" Narcissa added.

"I-I'm fine," Hermione directed at Tonks. "I think," she said to Remus. "Draco is-he's... he's okay," she lied to Narcissa.

Hermione had hoped that her responses would be sufficient and she'd be rewarded with some quiet, or at least some space, but she wasn't. Instead, she was met with even more questions. Tonks was telling her that they watched the whole thing, that they saw her appear in the forest and go back to the manor with Draco. Remus was babbling about something regarding the stone and Narcissa was requesting more information on Draco's state.

She understood that they had questions but the process of being pulled from the afterlife only to then be shortly thrust back into it was not only painful but it was also draining. Hermione just wanted some time to readjust and process what had just happened.

"He's picking it up again," she heard Lucius say and immediately, the tug in her chest returned and she was ripped away.

The second the manor walls solidified around her, Hermione's legs gave out and she dropped to her knees. Draco frantically called out her name and she could hear his footsteps closing in on her.

"No," Hermione choked out as she raised her hand to stop him. "Don't."

"Granger, I-"

"Stop!" she snapped. "I just... need... some quiet."

"Okay," Draco whispered.

She wanted to help him, she wanted to make sure that he would be okay. But, what she didn't expect was the aftermath of jumping back and forth to take a toll on her which was worse than death reincarnate. Hermione hunched over and ran her fingers through her curls. Closing her eyes, she focused on the rise and fall of her chest as she inhaled through her nose and slowly exhaled through her nose. Once her heart rate levelled out to a steady rhythm, she sat up and pushed her hair out of her face. When she opened her eyes, her gaze landed on the small black stone within Draco's grasp. Every muscle in her body tensed and her face twisted in anger.

"Why would you do this?" Hermione asked, her words laced with rage.

"What do you mean?" he replied, his eyes full of innocence.

"Why would you bring me back like this?!"

Draco shook his head. "I didn't..."

"*You didn't*, what? Tell me, Draco!" she commanded.

"I didn't know how to survive without you!" he blurted out. "Every day I would wake up and remember that you're gone and it killed me! I tried to drown out your voice and blur the memories of us with alcohol and calming draught. But once I was finally able to free myself from the torment that is your absence, I would be haunted by you all over again in my dreams. I couldn't take it anymore!"

"So you thought the next logical step was to use the resurrection stone? Was haunting you in your dreams not good enough? You'd rather have me haunt you in your reality?" Hermione questioned as she got up to her feet.

"I just wanted you back," Draco replied as he followed suit.

"But I'm *not* back!"

"Yes, you are!"

"No, I'm not!" she shouted. "I'm still dead, Draco, and no amount of magic will change that!"

Draco winced at her words. "*Please*," he begged. "Please don't say that."

Hermione could see the pain she was inflicting on him with her words but she couldn't stop them from coming out. The back and forth chipped away at her sanity, leaving her mind a mess. One moment she was alone, then she was with him, then she wasn't, and now she was again. It was all too much and she hadn't been given the time needed to process any of it.

She wanted to help Draco, but at what cost?

Was she really willing to suffer in order to do so? And would her being here actually help him move on? Based on his reasoning as to why he went looking for the resurrection stone, Hermione decided the answer was no. Her being here wasn't going to be helpful to either of them. She refused to play into this fantasy of his.

Taking a step forward, Hermione pressed her hand against Draco's cheek, her palm fading into his skin. "If I were really here, you'd be able to feel me right now," she said before pointing to the stone in his hand. "And if I were really here, I wouldn't disappear every time you set that down."

"I'm not ready to say goodbye yet," he admitted, his eyes red and cheeks stained with tears.

"I know," she sighed. "But I need you to be. I need you to let me go, Draco. I can't stay here."

"But what if you can? What if I can figure out a way to keep you here without me having to constantly hold onto the stone?"

Hermione shook her head sympathetically. "You know I want nothing more than a life with you but--"

"Then let me give it to you," he said eagerly. "I know it won't be the same and that there will be restrictions, but let me do this for you. Let me do this for *us*."

"I don't want tha--"

"I'm going to fix this," Draco said confidently, cutting her off again. "I'm going to bring you back."

"Draco, please listen to me," Hermione begged but it was as if he had gone deaf. She continued to list off reasons as to why it was a bad idea and that it wasn't what she wanted but he wouldn't listen.

"I'm going to put it down which means you'll disappear again, but I'll bring you back as soon as I have everything sorted," Draco stated.

"Don't do this Dra--"

"I love you, Hermione."

As soon as her name fell from his lips, the stone dropped from his hand and Hermione was, once again, pulled away against her own free will.

### ***May 10, 1998 : 140***

When Hermione returned yesterday, she was berated with a chorus of questions again, but this time she didn't take the time to answer any of them. Instead, she walked away without saying a word and locked herself in her room. She didn't want to speak to anyone or hear any of their opinions on the situation.

She wanted to be alone. She wanted some *peace*.

For the first time in her life, Hermione was putting her needs first. And right now, what she needed was time and space to grieve the life that she had been stripped of three times.

*May 11, 1998 : 131*

grief is a house  
where the chairs  
have forgotten how to hold us  
the mirrors how to reflect us  
the walls how to contain us  
grief is a house that disappears  
each time someone knocks at the door  
or rings the bell  
a house that blows into the air  
at the slightest gust  
that buries itself deep in the ground  
while everyone is sleeping  
grief is a house where no one can protect you  
where the younger sister  
will grow older than the older one  
where the doors  
no longer let you in  
or out

*Jandy Nelson, The Sky Is Everywhere*

Hermione still hadn't left her room. For the last three days, she remained curled up in her bed. She didn't have the energy or desire to do anything else. There was a sense of guilt that lingered for not going to check on Draco but it was overpowered by the anger she had toward the situation.

She was frustrated that he hadn't listened to anything she had said, and most of all, she felt betrayed. Hermione was so certain that Remus was wrong when he said that Draco was searching for the resurrection stone. She was so certain that the man she loved would never do something like that. But then, he proved her wrong. Grief proved her wrong.

To Hermione, it felt like he had buried a knife in the back. And now, she was left in a position where she couldn't rid herself of the pain because every day she had people knocking outside her door wanting to give unsolicited advice on how to handle it all.

Narcissa would talk through the door and tell her that it was a gift to be able to be with Draco again and how she'd give anything to be in her position. Remus would offer some sympathetic words but they'd always be followed up by some facts on the magical properties of the stone and how it worked.

Tonks was the only one who visited solely to check on Hermione. Which is why, when she heard the familiar light knock, Hermione dragged herself out of bed and finally answered the door.

"I'm sorry for ignoring you-*Mr Malfoy?!'*" Hermione's breath caught in the back of her throat as she met his uninviting glare.

"You may dismiss the formalities. Especially considering our... *situation*," Lucius drawled. "May I?" he requested, his hand suspended in the air, waiting for permission to enter the room.

"Er, sure," Hermione replied hesitantly before stepping to the side.

As Lucius stepped through the doorway, Hermione couldn't help but observe the way in which he walked. His movements were so... mechanical and precise. Draco moved with precision too but he was fluid, unlike Lucius whose arms remained glued to his side. Apart from their hair, eye colour, and last name, Draco and Lucius were polar opposites.

"Miss Granger-"

"I thought we were dismissing the formalities?" Hermione questioned.

"I said that *you* may do so. I spoke nothing of myself," Lucius explained. "As I was saying, I have noticed your absence downstairs the last three days."

"Yes, well I-"

Lucius raised his hand to silence her. "You've mistaken me, Miss Granger, I have no interest nor do I care about your reasoning for isolating yourself."



"What *do* you care about then?"

"My family."

It took everything in Hermione to not burst into laughter at his response, a fact that Lucius took quick note of.

"Everything I have done was with their best interest in mind," he stated firmly.

"And how exactly does forcing your teenage son to become a Death Eater fall under '*best interest*', Lucius?" Hermione challenged.

"The likelihood of the Dark Lord-"

"Voldemort," she corrected. "His name was Voldemort. If you're going to try and justify offering your son up to a psychotic mass murderer, then the least you can do is use his actual name."

"Very well," he replied through gritted teeth. "The likelihood of *Voldemort* winning the war was high. Securing my son a place in his regime simultaneously secured him a future."

"Secured," Hermione scoffed. "You refer to him becoming a Death Eater so casually like you had booked him some holiday. I also believe you're leaving out a rather big piece."

"Being?"

"The fact that he had to kill people."

"You, of all people, should understand that the price of saving one life often costs another theirs," he countered. "I did what I believed was necessary to ensure that my son would be able to make it past the age of eighteen, to be able to build a life for himself, as did you. Our methods may have been different, but our end goals were the same."

Part of Hermione wanted to scream at him, to curse him out for all of the hell that he put Draco through, but another part of her, a rather annoying one, understood his reasoning. She understood because, he said, their methods were different but their end goals were the same - keep Draco alive.

*No. Fuck this guy. He abused his son,* she reminded herself.

"What about the scars on his body?" Hermione challenged. "And the knife? You know, the one you cursed to infect the bloodstream to delay the healing process?"

"The cursed blade forced Draco to become resourceful, to not rely on common healing techniques such as dittany. Because of such, if my son was ever wounded and didn't have access to a beaded bag with an endless extension charm full of vials of dittany, he would still be capable of healing himself. As for the scars, those were also a lesson."

Hermione narrowed her eyes as she prepared to argue further, but Lucius took a threatening step forward, causing her breath to hitch.

"I have never claimed to be father of the year, Miss Granger, and I never will. I also do not owe *you* an explanation of my parenting technique. However, I'm feeling rather generous today, so I will. But you better listen closely because I will not be repeating myself."

Hermione crossed her arms and began tapping her foot impatiently as she waited for him to continue.

"I was hard on Draco because I had high expectations for him," he stated. "Draco is, and always has been, extremely intelligent with a bright future ahead of him. But as I'm sure you know, he's impossibly stubborn. My son thrives on order, and with order comes consequences. I did not punish Draco for failing to befriend the Potter boy, though he might have seen it that way. I punished him for forgetting the manners that my wife and I had taught him. Regarding the scar on his lower abdomen, that was for his piss poor attitude after losing his first quidditch match, not *because* he had lost. And as for the one along his left side, well, he should have thanked me for that one."

"You're joking, right?"

"Do I come off as the type to joke?" Lucius asked as he quirked a brow.

"Why the fuck would Draco ever thank you for defacing his body like that?" Hermione sneered.

"Such crude language, Miss Granger," he criticised. "The reason why is because if I hadn't, then Voldemort would've done something far worse to him for failing to kill Dumbledore. I do not expect you to agree with my approach but I am also not seeking your validation. All I am saying is that everything that I have done was to strengthen and prepare Draco for life."

"So I'm supposed to believe that abusing your child was done to help him?"

"As I stated previously, I am not seeking your validation."

"Do you want to know what I think?" she asked angrily.

"Not particularly," he drawled.

"I think you're full of shit," she spat out, anger radiating off of her. "I don't think you ever cared about Draco's well-being and you certainly never gave a damn about his happiness."

"And yet, I kept him hidden while he ran off with you and your little friends."

"And I think-wait-you what?"

"Believe it or not, I do pay attention to my son," Lucius stated. "Which means I noticed straight away when he had fallen in love. He had the same stupid look on his face that I did when I first met my wife. Granted, at the time, I was unaware that it was *you* who he had fallen for. Then you were brought to the manor and all of the pieces fell together."

"Very out of character for you to refrain from forcing him to break up with the *mudblood*," she mocked.

"If I had thought he'd actually listen to me, I would have, and not because of your lack of purity but because love makes even the smartest of us foolish. The second I saw how he looked at you, I knew he was about to abandon his responsibilities as a Death Eater. I also knew that I could lock him in his room and he'd still find a way to get to you. So, instead, I let him play house with you at that little cottage and kept an eye on him from a distance."

"You... you knew where we were the entire time?"

"What a ridiculous question," Lucius scoffed. "Of course I did. Who do you think led Voldemort astray during his search for him after he disappeared?"

"You're lying!"

"What could I possibly gain from lying? You're an intelligent individual, Miss Granger, think about it. Do you really believe some safe house with a weak ward on it was what really kept you and your little friends hidden? Do you think my wife and I got lucky and managed to stumble upon you and Draco during the battle?"

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed circles on her temples as she attempted to digest the information. The more she thought about it, the more everything Lucius was saying made sense and it was infuriating. She didn't want to believe that deep down, in some messed up way, Lucius had cared for his son and wanted to protect him.

She hadn't forgotten what Lucius had done for him during the battle and if she were being honest, it had made her see him in a different light but only slightly. It didn't change the fact that Draco had been tormented by his father his entire life. It didn't take away the scars that were scattered across his body and it didn't reverse the trauma that Draco lived with.

So, for Hermione to believe for even a second that Lucius had any sort of good intentions when it came to his son... it felt like she was turning her back on Draco.

"I understand that it may take some time for you to process the fact that I actually give a damn about my family, but I'm afraid we don't have the time necessary for you to do so," Lucius stated, interrupting her thoughts.

"What? Why not? Did something happen to Draco? Is he alright?" Hermione's voice grew more frantic with each question.

"He's been working on the resurrection stone and I believe he's close to figuring out a way to make it so that he may keep you with him at all times."

As soon as his words registered in her head, Hermione's heart sank like a heavy stone in her chest. Her eyes widened in disbelief before slowly narrowing as she attempted to fight back the tears. Dropping her head, she focused on the cracks in the floor beneath her feet. Her lip quivered as she struggled to find the words needed to express the storm of emotions swirling inside her.

"I don't want to go back there," her voice barely above a whisper. There was a tremble in her tone as if the words themselves were painful to say.

Hermione struggled to keep her composure, her breaths coming in short and shallow gasps as a wave of devastation and fear washed over her. She wanted to be there for Draco, to help save him from the darkness that he had been drowning in, but this was too much. He couldn't possibly ask this of her. But that was the problem, Draco wasn't asking. Hermione had attempted to tell him that she didn't want to be forced back into a world that she no longer belonged to, but he refused to listen to her.

Just as her legs began to give out, she felt a firm hand on her shoulder. Looking up, she met Lucius's gaze. It was still just as impassive, but within the faint creases of his forehead, there was something that she never thought a man like Lucius would be capable of - empathy.

"My wife is too blinded by her desire to reunite with our son. If he were to conjure her, she wouldn't fight him on the matter, she wouldn't warn him of the dangers. Though, even if she did, I'm almost certain he wouldn't listen. *You* are the only one who is capable of getting through to him."

"I think you overestimate my influence on Draco, Lucius."

"I'd argue that I *underestimate* your influence," Lucius admitted. "You're like his own version of a Horcrux. Within you lives a piece of his soul." Removing his hand from her shoulder, his eyes lowered for a moment as he pulled in a shaky breath. "I'm afraid of what will happen to him if he abuses the stone for too long," he said quietly.

When he looked up again, Hermione could see in his eyes the question that his ego refused to let him vocalise. He was asking her for help. Lucius Malfoy, asking Hermione Granger for help. If she wasn't already painfully aware of the fact that she was, Hermione would be asking herself if she were dead because never in a million years did she think a moment like this would occur.

It was at that moment, while she stared into Lucius's pleading eyes, that Hermione was painfully made aware of the fact that she wasn't the only one being affected by this resurrection stone ordeal.

Hermione let out an exhausted and defeated sigh. "I'll do what I can."

Lucius's eyes softened at her response. While he didn't verbally thank her, he did offer a curt nod, which Hermione felt was essentially the same thing when coming from him. He got up from his spot, his back becoming more distant with every step he took. She knew what he was asking of her, and she was willing to give it to him regardless of the consequences. For the first time in what felt like forever, she felt alone with her thoughts. The thoughts that had run rampant for far too long, slowly digesting themselves in her consciousness. The lack of verbiage in her brain felt *still*. It felt *quiet*. For the first time, she felt at *peace*.

## Chapter 13

*May 17, 1998 : 125*

After Hermione's conversation with Lucius, she resumed her regular schedule. She'd wake in the morning, head downstairs, sit in silence with Narcissa and Lucius by the fireplace and watch Draco. It had all become far less awkward now, and Hermione was pleasantly surprised to find that, upon her return, no one berated her with questions. Instead, they spoke to her as if everything were normal. A small part of her considered that Lucius was to thank for that. Though, even if it were, she wasn't about to go up and thank him. Hermione decided that it was the least he could do after what he had asked of her.

*"You are the only one who is capable of getting through to him."*

Lucius's words played on a constant loop in her head. Even when she'd rest, his voice would echo in her ears. Something she learned while being with Draco was hearing the underlying statement in a Malfoy man's words. If they say that they're fine, they're not. If they insist that they can handle something, they're seeing if you'd be willing to help them. If they tell you to leave, they're secretly praying that you'll stay.

It was as if whatever they said, they were hoping for the opposite.

Which meant, when Lucius said, *"I'm afraid of what will happen to him if he abuses the stone for too long,"* what he was really saying was, *"I need your help. I need you to save my son from himself."*

Lucius wasn't the only one who needed her help. Narcissa, Tonks, and Remus needed it too. They needed to be willing to release their past life and the people who were a part of it, but none of them were ready to do so.

Narcissa needed to know that her son would be okay.

Remus needed Tonks to be ready.

And Tonks needed Teddy to be with Draco. She wanted to know that Teddy would be okay, that he would grow up surrounded by people who loved him. People who would take care of him. She wanted him to be with his family. She wanted him to be with Draco.

It all started with Draco. He was who Hermione, Narcissa, and Lucius were still staying back for. If she could help him get back up to his feet, then that would trigger a domino-like effect. Once he was better, then he would be ready to take care of Teddy, just like Tonks wanted.

So, as Hermione felt the forceful tug in her chest, she closed her eyes and prepared herself for the most important assignment of her life.

Save Draco.

As her eyes opened and the walls of the manor materialised around her, Hermione let out a deep breath and smiled at the man standing before her. Hermione's chest ached at the sight of hope consuming his eyes. She wanted to tell him that none of this was real, that she was still dead, but she knew she needed to be more tactful than that. She needed to ease him into it all.

"Granger," he exhaled with relief, tears filling his eyes.

"Draco," she smiled softly.

### ***May 18, 1998 : 124***

Last night primarily consisted of Draco apologising over and over again. He apologised for the way he treated her at Hogwarts, for how he treated her when he first joined them on the Horcrux hunt, and most of all, for what had happened to her. Hermione tried her best to tell him that all of it was okay. There was a flicker of understanding in his eyes, but that's all it was, a flicker. His Hermione-sized wound was still too fresh, and the guilt had too strong of a hold on him, but Hermione was prepared for that.

Draco was going to have bad days, some harder than others, but eventually, the good ones would start to outweigh the bad ones - at least that's what she hoped.

"Granger," Draco said as he joined her by the fireplace, "is everything okay?"

*No, I'm not meant to be here.*

"Everything is fine," she lied with a convincing smile.

Taking a seat beside her on the floor, Draco stared into the burning embers. Something Hermione always loved about being with Draco was that they could comfortably sit in silence together. He never felt the need to fill the time with mindless conversation, unlike Ron and Harry, who seemed to always have *something* to say.

With Draco, Hermione was allowed to just simply exist.

"What's the afterlife like?" Draco asked, breaking the silence after a few minutes.

Hermione turned to look at him for a moment before returning her gaze to the fire. "It was a lot like this," she replied. "We'd all gather around a fire and watch over you."

"We?"

Hermione nodded. "Your mother, father, and on occasion, Remus and Tonks would join us."

These were the moments that Hermione was dreading, the ones where she would instinctively want to reach for his hand, but she knew she couldn't. So, instead, she picked at the skin around her nail to keep her hands occupied.

"Sometimes I would talk to you," she continued.

This confession caused Draco to perk up. "You would... talk to me?"

"Yes."

"What would you say?" he asked as he shifted his body to face her.

"It depended on the day, really. Sometimes I would talk to you about your family, particularly your father. He's a... *peculiar* individual."

Draco let out a soft chuckle. "That's one way to put it," he replied. "Was there anything else you'd talk to me about?"

As she repositioned herself so that she was facing him as well, she took the time to admire the way he looked. The gentle orange glow from the fire softened his sharp features and brought warmth to his face. And the way he was looking at her... Gods did she love the way he looked at her. There was always so much adoration, so much passion, and tenderness. It was a look that Hermione had only ever read about in books before him - a look she had always dreamt of being on the receiving end of, but never thought she actually would be.

For a brief moment, Hermione allowed herself to believe that this was a life she'd be willing to live - a life that she'd be *happy* to live.

But then she heard it again, Lucius's voice, "*You are the only one who is capable of getting through to him,*" and reality slammed into her chest with the same brutal force as the cruciatus curse.

This was *not* a life she'd be happy to live.

Maybe for a moment, but that's all it would be.

A moment.

"Granger?" Draco's gentle voice pulled Hermione from her thoughts.

Snapping her gaze back to him, she said, "I would tell you that you're strong enough to survive this. That one day, you'll be okay because you will, Draco. One day you will wake up and no longer feel the weight of guilt pressing down on your chest. One day you will be able to draw in a breath without feeling like your throat is closing. And one day, you'll no longer be haunted by the thought of me. You'll be free."

Draco's face twisted in pain. "No," he said as he shook his head, "I don't want to be free if it means that I lose you all over again."

"But Draco-"

"No, Granger!" he snapped as he shot up to his feet. "I can't lose you again! I can't-I won't-I-"

Hermione stood and reached for his arm but quickly retracted and held onto her own hand instead.

"Draco," Hermione exhaled. "You won't lose me again." Draco's eyes sparkled with a sense of possibility, a subtle curve gracing his lips, hinting at a smile as he took a step toward her. "Because you never actually got me back," Hermione added, causing all of the light and hope to immediately fall from his face.

"Don't say that," Draco said as he slowly took a step back.

"I'm not saying it to hurt you, Draco. I'm saying it to *help* you."

"Help?" he scoffed. "How is anything you just said supposed to help me?!"

"We can't stay like this forever. *I* can't stay like this forever," Hermione said delicately.

Then, there was a shift in his eyes that caused Hermione to freeze.

*Don't say it.*

*Don't say it.*

*Don't say it.*

"I'm not letting you go, Granger. I can't."

As the words fell from Draco's lips, Hermione's heart dropped to her stomach. It was as if her soul had crack into two and the worst part of it all, was it had been the most confident his voice had sounded, not a single tremble of uncertainty. He meant every word he said, and it terrified her.

"Don't-" her voice cracked, "don't say that."

"Why not? I'm just being honest," there was anger in his words now, rage lacing every syllable. "Say whatever you want but it's not going to change my mind."

"Why not, Draco? Why inflict even more pain on yourself by keeping me around in this state? I know it may seem like a good solution, and that it might feel nice, but that feeling won't last forever. One day, me just being here isn't going to be enough and it's going to break you even more."

"Then let it break me," he shrugged. "I would rather have a few more weeks with you than none at all."

Hermione was silent.

She had prepared herself for countless things; denial, guilt, anger, but not acceptance.

There were many things that Draco still refused to come to terms with, but one thing he had accepted was the fact that bringing Hermione back with the resurrection stone would result in



more pain, and he was okay with it.

He was okay with hurting himself more.

He was okay with hurting *her* more.

"You don't mean that," she whispered.

"Yes, I do," is all he said before turning and walking away.

### ***May 19, 1998 : 123***

Hermione had convinced herself that she could do this, that she could be strong enough. But as she sat alone on the back porch and stared out at the garden, she realised just how wrong she was.

She wanted to cry.

She wanted to scream.

*She wanted to leave.*

Anything.

But she couldn't.

She was trapped.

Trapped in her own mind, unable to express the storm of emotions happening within her. Trapped in a life that she didn't want to be a part of. Trapped in a life she *couldn't* be a part of.

Trapped by the person she trusted more than anyone.

### ***May 21, 1998 : 121***

The days had grown quiet. Hermione spent most mornings by herself, unable to be in the same room as Draco for more than a few minutes before her anger would take over and cause her to snap at him.

Hermione never thought there'd be a day where all they did was fight, but that's precisely what was happening. The few times they would speak, their civil conversations would quickly escalate and turn into a full on screaming match.

This wasn't what she wanted.

This wasn't who she wanted to be.

This wasn't how she wanted *them* to be.

***May 23, 1998 : 119***

"Just tell me what you want me to do, Granger."

"You know what I want you to do!" Hermione hissed as she spun on her heels to face him.

"You know that I can't."

"No, I know that you *won't*," she corrected. "Won't and can't aren't synonymous. You are deciding to keep me like this! You are deciding to ignore what I want so that *you* can be happy!"

"I know that I'm being selfish, I understand that!" Draco shouted as he frustratingly ran his hand down the length of his face. "But we can be together this way."

"We can't even touch, Draco!" Hermione argued.

"I know but-"

"And what about your future? What about all of the plans that you made?"

"The only plans I made are the ones with you!"

"You can't just throw away your life, Draco!"

"This isn't my life! *You* are my life, Granger. Without you, there's nothing," taking a moment, he closed his eyes and let out a deep breath before saying, "*I'm* nothing."

***May 26, 1998 : 116***

There was this story that Hermione's father would often tell her whenever she was having a hard day. It was about a young girl who dreamt of a place where butterflies would fly around, the sun would always be shining, and people were never sad. Eventually, the girl finally discovered the dreamland. It was everything she had hoped for. Butterflies danced through the air, the sun was always burning brightly in the sky, and people were always happy, but there was something missing.

There were no stars for her to wish upon, no stillness in the air that only comes with the quiet of the night, and no depth to the human emotion that made the happy days special.

*"When all we have are the bright and cheerful moments, we aren't able to appreciate the true beauty of being alive," her father had said. "It's a gift to be able to feel everything, little bird. Without the dark days, we'd never appreciate the light."*

Hermione was always able to see the good in every situation. Almost being killed by a troll was less than pleasant, but it resulted in her finding her best friends. Getting petrified by the basilisk was uncomfortable, but it relieved her worries about whether or not her friends truly cared about her. Getting hunted down by her professor-turned-werewolf was terrifying, but it showed her that she was far braver than she ever allowed herself to believe.

The list continued on.

For every unfortunate and less than desirable event that occurred, Hermione was capable of focusing on the positive side, except for today. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't find any good.

She was stuck in the labyrinth of night, with no stars or moon to guide her way.

### ***May 30, 1998 : 112***

A gentle knock on the door was shortly followed by the voice that once brought Hermione comfort. But now, the low baritone caused a pang in her chest and rage to build within her.

"Granger?" Draco spoke softly. "Granger, can we please talk?"

With a sigh, Hermione approached the closed door and crossed straight through the barrier. Her sudden appearance in the hall caused Draco to jump slightly.

"I always forget that you can do that," he said with a soft chuckle, attempting to keep the mood light.

"You seem to also forget that I'm dead," she added, bitterness consuming her tone.

Draco's face contorted in discomfort. "I haven't forgotten that you're dead," his voice barely above a whisper.

"Then why am I here, Draco? Why do you continue to insist on playing out this fantasy of us being together?"

"It's not a fantasy. You *are* here. I thought you'd be happy that I was able to steal back some time for us."

"All you stole was my sanity!" Hermione exclaimed. "Do you know what it's like for me to be here? Do you know how painful it is for me to see you every day? When I look at you, all I feel is hurt and betrayal. When I look at you, all I see is everything I can never have."

Draco's head dropped.

Hermione didn't know what he was thinking or how he was really feeling, but she didn't care. When she first arrived she was ready to do whatever it took to help him, but that quickly changed when Draco said those six words.

*"I'm not letting you go, Granger."*

She still wanted peace and happiness for Draco, but the person who was refusing to let *her* find peace wasn't him. He was not the person who had calmed her panic attacks. He was not the person who brought her and her friend's supplies even though he was exhausted. He was not the person who tracked down her parent's house just so he could retrieve an old childhood book she had briefly mentioned. And he was certainly not the person that she had fallen in love with.

"I want you to leave me alone, Draco," Hermione said firmly before disappearing back into her room.

### ***June 5, 1998 : 106***

Just as Hermione had requested, Draco had left her alone. The only time Hermione left her room was to roam the garden, but if she heard so much as the faint sound of footsteps, she immediately retreated back to her isolation. Hermione was adamant about keeping her distance, of remaining inaccessible to him, in hopes that he would grow tired of being avoided and would release her.

Today was an exception.

It was Draco's birthday, a day she knew he was never fond of due to an unaffectionate upbringing. She was angry with the man who was keeping her prisoner, but her heart softened for the boy who was never shown love.

She couldn't offer him a present since going into town and purchasing something wasn't possible. She couldn't ask his house elf, Bippy, to cook his favourite meal because Draco was the only one who could see and hear her. What she could do, however, was give him something that she had refused him for the last six days - time with her.

Reaching the bottom of the stairs, Hermione made her way down the corridor and to the room she knew Draco spent the majority of his time in. Hermione passed through the closed door, entered the library, and cleared her throat, gaining Draco's attention. Closing his book, he lifted his head and met Hermione's gaze.

"Granger," he gasped, taken aback by her presence. "Did you need something?"

Hermione shook her head before crossing the room to where Draco was sitting. She stared at the empty space on the couch beside him and let out a deep breath. Slowly lowering herself

onto the seat, she focused her thoughts and energy until finally, her body came into contact with the green velvet.

Draco's eyes widened and he shook his head in disbelief. "How are you doing that?"

"I was just as surprised as you are when I discovered it," Hermione said. "If I focus enough, I can solidify in a way that allows me to do things like sit on a couch. I can't feel the softness of the fabric or the firmness of the cushion beneath me, but still, it's something."

"So does that mean you could also..." he trailed off.

The hopefulness in his voice was all she needed to hear to know what the remainder of his question was.

Hermione shook her head. "It only works with inanimate objects, things that don't have a soul," she paused for a second before saying, "just like I don't."

"I see," Draco nodded understandingly. "What are you doing down here, Granger? Not that I don't want you to be, it's just... you've made it pretty clear that you don't want to be around me."

"It's your birthday," she stated.

"I'm aware."

"I'm not letting you spend it alone, even if I am mad at you."

"Okay," he said quietly.

The first few hours were silent and slightly uncomfortable, but as time passed, so did the tension. Draco relaxed back into the couch and Hermione began offering more than just hums or one word responses. Eventually, their conversation started to flow with ease just like it used to, and for a little bit, it was as if everything was normal.

They spent the afternoon discussing literature and reminiscing on memories. Oddly enough, the events that Hermione enjoyed talking about the most were ones that took place during the Horcrux hunt.

They were happy then.

And she was alive.

There was a small piece of Hermione that enjoyed this - talking to him. She missed his sarcastic tone and their playful banter.

She missed who Draco used to be.

As the moon replaced the sun in the sky and the flames in the fireplace began to die down, Hermione could see Draco's energy leaving him. He was tired, but unless Hermione was the one to call it, he'd force himself to stay awake all night.

"...and that time Weasley fell face first onto-"

"It's getting late," Hermione interjected.

"Oh," Draco cleared his throat and nodded, "right, yeah. You're probably getting tired."

Hermione never got tired; not like she used to. She would feel fatigued which would lead to her laying down and resting but, if she wanted, she could stay up for days, months even. But she wasn't going to tell him that. Instead, she just agreed.

"Can I walk you to your room?" Draco asked nervously.

"I'd like that," she smiled.

The walk to her room was quiet, but not the type of quiet that comes from hostility. No. It was a familiar quiet. A quiet that can only exist between two people who are comfortable with one another.

A quiet that comes from love.

Reaching her room, Draco turned the handle and opened the door for her.

"Thank you," Hermione said before walking inside.

Now standing in the doorway, his fingers fiddling with the ring that encased the black stone, Draco chewed on the inside of his cheek.

"What is it, Draco?"

"I was just wondering if you'd maybe consider moving into my room with me? You don't have to decide now, I know we only just started talking again. You can take as much time as you need, I just wanted to put it out there."

Hermione let out a sigh and said, "Today was nice."

"I agree."

"It was a good first step."

"I think so too."

"Let's keep it that way."

"Oh, okay."

"There's still a lot we need to work through, things *I* still need to work through," she explained. "I'm not saying it will never happen, but in order to get to a place where I'd feel comfortable doing that I need to forgive you and I don't think I'm quite ready to."

Hermione could see the tears that Draco was fighting to keep back as he said, "I understand."

Today *was* a good day. It was filled with shared laughter and moments that allowed Hermione to escape her reality, to forget what was going on. But she didn't want to forget, because if she did, if she let herself become blinded by the delusion, then she'd be failing Remus, Tonks, Narcissa, and even Lucius.

If she forgot, they would never be able to let go and move on.

If she forgot, *she* would never be able to let go and move on.

"Goodnight, Draco."

"Goodnight, Granger."

### ***June 9, 1998 : 111***

It had been four days since she and Draco spent the day together and, to her surprise, he hadn't made any effort to try and talk to her. The day after, Hermione was heading out to the garden and passed by Draco. She was nervous that he would stop her and bring up his offer again, but he didn't. He simply gave her a warm smile and continued on his way.

The following days went the same.

Hermione would see him, they would exchange a nod and smile, sometimes even a wave, but never once did he intrude.

He respected her space.

### ***June 23, 1998 : 88***

She had expected him to crumble by now. She expected him to grow impatient and come knocking at her door and requesting to talk, but he hadn't. He had continued to give her space and let her be.

His physical appearance was starting to improve too. He was showering twice a day, he had Bippy cut his hair, he was back to wearing his dress pants and button ups and he hadn't consumed so much as a drop of liquor or calming draught.

He was getting better.

He was becoming *her* Draco again.

***July 7, 1998 : 74***

I just wanted you to know  
That I'll never care  
How far you push me away  
Because when I told you  
That I would stay  
I meant it  
You're a little lost  
And a little damaged  
But you're not hopeless  
I know who you are  
I love who you are  
And that's why I'll stay  
So you learn to love  
Yourself too

*-Courtney Peppernell*

***July, 10 1998 : 71***

The decision wasn't easy. Hermione paced the length of her room as she listed out every possible way things could go wrong.

1. Draco could grow too fond of their new arrangement and never want to give it up
2. Draco could slip into delusion and forget the reality of their situation
3. She could slip into delusion and forget the reality of their situation

These were all things that would've instantly talked her out of what she was about to do in the past, but things were different now.



There was hope.

There was hope because Draco was getting better. He was healthier, happier and he was in the beginning stages of healing, and that all started happening after they spent time together on his birthday.

Hope was enough for Hermione to risk the negative outcomes.

Joining Draco in the library once again, Hermione walked straight up to him and said, "Okay."

"Okay?" he asked.

"Yes, okay, I will move into your room with you."

A smile so bright it could outshine the sun quickly appeared on Draco's face and his eyes lit up with joy. Hermione could see that it was taking everything in him to not jump up and wrap his arms around her.

"Okay," he said as calmly as possible. "I have a few more things to do but would you possibly want to hangout in an hour?"

"I would love that," she smiled.

As Hermione turned to leave she heard Draco say, "Until then?"

Warmth filled her chest and she swore she felt her heart skip a beat.

"Until then," she replied.

### ***July 25, 1998 : 56***

In the mornings, they would talk.

In the afternoons, Draco would read to her.

And in the evenings, Hermione would watch the peacocks from the window while Draco worked on a project he refused to give her details on.

"Are you ever going to tell me what you're working on?" she asked.

"One day, when the timing is right and everything is perfect," Draco replied.

"Can I at least have a hint?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because that would ruin the surprise part of a surprise," he stated.

"Fine," she huffed as she crossed her arms.

"You're being awfully bratty today, Granger," Draco teased.

"And you're being awfully insufferable, *Malfoy*," she mocked.

"Mmm," he hummed, "just like old times," he grinned as he got up from his chair, walked over to Hermione and positioned his arms on either side of her, his hands gripping onto the back of the couch. "You know I love it when you insult me."

"Do you love it enough to tell me about your little secret project?" she asked, batting her eyes up at him.

He looked off to the side for a second as he thought over her question. Returning his gaze to her, he said, "Nope."

"You're a proper pain in the arse, Draco Malfoy."

"And you love me for it, Hermione Granger."

### ***August 9, 1998 : 41***

The sun hadn't even grazed the sky when Hermione heard the voice. It was light, elegant, and one she didn't expect to be woken up by. Allowing Draco to continue to sleep, Hermione made her way downstairs and approached the individual.

"Narcissa," Hermione said quietly.

Turning around, Narcissa's lips pulled into a wide smile as she cleared the distance between them and pulled her into a tight embrace.

Touch was something Hermione had been deprived of for months. Hermione had gotten so used to keeping physical distance between her and Draco that it became normal to her. She hadn't realised how badly she missed simple acts like a hug, until now.

"How are you?" Narcissa whispered in her ear.

The question combined with the affectionate action pushed Hermione over the edge. Her vision quickly became blurred by tears and all that she could get out were sobs.

Narcissa pulled back and held Hermione's face in her hands. "What is it, Hermione? What's wrong?"

Hermione shook her head. "N-nothing," she choked out. "It's just good to see you."

Wrapping her arms back around her, Narcissa said, "It's good to see you too."

### ***August 13, 1998 : 37***

Narcissa's arrival was a lot for Draco. He wasn't aware that he had summoned her, so her appearance was unexpected. He had time to process what it would be like to see Hermione again. She was the whole reason he went and found the stone.

But his mother...

It was like ripping open an old wound and injecting acid straight into his veins.

Hermione gave them privacy but even from upstairs, she could hear him. Much like he did with her, he apologised countless times to his mother. He apologised for failing as a Death Eater, for failing as a spy for the Order, and for failing her as a son.

*This is good*, Hermione thought. Draco blamed himself for more than just her death, he blamed himself for all of theirs. So for him to be able to hear from someone other than her that he wasn't to blame, well, it was bound to help him heal even more, right?

### ***August 16, 1998 : 34***

"Oh, good, you're both here," Draco said as he joined Hermione and Narcissa in the garden. "I'll have Bippy bring out breakfast."

"Er, Draco we-" Hermione began but Narcissa cut her off.

"Thank you, darling," she smiled.

Draco called for Bippy and once she appeared at his side and he turned to talk to her, Hermione leaned over and whispered to Narcissa, "Why is he giving us breakfast? He knows we can't eat it."

Narcissa waved her hand dismissively. "I'm sure he means no harm. He is still adjusting to having us both here."

"But isn't it a little concerning that-"

"Hermione," Narcissa sighed. "Everything is okay."

***August 23, 1998 : 27***

Everything was *not* okay.

What started out as an innocent breakfast, quickly turned into requesting that they all sit together for nearly every meal. Bippy would serve three plates worth of food and Draco would question them on why they weren't eating.

*"Do you not like it? Do you want something else?"*

Then, the physical touch attempts started happening.

At first, they seemed accidental. They would all be talking and someone would say something that would make him laugh and, instinctively, Draco would try to reach for Hermione's hand. She'd subtly move away and wouldn't dwell on it, but then it started happening more frequently, more intentionally.

In the mornings, Draco would move towards her in bed and extend his arm out in an attempt to hold her. As they walked, he'd try to place his hand on her lower back. When they would all sit by the fire, Draco would reach for her hand. And when they'd lay in bed at the end of the night, he'd try to kiss her.

Hermione's tactful way of moving just out of reach from him became more obvious with each occurrence. Instead of pretending that she saw something so that she could avoid his touch, she'd violently jerk away from his grasp. It was evident that this action pained Draco, but his actions were hurting her too.

Every time Hermione would try to bring up her concerns to Narcissa, she would dismiss them. Hermione wasn't surprised though, it was just as Lucius had warned her.

*"My wife is too blinded by her desire to reunite with our son. If he were to conjure her, she wouldn't fight him on the matter, she wouldn't warn him of the dangers."*

Narcissa was in just as much denial as Draco.

***September 6, 1998 : 13***

"You need to listen to me, Narcissa!" Hermione pleaded.

"No, *you* need to listen to *me*," Narcissa replied. "My son is happy, something I never thought he'd be again. I will not be the one to take that away from him. He does not deserve that."

"What about us? Do *we* deserve *this*?"

"We have been given a chance to be with someone that we both love very much. I'm failing to see how this is unfair to us, Hermione."

"It's unfair because we didn't ask for this, or at least I didn't. And what about Remus and Tonks? What about your husband?"

"My husband is happy knowing that myself and our son are happy. As for Remus and Tonks, I don't see how their situation is tied to Draco."

"It's tied to him because Remus won't let go and move on until Tonks does and Tonks won't move on until her son is with the person she intended him to be with," Hermione explained. "The longer we let Draco live in his delusion, the more he'll forget. Soon he'll forget that we even died. He'll forget that Tonks and Remus died. He'll forget that he's meant to be watching over Teddy."

Narcissa glanced over Hermione's shoulder at Draco, who was talking with Bippy in the garden. Her eyes softened and her lips pulled into a smile as she watched her son.

"I lost my son once, I'm not losing him again," is all Narcissa said before walking off.

It felt like someone had punched Hermione in the stomach. It was happening all over again. Her concerns were being silenced by someone who cared more about their own happiness by their own desires.

She was trapped all over again.

***September 8, 1998 : 11***

He convinced her to jump

Promising that he'd catch her

But as soon as she started to fall

He was already turning

Around

-s.b.

***September 10, 1998 : 9***

He tried to hold my hand again.

*September 12, 1998 : 7*

People always say  
"Why regret something you once wanted?"  
But if i had known  
What I know now  
I never would have wanted it  
In the first place  
-R.h.

*September 14, 1998 : 5*

He's starting to forget.

*September 15, 1998 : 4*

Grieving, grieving, constantly grieving.  
I will mourn what could have been,  
What will not be, what I can't save.  
-Ojibwa

*September 16, 1998 : 3*

He's changing our ending.

*September 17, 1998 : 2*

I don't want to be here anymore.

*September 18, 1998 : 1*

I lost him.

I lost myself.

## Chapter 14

*September 19, 1998 : 0*

"...today is a special occasion. Now, off you go," Draco commanded.

As soon as she heard the sound of the door clicking shut, Hermione sat up and stretched her arms out to the side as she faked a yawn. "Good morning," her smile was counterfeit. "What's that?"

Draco looked down at the tray in his hands and then back up at her. "Oh, this?" he questioned as he strolled over to her. "Nothing special, just a homemade Cherry Bakewell cake that Bippy spent all night baking."

Even though she couldn't smell it, the sight of the cake alone was enough to make Hermione's mouth water. "Cherry Bakewell? That's my favourite," she exclaimed as she licked her lips.

"Is it? I hadn't a clue," Draco smirked as he removed the metal cover to reveal the cake. "Happy Birthday, Granger."

Gods, if she could feel hunger, she was sure her stomach would be rumbling so loud she wouldn't even be able to hear her thoughts. And then, reality smacked her in the face.

She couldn't feel hunger because she was dead.

She wouldn't be able to enjoy a piece of her favourite cake because she was dead.

And she couldn't kiss Draco as a thank you for remembering her birthday because she was dead.

She had died.

"What's wrong?" Draco asked as he noticed her sudden shift in demeanour.

"Nothing," she lied as she shook her head, got up from the bed, and began pacing the length of the room as she tugged at her hair frustratingly.

This was all wrong. This wasn't how things were supposed to be. She should've known better. She *did* know better. Hermione knew that there was a possibility that Draco would lean too far into the fantasy, but she still did it. She still played house with him, and now she was paying the price.

"This doesn't seem like nothing," Draco said as he placed the tray down on the dresser. "Tell me what's wrong and I'll fix it."

"You can't!" she snapped. "There's nothing you or anyone else can do!"

*You could set me free.*



"I wish you could, gods do I wish for that..."

*I wish you would.*

"...but you can't..."

*You won't.*

"...and I just..." Hermione's eyes frantically shifted around the room, and the panic in her voice increased as she continued to stammer. "I need you to-I don't want to be-"

"Hey, hey," Draco cooed as he cleared the space between them. "Look at me, Granger."

Hermione continued to avert her gaze, unable to meet his eyes, unable to look at the man that was causing her so much distress. Draco took another step forward. His hand extended out to reach for her. Noticing his movement out of the corner of her eye, Hermione took a quick step back and jerked away.

"I don't want to be like this," she choked out, finally meeting his stare.

*Please don't keep me like this.*

Hermione wrapped her arms around herself as she slowly lowered her body to the ground. She dropped her head, her forehead resting on her knees as the sound of her sobs bounced off the walls.

"Do you remember my first night at the burrow?" Draco questioned, his soft voice barely audible over her cries. "I do," he continued. "I was almost certain Snape was fucking with me when I had arrived at the meeting spot."

Draco went on to tell her about how he apparated from the manor, expecting to appear in some underground hideout, only to find himself in the middle of a field. Hermione's gasps for air began to lull as he continued to tell her the story, and tears finally stopped falling when he repeated what she had said to him that night.

*"He's vile, just like the rest of them. We have no evidence that he won't turn on us. With that being said, we have nothing to believe the contrary either. But the second he gives us reason to believe the former, I won't hesitate to shoot a hex through his skull."*

At least he remembered how much talking about their time together during the Horcrux hunt comforted her. At the same time, it felt like a manipulation tactic. She knew Draco wasn't doing it on purpose, but it frustrated her that something so simple as him talking about a memory was enough to, for a brief moment, distract her from what was going on.

It was like breaking someone's bones and then mending them, only to break them all over again.

"Breakfast is ready, Master Draco," Bippy announced from the hallway.

"I can tell her to put it away," Draco said to Hermione. "We can eat later."

Hermione pushed the curls out of her face and stood. "No, it's fine. I'm fine. We can go downstairs."

"Are you sure? We don't have to."

Hermione didn't want to at all. She never wanted to sit at that bloody dining room table ever again. She didn't want to stare at the freshly cooked meal that she couldn't enjoy, and Hermione never wanted to see the confused look on Bippy's face as she watched Draco converse with thin air. But, at the moment, all of those things sounded far less painful than remaining in a room with Draco and being suffocated by his obliviousness.

"Yes, I'm sure," Hermione said.

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Narcissa was surprisingly sitting at the table when they finally made their way downstairs. It was rare that she ever entered the dining room in the first place. Not because she had the same feelings as Hermione but because she had her own demons that haunted the specific room.

When Narcissa first arrived and was talking to Draco, Hermione overheard his mother apologise for not doing anything the day he was given the dark mark. As she continued to talk, Hermione pieced together the fact that the branding took place at the manor in the dining room.

"Glad you could join us this morning, Mother," Draco smiled.

"Yes, well, it's a special day today," Narcissa replied. "Happy birthday, Hermione," she smiled warmly.

*Happy Birthday.*

Hermione wanted to scoff at the statement. It seemed ridiculous to wish her a happy birthday when the reality was, she wasn't ageing.

She died at eighteen.

*She would forever be eighteen.*

Hermione stared down at the plate of eggs in front of her as she picked at the dead skin around her nail and thought about what today would have been like if she were actually turning nineteen.

She would be having breakfast with Draco, just like today, but her friends would also be here. Hermione also liked to believe that she would've been able to reverse the obliviation on her parents so that they could be in attendance as well.

She wondered how they would've got along with Narcissa.

After breakfast, she and Draco would go with her friends into town. They'd visit her favourite bookshop, she'd pick out a book, and when she approached the counter to check out, the clerk would tell her that Draco had already paid for it. The afternoon would be filled with playful bickering between Draco and Ginny, and at the end of the day, Hermione and Draco would return to their place and have dinner, just the two of them.

It would've been perfect.

But that's not how it was. Her parents were still in Australia, completely unaware that their daughter had died - completely unaware that they even had a daughter. Her friends weren't with her, they wouldn't be visiting a bookstore, and Draco wouldn't be buying her a book.

"Granger?" she heard Draco say, snapping her from her thoughts.

"Hmm?" Hermione hummed as she looked up at him.

"The garden, thoughts? It's your birthday. I don't want to force you to do anything you aren't interested in."

*Like using the resurrection stone to keep me here?*

"No-I mean-sure. That sounds... nice," she replied quietly with a smile.

"You must visit the dahlias," Narcissa chimed. "They're absolutely delightful this time of the year. Bippy could put together a basket, and the two of you could enjoy a picnic under the family oak tree. The weather is supposed to be perfect today too. Not too sunny with a light breeze. Oh, it'll be so lovely!" she exclaimed as she clapped her hands together.

Hermione uncomfortably shifted in her seat as she bit her tongue. There were countless times when she wanted to scream at Narcissa and ask what in Merlin's name she was doing. Ever since she got here, she had done nothing but feed into Draco's delusion. Hermione understood that she was a mother who was overjoyed to be reunited with her son, but for Godric's sake, when did it end? The pain was like a broken record playing on a constant loop.

Hadn't she *given* enough?

Hadn't she *sacrificed* enough?

Hadn't she *suffered* enough?

Hermione stayed silent for the remainder of breakfast. She didn't know if Narcissa and Draco chose to do the same or if they continued talking. She didn't know because she didn't care to pay attention. Over the last few weeks, Hermione became skilled in the art of tuning out unwanted noise, and as of late, their voices had become such.

"Bippy clear the table now, Master Draco?" The sound of the kind house elf's voice caught Hermione's attention.

"Yes, that would be great, Bippy," Draco smiled as he wiped the corner of his mouth with his napkin before standing and motioning for Hermione to follow.

Hermione let out a disgruntled sigh as they stepped through the french doors and into the backyard. She couldn't help but feel disappointed each time she walked outside and wasn't welcomed by the warmth of the sun.

Draco, on the other hand, was busy basking in the gifts that life offered him. His chest expanded as he breathed in the fresh air and as he released a steady exhale, he glanced over at Hermione with a loving look that she once loved being on the receiving end of.

Approaching the dahlias that Narcissa had mentioned over breakfast, Hermione lowered herself onto the marble bench as she admired the flowers. Narcissa was right, they were delightful. Hermione raised her hand, her fingertips desperate to brush against the velvety petal.

*"You can't touch that,"* the voice inside her head reminded her. *"Flowers are alive and you aren't."*

Retracting her hand, Hermione cleared her throat and shifted in her seat.

"Did you know that the dahlia was one of Queen Victoria's favourites?" Draco questioned.

Hermione shook her head as she swallowed back her tears.

"Though it's also wise to mention that she was also quite the fan of orange blossoms, lilies, and violets," Draco continued as he mindlessly fiddled with the black stone that was keeping Hermione hostage. "But I'm certain that, at one point, dahlias were at the top of her list."

Surprised by his expertise on such a random topic, Hermione said, "I must say, I'm surprised you, of all people, carry so much knowledge on a topic like this."

Draco's brow arched. "Oh? And why's that?"

"It just seems like a rather useless piece of information if I'm being honest," she admitted.

"Miss Granger, I can assure you that knowing the late Queen Victoria's preference in flowers is extremely useful."

"Is that so?" she teased as a smirk crept its way across her lips.

Draco nodded confidently.

"Go on then, enlighten me."

"Gladly. You see, not only did it help me redirect an exasperating conversation about my theoretical future wife with one of my mother's friends during Sunday tea three years ago,"

he explained as he slowly stepped toward her. "But it also managed to provide me with my favourite view."

"Which is?" she prompted.

He raised his hand and pointed at her.

"Me?"

"Yes, you," Draco replied. "More specifically, that smile of yours. It's been far too long since I've seen it. But on the rare occasions that I do, it still causes me to go weak in the knees. *You* make me weak in the knees, Granger."

It was moments like these that offered Hermione an escape.

An escape from the torment.

From the betrayal.

From the pain.

This was them. This was what she had mourned in the afterlife. These soft, delicate, and love-filled moments with Draco. She could fight it and remind herself that he is the one imprisoning her in this endless cycle of torture, or she could be kind to herself and enjoy a playful moment with the man she loves.

"You know," her shoulders relaxed as she released her anger, "it's almost comical thinking back on my impression of you at Hogwarts."

Claiming the seat beside her, Draco leaned back until his shoulders made contact with the tree behind them. "I'm listening," he smirked as he motioned for her to continue.

"Where to even begin?" Hermione teased as she let out a small giggle. "For starters, you were England's most pompous child."

"I prefer the term confident, but please, do continue."

"There are so many words that come to mind when I think back on the Draco Malfoy everyone knew and loathed so dearly," her words dripping with sarcasm. "A few of my favourites would have to be judgemental, arrogant, selfish, vain, aggravating, dramatic-"

"Dramatic?! I am *not* dramatic!" he argued as he shot up to his feet and threw his hands into the air.

"Right," Hermione chuckled. "Not dramatic at all, my apologies."

"Apology accepted," he nodded as he readjusted his shirt before returning to his spot on the bench.

"Now that that's settled," she began. "The point I was trying to make was that if someone told me back then that Draco Malfoy knew random facts about flowers and enjoyed filling his free time whispering sweet nothings, I would've laughed in their face. You're a far more complex person than I gave you credit for."

"You forgot to mention how devilishly handsome I am," he winked.

"I seem to have forgotten humble as well."

"That you did. But no worries, love, I forgive you," Draco replied with a cheeky smile. "I have a surprise for you."

"What is it?"

"If I told you, that would defeat the purpose of a surprise, now wouldn't it?"

"You know surprises irritate me, Draco," Hermione groaned.

"And you know that I love to irritate you," he smirked. "Now come, it's not far of a walk."

As they made their way through the garden, Hermione listened to the crunching of the leaves beneath Draco's feet and the melodic sound of the birds chirping intertwined with the low whistle of the wind blowing through the trees.

Things were feeling almost normal again.

The shared laughs, the banter, and Draco's shameless flirting. It's how things used to be.

It's how *they* used to be.

The walk, however, was gruelling. Even though Hermione was enjoying the echoes of nature around her, she just wanted to know what surprise Draco had up his sleeve already.

"Are we there yet?" she groaned.

"Still the impatient sort," Draco teased. "But yes, we're here."

Hermione found herself lost as she scanned the space around them. The look on Draco's face was signalling that the weeds and seemingly endless land of grass before them were something to be excited about, but Hermione had no clue why.

Not wanting to ruin the mood, Hermione cleared her throat and said, "Oh, wow, this is a very nice-er-field," she nodded. "I love it."

Draco let out a soft chuckle as he rolled his eyes. "And still a terrible liar as well," he stated.

Removing his wand, he muttered an enchantment causing the concealment charm to drop and a greenhouse to appear. Pushing open the door, he gestured for Hermione to enter. She could feel his eyes tracking her every movement as she stepped through the opening. He was observing her reaction, and for once, Hermione didn't have to fake anything.

The greenhouse was magnificent, magical even. Her eyes doubled in size as she clasped her hands and held them close to her chest. As she explored each aisle, she took note of every plant and flower that painted the room.

Dittany, snargaluffs, petunias, orch-

Hermione's breath hitched as she came to an immediate halt.

"Are those..." she trailed off, her eyes still locked on the delicate and ghostly petals.

"Orchids, yes," Draco answered. "I remembered that day at the Ministry when you were polyjuiced as Mafalda and how I had you focus on a happy memory." Hermione could hear his footsteps growing closer. "You said that you were in a greenhouse looking at-

"Looking at the orchids." Hermione's eyes met his.

Draco nodded. "I thought that perhaps if the memory alone could bring you comfort back then, that maybe bringing it to life would be able to help bring you some now," he explained tentatively. "Do you hate it?"

Hermione's lip quivered, and her eyes misted over as she thought back on the memory. It was one that she hadn't allowed herself to revisit in a long time. It hurt too much. But this, the greenhouse... it hurt even more.

It hurt because Draco had noticed that she had been unhappy and remembered what would bring Hermione comfort, but he was clueless to the fact that *he* was the reason she needed comfort in the first place.

The man who was shattering her heart into pieces daily, was also the man trying to put it back together.

"Shit, you hate it," Draco cursed. "I'm sorry, I should never have-"

Unable to contain her emotions any longer, Hermione dropped to her knees as a heap of grief poured out in a flood of uncontrollable tears. Her face fell into her hands, and she mumbled incoherent things as she choked on her sobs.

"Granger, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you," Draco apologised as he rushed to her side. "I can have it dismantled."

"No," she cried out as she shook her head.

"No?"

"No," she repeated. "I don't want you to get rid of it."

"But you're crying?"

"Not because of this," Hermione said as she motioned to the space around them. "This is wonderful."

"Then what is it? What's wrong? Talk to me, please," he pleaded.

He had no clue.

He had no fucking clue.

She could tell him. Hermione could tell him everything. How she had died during the war to save him. How he drowned his sorrows in liquor and calming draught, and how he eventually went and found the resurrection stone to bring her back.

She could tell him that he was the reason she yearned for death.

But she couldn't. There was a look in his eyes that Hermione had only seen twice before. The first time was when she was paralysed by fear on the drawing room floor, blood trickling down her arm as she stared up at him. And the second time was during the war, right before the killing curse slammed into her chest.

It was a look of love, desperation, confusion, and pain.

Hermione wiped the tears from her cheeks with the back of her hand before flitting her bloodshot eyes up to meet Draco's. She hated herself for how she had treated him over the last few months. It was warranted, and she knew that, but she wished that she could take back the fights and the words she spoke solely to hurt him.

All Draco wanted was his Granger back.

All Draco wanted was to be happy.

Draco had achieved both. He got his girl back, and he was happy, and as a bonus, he got his mother back as well. He could see that Hermione was miserable, but he was too blinded by joy to see *why* she was.

She knew Draco wanted to help her, to fix what he didn't know he had broken, and she loved him for it. But he didn't understand, and how could he? In Draco's mind, nothing bad had happened.

For him, they had not only won the war, but they had also survived it.

Hermione gripped the base of her hair as her mind turned into a warzone. Her empathy for Draco was fighting valiantly, but her anger at him for forcing her into this situation had her by the neck.

She hated that whenever a good moment would arise. She would ruin it. She hated that Draco was so selfish that he rewrote their story so that he could be happy. And she hated the confused look on his face every time she'd lash out at him whenever he tried to comfort her.

Hermione hated that she was incapable of hating him, even though she should.

All she wanted was to join Draco in his happiness. She wanted to laugh with him until her cheeks hurt. She wanted to fill their mornings with banter and their evenings with silence as



she rested her head on his chest and listened to the steady rhythm of his heart beating. She could try to lean into this fantasy with him, just like Narcissa had, and pretend that everything was fine, but she knew it wouldn't last.

Hermione was no longer the girl that Draco had fallen in love with.

She was merely a ghost of who she used to be.

Hermione would give anything to have a life with Draco, to live out the happily ever after that they were deserving of, but she had nothing left to give.

There was, however, one thing she could still offer Draco.

"I never told you why I chose that memory," Hermione said quietly.

"You don't have to, Granger."

"I know I don't have to, but I want to."

"Okay," he nodded understandingly. "I'm all ears then."

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep breath. "The memory was one with my parents. My dad used to have a greenhouse like this in our backyard; granted, it wasn't nearly as extravagant. It was his pride and joy aside from Mum and I. He would spend hours in there. One summer, he came rushing into the house and insisted that Mum and I follow him. He had grown his first tomato which was a *very* big deal," she giggled. "We spent all evening walking up and down the aisles as he told us about each plant and the specific care required. My dad had a thing for turning everything into a lesson, so of course, he seamlessly related the various vegetables and flowers to life. But the one that stuck with me was the orchids."

She wondered if he could see through her smile and hear the pain in her voice.

"He told me that you needed to be careful not to overwater them and that once the blooming is over, let the flowers wilt and fall off naturally," she continued. "He then went on to tell me that I should use the same approach to life. Everything was best in moderation, and I needed to relinquish my need for control and let things happen organically."

Lowering her head, Hermione swallowed back the tears that threatened to escape again.

"It's one of my favourite memories with them, one that I hope I never lose because I won't have a chance to make any new ones."

Draco's head tilted to the side, "What do you mean? Are they..."

"No, but sometimes I wish they were, which is a terrible thing to say, but it would certainly make things hurt less."

*At least then we could be together.*

*At least then, they could remember me.*

"I never told you this because, frankly, I never saw any reason to do so," she drew in a shaky breath. "Before Harry, Ron, and I left for the Horcrux hunt, I obliviated my parents."

"Granger..."

She shook her head. "It's fine. It was for the best. It was to protect them," she replied. "I knew Voldemort would do anything to get to Harry, which meant he'd do anything to get to me. Wiping their memories was the best way to ensure their safety. It's what was best for them."

"Where are they now?" Draco asked, his voice gentle.

"Australia, at least, that's where I had sent them. They could've moved for all I know. I just wish I could see them again, even if only for a moment. I never got to say goodbye, to tell them that I love them."

*I never said goodbye because I thought I would see them again.*

*I never said goodbye because I didn't think I would die during the war.*

"Then let's go to them," Draco suggested.

"I can't, not like this," she replied.

*They wouldn't be able to see me.*

"Besides, they wouldn't even remember me."

"Surely there's a way to reverse the effects," Draco stated. "Somewhere, someone has done a study on it. We just need to figure out who and speak with them. We can do this, Granger," he said, hope consuming his words. "Let me help you with this. Let me bring your family back to you."

This was why she loved him.

Hermione always had to be the strong one. She always had to be the one with all of the answers and the one who was there to support and help others. But with Draco, he never needed that from her. Instead, *he* wanted to be the one to support and help *her*. Time and time again, he had put his own life at risk for the sake of hers and, sometimes, even for her friends.

He loved her without the expectation of anything in return.

Hermione's eyes softened as she raised her hand, her palm hovering just above his cheek.

"Master Draco, Bippy brings news," Bippy announced, her sudden appearance startling Draco and Hermione.

"Not now, Bippy." Draco waved the house elf off.

"But Master Draco, it has to do with the guests for this evening," she urged.

He let out a sigh of defeat and rubbed his eyes before signalling for Bippy to continue speaking.

"Mister Ronald Weasley sends his regards but says he will not be in attendance."

*Ron?*

"And what of the others?" Draco asked.

*Others?*

Bippy shook her head, "No response from anyone else yet, Master Draco."

Draco's voice became nothing more than a mumbled mess in Hermione's ears as the room around her began to spin. Draco had invited Ron over, which meant he more than likely invited Harry and Ginny as well.

He had invited them over for her birthday.

The perfect birthday that Hermione had imagined earlier, the one where she'd spend the afternoon with Draco and her friends, he was trying to give that to her, and it broke Hermione's heart. The playful flirting, the greenhouse, and the attempt to gather her friends, it was all too much. It was too much because it reminded her just how much he loved her.

Hermione had spent so much time focusing on the fact that he was taunting her with a life she could never have, that she never took the time to realise she was, in some way, doing the same. She had stopped fighting back and forcing him to come to terms with what had happened.

Her silence only fueled his delusion.

Hermione was done being silent and letting him waste his life on one that could never be real.

*She* needed to set *him* free.

"Maybe it's time," Hermione said quietly.

Draco's head cocked. "Time for what?"

"For you to move on," she replied as she rose to her feet. "Everyone else has."

The words burned as they escaped the back of her throat. The idea of him moving on, of loving a new person the way that he loved her, felt like a dagger to the heart, but she needed to do this for him.

"Don't ever say that to me again," Draco chastised as he stood and brushed the dirt from his pants.

"But Draco-"

"No Granger!" His jaw tensed, and brows furrowed. "Just because Weasley is a piece of shit doesn't mean that I am too! I'm sorry that your friends are too self-involved to be here for you, but don't insult me by lumping me in with them."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to..." Instinctively, Hermione stepped forward and went to comfort him, but she quickly retracted her hand and lowered her head. "I'm sorry," she said once more, her voice quiet and frail.

Exhaustion filled his eyes, a look that Hermione hadn't seen since before he had brought her back.

"I just need some time alone," Draco stated.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to upset you."

*I was trying to help you.*

"Stop apologising. You didn't do anything wrong. I'm fine. I just need to go for a walk."

"Okay," Hermione sheepishly replied as her eyes brimmed with tears.

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Hermione had considered following Draco inside, to be with him and make sure that he was alright, but something stopped her. Perhaps it was the exhaustion from her rollercoaster of emotions over the last few weeks, or maybe it was because she was still spiteful toward him. Whatever the reasoning was, it didn't matter, because she didn't follow him. Instead, she stayed outside and wandered the grounds of Malfoy manor.

During the war, whenever Hermione would daydream about her future with Draco, she always assumed that they would distance themselves from this place as much as humanly possible. After everything that had happened within the walls of the manor to both Draco and Hermione, she thought it was safe to believe that they would never step foot in it again. Of course, Hermione didn't have much say in revisiting the place where she had been pinned to the ground and tortured. But despite that, she had eventually grown rather fond of the estate.

There was something comfortable and reassuring about the predictability of the manor. Each morning, at precisely seven-thirty am, Bippy would greet Draco and inform him that breakfast was ready. Hermione always knew that she could count on the grandfather clock just outside of the drawing room to chime every hour, and as if charmed to do so, the birds would chirp just outside the library window every day at two pm.

For Hermione, the consistency in those few details meant everything. She never knew what Draco would say or do each morning, and her own emotions had become too unpredictable for her to prepare for. One moment she would be drowning in a pool of her tears, and the next, she would be joking and laughing with Draco like everything was perfectly normal.

It was draining.

Hermione was tired in more ways than one.

She was tired because she had never experienced actual exhaustion, which meant no matter how long a day was, fatigue would never consume her and force her to fall asleep. Hermione was tired of the ache in her chest, the tears in her eyes, and being angry with Draco.

Her entire life, her parents had always told her to stand up and fight for what she believed in. Hermione never had any issues doing that, until now. Because right now, she didn't know what she believed in.

She believed in Draco and wanted to fight for him and his happiness, but if she did that, then she would only be subjecting herself to even more pain. Hermione also believed in herself, but if she fought back then she would only be hurting Draco.

There was no right or wrong answer and no good or bad choice, and it was driving her mad. All Hermione wanted was for someone to tell her what to do. For someone to lead her in the right direction.

"Miss Granger," a familiar monotone voice said from behind.

Looking over her shoulder, Hermione's eyes widened as her gaze landed on the source of the sound.

"Mr Mal-" Hermione cleared her throat, "*Lucius*," she corrected. "What are you-how are you-"

"Join me for a walk," he said casually. "There are some things I wish to check on."

Hermione didn't know why, but without a second thought, she stood and began walking alongside him.

"Did you know that this manor has been within the Malfoy family for over a century?" Lucius asked, his hands neatly clasped behind his back as they weaved through the garden.

When Hermione didn't respond, Lucius continued speaking.

"I inherited this home from my father when I got engaged to my wife," he stated. "Narcissa immediately began redecorating, which I am forever grateful for. It was absolutely heinous in there before."

For each statue that they passed and every step they took, Lucius shared another piece of the Malfoy family history. For a moment, Hermione was certain that she was just imagining him

because he was far too personable. But then, he commented on how Narcissa would always try to convince him to garden with her.

"I told her that was what house elves were for and that I would not be crawling around in the dirt like a lower-class citizen," he scoffed.

That statement alone was enough to validate that the man she was walking with was, in fact, Lucius Malfoy. Why or how he was, was what Hermione was struggling to figure out.

"And that piece over there we got in Italy when I-"

"I don't mean to be rude," Hermione interrupted, "but how are you here?"

Lucius stared at her for a brief moment before motioning over to a window. Reluctantly, Hermione followed. Once they approached the glass opening, he instructed her to look inside. Taking another step forward, Hermione peeked through the pane and saw Draco.

He was destroying his father's study.

Glass shards covered the carpet, and books and pieces of parchment were scattered throughout the room. To his left was Narcissa, who was watching him with sympathetic eyes.

"*That* is how I am here," Lucius said as Hermione backed away from the window. "The first time my son summons me, and it is all because a part of him wanted me to watch as he destroyed my belongings." Hermione couldn't quite decipher the tone in Lucius's words.

"Don't you want to see him?" she asked.

Lucius shook his head. "I don't want my last memory with my son to be one where he curses me out," a flash of pain flickered in his eyes, "I am quite happy with the one I have now, it was the first time he had ever looked at me with gratitude."

Hermione nodded understandingly as she joined Lucius under the oak tree and observed the peacocks as they elegantly moved through the garden.

"They were brown when we first got them, but as they matured, their feathers gradually became whiter," he explained. "Did you know that the white peacock symbolises nirvana in Buddhism?"

"No, I can't say that I did," Hermione replied.

"My wife is to credit for everything on this estate, except for those," Lucius looked pointedly at the peacocks. "Those were my contribution. I thought that perhaps they could help cleanse these grounds of the darkness that plagued it and grant my family something we had not known for a long time."

"Which is?"

Lucius met Hermione's gaze, his eyes soft. "Peace, Miss Granger."

Hermione had always thought that Lucius and Draco couldn't be more opposite, but now she was starting to see their similarities. At first glance, they were both extremely detestable individuals, but once you listened and looked past the hardened exterior, they were just two people who wanted to take care of the ones they loved.

She would never agree with the way Lucius chose to raise Draco or the morals he had instilled in him. And no matter how much he explained, she would never be able to justify the suffering he caused his son. What she could do, however, was acknowledge that he had tried. She could also acknowledge the fact that not everyone was born with the parental gene.

There was also a part of her that felt bad for letting him down. Hermione had told him that she would save Draco from this dark path, but all she had done was make it worse.

"I'm afraid I couldn't do what you asked of me, Lucius," Hermione said quietly, her eyes still fixed on the peacocks.

"You did your best," he replied.

"Did I?" she asked. "Because it feels like all I did was make things worse. I mean, surely you've been watching Draco."

"That I have."

"Then that means you see how lost he's become. He's convinced himself that Narcissa and I are still alive."

"Yes."

"Which is the opposite of what I was meant to do!" Hermione exclaimed, frustration lacing her words.

Lucius let out a steady exhale. "I have been watching Draco, and I have seen how deep into this fantasy he has fallen, but I have also been watching you," he stated. "You tried to fight it and talk some sense into him, but you are just one person, Miss Granger."

"But you asked me to do this because I was the only one who could fix it," her eyes misted with tears. "*You* said that. *You* said I could fix it."

"I said you were the only one capable of getting through to him. I did not say you would be able to fix it."

Hermione shook her head angrily. "Then why am I here?"

"You are here because my son was not ready to say goodbye," Lucius replied. "And much like myself and my wife, *you* were also not ready to say goodbye."

Silence fell between them as Hermione thought over his words.

Had she still been holding on?

Was there a part of her that wasn't ready to say goodbye?

Had she been putting all of the blame on Draco this entire time when, in reality, she was also contributing to the problem?

"You needn't worry," Lucius said. "It will all be over soon."

"What do you mean?"

Lucius took one last glance at the flowers, trees, and birds that surrounded them. "There is a certain beauty in letting go, Miss Granger."

Hermione's brows furrowed together in confusion. "I don't understand, letting go?"

"Decide what you want to do with your remaining time here. Whether you wish to spend it with Draco or by yourself, I do not care. That is entirely up to you. My son has been in control for long enough. It is your turn to make decisions."

"But I don't-" she began, but Lucius cut her off.

"Say hello to my wife for me, let her know that I miss her dearly and will be waiting for her on the other side," is all he said before walking away.

Hermione was about to chase after him and demand that he tell her what to do to help his son, but as soon as Lucius disappeared, she spotted Draco.

"Hi," she smiled, doing her best to appear calm.

"Hi," he replied.

Hermione could see through his weak smile.

"Want to join me?" she asked, motioning to the space beside her.

Draco happily accepted the offer and lowered himself onto the grass.

"Did you know that-"

"I wanted to talk to you about-"

They said simultaneously, causing them both to chuckle.

"You first," Draco prompted.

Her first decision.

She could tell Draco that she had just spoken with his father, one of the few people he had chosen to remember being dead, or she could choose to keep it to herself and do what she did best - ramble.

Hermione went with the latter.



She went on to share all of the facts that she had recently learned from Lucius about white peacocks. Hermione was certain that Draco already knew everything, but she thought that maybe it might be nice for him to hear about something other than the war.

"... and they turn white as they mature," Hermione finished as she looked over at Draco. "Sorry, I kind of went on a tangent there."

"Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Apologise," he explained. "There's nothing to be apologising for."

"Okay," she nodded. "Sorry."

"Granger," Draco sighed, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to-sorry-shit-sor-okay, I'm just going to stop talking now," Hermione giggled. "What about you? What were you going to say?"

"Right," he exhaled, his mood instantly shifting. "I just wanted to talk to you about earlier, about why I had to walk away for a moment."

"Oh, okay." Hermione uncomfortably shifted in place and anxiously brushed her hands against her pants.

"It's nothing bad," he assured her. "I just wanted to be honest with you."

"Okay, I'm listening."

"I've been having a hard time, with a lot of things, but specifically regarding us," Draco admitted. "The distance between us has been tough and not just the physical distance but the emotional one too. You used to talk to me, and other than today, we've barely spoken. I know that it's not my fault, but most days, it feels like it is, like there's something that I'm doing wrong. I'm by no means trying to make you feel guilty for such. I just wanted to tell you how I felt."

"How long have you been holding this in?"

"A while. I thought that by keeping it all bottled in I was helping, that I was saving you from more pain, but I realised that wasn't true. If anything, I feel like pretending to be okay and having it all together only made you feel even more isolated from your feelings. Of course, I could be wrong and you could tell me to go fuck myself by all means."

"I would never tell you to go fuck yourself, Draco," she said with a small playful smile.

"Oh, thank Merlin, I really didn't feel like figuring out how to do that," he joked which caused her to laugh.

Hermione wished that Draco had told her this sooner, that she would have known that he wasn't as content as he had appeared to be. Maybe she would have been more understanding. Maybe she wouldn't have been so hard on him.

"Thank you for being honest with me," Hermione said. "I know you told me not to but I am sorry if I've ever made you feel like any of this was your fault. We both know that it's not."

Hermione revisited what Lucius had said to her earlier.

*"And much like myself and my wife, you were also not ready to say goodbye."*

It was true, she hated that it was, but she couldn't deny it.

During the war, when Hermione had disarmed Draco, everything happened so quickly that she didn't have time to process it. The moment she saw Voldemort point his wand at Draco, the only thing that popped into her mind was to save him, no matter what the cost.

Then, when she appeared in the afterlife and watched as people reunited with their friends and family, Hermione realised that she wasn't ready like they were. She wasn't ready to say goodbye to her friends that she had left behind, to her life, or to Draco. And she wasn't ready to accept the fact that one day, Draco would love someone else the way he used to love her.

Hermione considered that maybe her anger never had anything to do with Draco or him using the resurrection stone. Countless times in the afterlife, she had wished that there was a way for her to be with him again. Hermione herself used to slip into a dream-like state and allow herself to believe that the war had ended differently, that they had both survived and were still together.

Perhaps Draco wasn't the only one who was blinded by emotions.

Hermione thought back on their first night after agreeing to stay in his room. Draco was asleep. His hand was resting on the mattress only inches away from hers. She could vividly remember the desperation that sunk in her chest as she stared longingly at the space between them. Every part of her wanted to grab onto him and feel his arms wrapped around her.

After that moment, Hermione began exploring the endless what-ifs.

What if she surrendered?

What if she decided to enjoy this life with Draco?

What if she was incapable of being the person that he had fallen in love with?

What if one day, Draco woke up and decided that this fake reality was no longer enough, that *she* was no longer enough?

The questions had consumed her that entire night, her mind refusing to rest.

"What else is on your mind, Granger?" he asked.

Hermione had closed herself off for so long, internalising her anger, worries, and frustration instead of vocalising them, but she was done.

She wanted to free herself from the isolation.

Hermione let out a shaky breath. "I'm just afraid of being like this forever," she admitted. "I know that I should be grateful to be here with you in the first place, but I'm scared that one day you'll wake up and grow tired of the fact that I'll never fully be the same girl you had fallen in love with. I know I suggested that you move on, but the truth is, I think I'll selfishly never want you to."

Draco's eyes softened with compassion. "Can I take you somewhere? I promise it won't be an empty field."

Hermione nodded before standing and following Draco inside. As they walked down different corridors, Hermione realised that she had never seen this area of the manor before. She primarily stayed within the left wing where Draco's room was.

"I had wanted to take you here a long time ago, but it took some time to gather everything," Draco said as they approached the black wooden french doors.

"What is it?"

"Why don't you see for yourself," he smirked as he turned the handle and held the door open for her.

Stepping in, Hermione's eyes grew twice their normal size as she took in the hundreds of books that surrounded her. Each area was sorted by genre and within each shelf, the books were organised alphabetically by the author's last name - just how she liked it.

"From Jane Austen to Bathilda Bagshot, it's all in here," Draco stated. "A majority of them are first editions, but there were a few that I couldn't find. I'll keep looking though."

He had built Hermione her own personal library.

It was an overwhelming feeling, the emotions that Hermione was experiencing. There weren't enough words within the English language to properly explain how much she loved it and him. She wanted to cry but she swallowed them back, deciding that she had cried enough for one day.

"There's one in particular that I wanted to show you," Draco told her as he walked over to the left wall and retrieved a small green book.

"You still have it?"

"Of course I do. It's the most valuable book in this entire room," he replied. "I want you to listen to me very carefully, Granger. There will never be a time in which I grow tired of you. No matter how long it takes, or even if you never do find your way back to who *you* believe is the girl that I had fallen in love with, I'm not going anywhere. Though, I'd like to argue that the girl I had fallen for hasn't gone anywhere. You're still her, Hermione."

As she stared down at the children's book that he had retrieved for her during the Horcrux hunt, she felt a switch flip. She had two options at this moment; she could either continue to wallow in self-pity and rob herself of any sort of happiness or she could be grateful for the second chance, for the time she *could* spend with Draco - even if it wasn't how she pictured their future together.

Hermione knew that if her dad were with her, he would sit her down and pull out the very book that Draco was clutching onto, and he'd tell her that the hard days don't have to last forever if she didn't want them to.

*"There is a certain beauty in letting go, Miss Granger,"* Lucius's words echoed in her mind.

Hermione was tired of the suffering, the anger, and the frustration. So, she released it all. She accepted all of the decisions that led up to this moment and reminded herself of why she made them in the first place. They were for him. They were for Draco. They were for the boy that helped ease her panic attacks, who delivered a home-cooked meal on Christmas, and the boy who, without even being asked, brought her a piece of home to help cheer her up.

Hermione was ready to let go.

## Chapter 15

Hermione threw her head back and clutched onto her stomach as hers and Draco's laughter filled the library. It had been so long since she last felt this light and carefree. Reaching around her, Draco picked out a book on the history of quidditch and quirked a brow, sending Hermione into another fit of laughter.

The book triggered a memory of Draco getting Harry a similar book during the Horcrux hunt, which then led to her remembering the time Ron and Harry walked in on them while they were doing... *things* together. Hermione remembered the horrified look on Harry's face as he stood drenched in water in the front of their tent as he clutched onto his copy of the quidditch book in one hand and the destroyed locket in the other.

*"You know people eat there, right?"* Hermione said, doing her best to mimic Harry's voice from that night.

"I don't know why he was so upset about us shagging. It's not like he was drowning or anything," Draco added with a smirk.

As she leaned back on the green sofa, a small collection of books sprawled across the area between them, Hermione watched as Draco draped his arm along the back of the sofa - his hand resting less than an inch away from hers.

And there it was again, the desperate urge to touch him, to feel him. That was until she looked up and noticed what he was looking at. Regret and shame consumed his eyes as he stared at her left arm. Most days, Hermione forgot that she had also been marked during the war. It was by no means something that she was happy to have, but it was clear that it hurt Draco more than it did her.

"It's not your fault, Draco," she said.

Draco blinked a few times before meeting her eyes. "What?"

"It's not your fault," Hermione repeated. "There was nothing that you could've done."

Pain filled the creases of his forehead as he furrowed his brows. "I could've stopped her," he stated, referring to Bellatrix.

"We both know that it would've only caused more harm if you had."

"Yes but I-"

Hermione shook her head. "No Draco," she said softly. "You did everything that you could that day. Please, rid yourself of this burden."

Draco dropped his head and nodded slowly as he fiddled with his ring that encased the resurrection stone.

In the past, looking at the black stone would be enough to make Hermione snap. No matter how nice of a moment they were having, seeing that bloody piece of jewellery would cause her to fill with rage and lash out at him, but not anymore. Hermione had decided to enjoy this life with Draco, which meant there was no longer room for anger.

“What is it?” Hermione asked, recognising the reminiscent look on Draco’s face.

“Nothing,” he said. “I was just thinking about us.”

“Well, now you *must* tell me,” she implored as she adjusted her position so that her legs were crisscrossed and her hands folded in her lap as she smiled and eagerly waited for him to speak.

Draco let out a sigh of surrender and said, “I was just thinking back on our days at the cottage.”

“Bill and Fleur’s?”

Draco nodded. “Specifically, the night when we first met Teddy.”

“Oh, you mean the night you confessed your undying love for me?” she teased.

“Yeah,” he chuckled as he rolled his eyes. “That night.”

“What about it?”

“I don’t know,” he shrugged. “Everything and nothing at the same time. Mostly just how we felt then and the excitement that we had for our plans for after the war.”

“We were going to have a cottage of our own,” she smiled as she reminisced on the memory. “We were going to build a garden in the backyard and learn how to grow our own vegetables.”

“Well, *you* were going to learn how to grow your own vegetables. I was just going to offer my support from the sidelines,” he playfully smirked.

“Please, we both know that I would’ve had you on your hands and knees planting seeds by the third day.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right,” Draco laughed. “I’d do anything that you asked of me, Granger.”

Hermione couldn’t help but let out a small laugh as his words triggered a memory.

“What?” he asked.

“Nothing,” she giggled. “It’s just, do you remember that time at the cottage with Ginny and Luna?”

“With Ginny and Luna...” he trailed off when suddenly, embarrassment washed over him. Covering his face with his hands and sinking back into the sofa, Draco let out a groan. “Please don’t remind me,” he begged.

“Why not? I thought you looked nice,” Hermione teased.

The infamous botched haircut was one of her favourite moments from the war. As Draco chased Ginny around the house and continued to threaten to shave her head and possibly even kill her, Hermione found herself feeling like a regular teenager for the first time in her life. There was no talk of Voldemort, Horcruxes or death.

If she could, Hermione would go back in time and live in that moment forever.

A sudden sharp crack caused both of them to jump in their seats before turning their heads in the direction of the sound.

“Master Draco, your guests have arrived!” Bippy excitedly informed him.

“They have?” he asked, surprised by the statement. “Who all is here?”

“Miss Ginny Weasley and Mister Harry Potter are in the foyer, and Bippy saw Mister Blaise Zabini, Miss Pansy Parkinson and Mister Theodore Nott approaching the gate,” Bippy said, her cheeks flushing as Theo’s name fell from her lips.

“Very good,” Draco nodded. “Please tend to our guests and offer them refreshments. Then in ten minutes, escort them all to the west wing.”

“Yes, Master Draco,” Bippy replied before apparating.

“Miss Granger,” Draco said as he rose from the sofa. “Would you mind accompanying me to one last place this evening?”

“It would be my honour, Mister Malfoy,” Hermione playfully replied.

As they walked, Hermione experienced something she never thought she would – contentment.

*I could do this*, she thought to herself.

There would always be barriers, and she knew it wouldn’t be easy, but she was willing to give it a chance. If a few hard days meant she could continue to have Draco in her life, then that was a sacrifice she was willing to make.

They would never be able to get the cottage or flat that they had discussed, and they would never be able to get married or have children, but they would have one another. And that was more than enough.

Reaching the west wing, Draco’s hand shook as he gripped the handle and opened the door for Hermione.

“Don’t tell me you’ve put together a second library,” Hermione jokingly said.

Draco let out a small laugh. “Unfortunately, I did not,” he replied. “Do you remember that time when we stayed up all night planning out our future?” Draco asked as he guided her through the room.

“Of course.”

“And do you remember telling me your dream proposal just in case some miracle happened and I managed to remove the broom from my arse and change my stance on marriage?”

“Yes,” Hermione giggled.

Snapping his fingers, the lights in the room shut off, and hundreds of small dots began to glow in the space above their heads to form the Orion constellation. Hermione stared up at the ceiling, completely entranced by the beauty and magic of it all.

A slight snapping noise caught Hermione’s attention. “What was tha—” her eyes widened in shock as she stared at the ring in his hands. “Draco, what are you doing?”

“I know that I said I’d never want to get married...”

*No, no, no.*

“... that I didn’t see a point in the titles or the rings or the ceremony, but I do now. I know that we’re still young, and by all means, we can wait as long as you’d like to make it official, but I want this, Hermione. I want this with you.”

“Draco...”

“Wait, please,” he requested. “I’ve rehearsed this speech a million times, but if I don’t get it all out, I’ll probably forget something, and I really don’t want to.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “You are the most amazing woman I have ever met, Hermione. If everyone viewed the world as you do and was in possession of the heart that you have, it would be a far better place. I kick myself daily for taking so long to make my way to you but Gods. I am so happy that I eventually did.”

Hermione stared down at him with glossy eyes. She knew that she should stop him, but she couldn’t bring herself to. Selfishly, she wanted to hear everything that he had to say.

“Before you, I was nothing more than a product of my father. I was a child who was raised like cattle to serve a single purpose, to act accordingly and carry out the family name. I had never dreamt of a future for myself because I had no reason to. But now, all I dream about is my future... our future. You have shown me that it’s okay to be vulnerable, to let people in and to have hope. There are a lot of things that I can’t promise, but the one thing that I can is that I will always love you, Hermione. I will love you on the easy days, and I’ll love you even more on the hard ones. Whatever challenges that may arise, we will face them together. There is nothing that I want more in this world than to build a life with you. Marry me, Hermione.”



She didn't know how to respond. He had done the one thing he said he'd never do, and it was for her. He had given Hermione her dream proposal and poured his heart out, and it was perfect. *He* was perfect. Her heart broke as she looked down at him on one knee. It was everything that she wanted, and it killed her to know that she could not have it.

"Draco I—" she began, but she was cut off.

"Draco?" Pansy chimed as she and the rest of the group walked in.

"Pans, good to see you," he replied. "If you could just give us a moment."

"Us? Draco, who are you talking about?" she questioned.

Hermione's stomach dropped.

"Did your travels fry your brain Pans? I'm referring to Granger and me, obviously. And if you couldn't tell by the ring in my hand and the fact that I'm on one knee, I'm kind of in the middle of something important. I didn't expect Bippy to be so prompt with getting you all here."

"Mate," Theo said as he stepped forward. "Hermione isn't here."

"What are you talking about, Theo? She's standing right in front of me," Draco said as he turned and looked up at Hermione, who had an almost horrified look on her face.

*Please, no.*

*Don't do this.*

*Not yet.*

"No, she's not," Theo replied.

"Yes, she is," he argued.

"Draco," Theo's voice was gentle as he slowly approached him. "Hermione isn't here."

*Don't take him away from me.*

*I'm not ready.*

"What the fuck is wrong with you?!" Draco ridiculed as he got up to his feet.

"Draco, listen to me," Theo said as he placed a sympathetic hand on Draco's shoulder.

"Hermione isn't here."

Smacking his hand away, Draco said, "Look, I get it if you think I'm being impulsive or that we're too young to get married or whatever, but stop, Theo. This isn't funny."

"I know that you're hurting, but you need to accept it," Theo said. "Hermione is gone."

“Fuck you!” Draco spat before connecting his fist with Theo’s jaw, causing him to stumble backwards. Grabbing onto the front of his shirt, Draco pinned Theo against the wall.

“Hermione never came back from the war,” Theo coughed out.

“Shut up!” Draco shouted before punching him in the stomach.

Hermione watched in horror as everything began to fall apart in front of her eyes.

“Look at me!” Ginny commanded as she ripped Draco away from Theo. “I know you’ve probably blocked a majority of the battle out. I know I have, but you need to remember.”

“What are you talking about?” Draco scoffed. “I remember the war. Potter died, then he came back to life and killed Voldemort.”

*Harry wasn’t the one who killed Voldemort. You are.*

“Actually, I wasn’t the one who-” Harry began, but Ginny raised her hand to silence him.

“Just fucking humour me and do it,” Ginny said. “You don’t even need to remember all of it, just the last half. Where were you when Harry jumped out of Hagrid’s arms?”

Draco let out an aggravated groan before reluctantly doing as instructed.

“I was with Granger,” he replied. “We were on the steps in front of the school.”

“Good, yes,” Ginny nodded. “And then, after Harry ran off and Voldemort followed him, what happened?”

Draco took another moment as he tried to remember.

“We got separated for a little, ” he said. “I got hit in the arm by a hex while I searched for Hermione. Eventually, I found her in the courtyard. A Death Eater was approaching behind her.”

Nothing had destroyed Hermione as much as watching Draco slowly remember everything. With each sentence, his voice became shakier. Death didn’t hurt nearly as much as this.

“...my father was killed, and then my mother was—” his voice cracked as he winced, tears brimming his eyes. “I was holding her. I remember the warmth of her blood as it poured out from her abdomen.”

“And then what happened, Draco?” Ginny asked carefully.

“I killed Greyback and my aunt Bella and then...” his eyebrows pulled tightly together.

“You killed Greyback and Bellatrix, and then, what? Tell me what happened next,” Ginny requested.

Draco immediately dropped to his knees, his head falling into his hands.

“Draco,” Ginny crouched down and placed a gentle hand on his shoulder. “Draco,” she said once more, her voice soft and compassionate.

“No,” he choked out as he shook his head. “no no NO!” his voice broke as he tightly covered his ears and hunched over, his forehead pressed against the marble floor. “She’s not dead, she’s not dead, she’s not dead,” he kept repeating.

“It’s going to be alright.”

“No!” he snapped as he shot up to his feet, his eyes frantically searching the area. “See!” he said as he pointed over at Hermione, who was still standing frozen in the centre of the room. “She’s right there. She’s fine.”

It felt like Hermione’s heart was ripped from her chest, and every bone in her body was broken as everyone stared at her unknowingly.

“Draco,” Pansy said delicately. “There’s no one there.”

“Yes, there is!” he argued as he began walking towards Hermione. “Look, I’ll even grab her-” his face dropped as his hand passed straight through hers.

He shook his head in disbelief as he reached out for her again. Draco desperately tried to grab onto her hand, her arm, waist, face, anything. But each time he attempted to, his hand moved through her like thin air.

“This can’t-I don’t-” he stammered as he stared at Hermione.

Tears streamed down her face as she looked into Draco’s pleading eyes. She could tell that he was waiting for her to say that it wasn’t true, but she couldn’t. “I’m sorry,” she whispered, her voice cracking with every word.

Draco stumbled backwards. His hands stretched out to the side as he searched for something to grab onto to steady himself.

“Mate-” Theo said.

Draco grabbed Theo’s wrist and twisted his arm back. “Where were you?” he asked. “Where were you this entire fucking time?! Why didn’t-why didn’t you tell me?” Draco turned to look at the rest of his friends. “Why didn’t any of you fucking tell me?!”

*They tried.*

“We tried,” Harry sheepishly stated. “We all took turns coming to visit you, but each time you had Bippy turn us away. After a month, we sort of just...” he trailed off as he looked down at his hands.

“You sort of just, what, Potter?” Draco snarled. “You sort of just moved on with your life? You sort of just went on your merry little way and moved on from her?”

“That’s not fair, Draco,” Hermione said.

When he turned around and moved towards her, Hermione had to stop herself from flinching. There was a raw anger in his eyes and movements that she had never seen before.

“Fair?” Draco scoffed. “You think I give a damn about fair? None of this is fair, Granger! You’re not even—” his voice caught in the back of his throat. Closing his eyes, he drew in a deep breath before continuing. “You’re not even real.”

It felt like she had been hit with the killing curse all over again as the words fell from his lips.

“Just because you can’t touch me doesn’t mean I’m not real, Draco,” Hermione said quietly. “I’m still here with you. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“That’s not good enough! I don’t want some conjured version of you that only I can see. I want the *real* you! I want to take your hand and put this stupid fucking ring on it,” Draco said as he angrily held up the small box.

*I want that too.*

“I want to stand with you before our friends and say those damn vows and kiss you. I want to build our cottage, buy our flat in the muggle neighbourhood, and start a family with you, but I can’t, we can’t!”

“Draco, please.” Hermione took a step toward him.

“No,” Draco said as he raised his hand to stop her. “Don’t come any closer. I can’t... it’s too much and I... just don’t.”

He may not have vocalised it, but Hermione knew that Draco’s desire to see her had finally reached its expiration date. Because as soon as he turned around and stormed off, Hermione felt a tug in her chest and shortly after, the walls around her began to twist and turn, and she felt herself being yanked away.

When Hermione materialised in the familiar room, she expected to be greeted by Lucius, but she wasn’t. No one came rushing forward to bombard her with questions and the only sound was that of the flames flickering in the fireplace that she once spent most of her days sitting by.

“Hermione?” The sudden voice caused her to jump.

“Tonks?” she asked as she squinted her eyes and looked at the front entrance.

Before she knew it, Hermione felt two arms wrap tightly around her. The warm embrace instantly broke down the last of her walls, causing Hermione to release every emotion she was experiencing in the form of gut-wrenching sobs.

“I lost him again,” she cried into Tonks’s shoulder. “I didn’t even get to say goodbye.”

“Shh,” Tonks lightly stroked her hair. “It’s okay, Hermione. You’re going to be okay.”

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Once Hermione calmed down enough to say a sentence without choking on her words, she sat with Tonks by the fire and explained everything from the very beginning. It was therapeutic in a way, to share everything that she had been through.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that, Hermione,” Tonks spoke with remorse.

“I’m not,” she replied.

Tonks raised a brow. “You’re not?”

“No. I would do it again, all of it, because while it was uncomfortable and draining and sometimes felt like the cruellest form of torture, I got to be with him for just a little longer.”

Tonks’s expression softened as she grabbed her hand.

“I still wish that—” Tonks stopped mid-sentence as she stared into the fire.

“What is it?” Hermione asked as she turned to look into the flames.

*It* was Draco, and he was currently standing outside of the greenhouse that he had surprised her with earlier that day, watching as it slowly burned to the ground. And then, he screamed. The sound of his rage, frustration, and heartache echoed against the walls of the afterlife.

He was ridding himself of her.

Tonks immediately checked on Hermione, but by the time she asked, “*Are you okay?*” Hermione had already broken down again.

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The afterlife grew silent as Hermione and Tonks watched as Narcissa explained everything to Draco. It was hard to see the memories force their way forward in his mind, but it was even harder to watch Narcissa - the heartbreak was written all over her face. Hermione understood now. She understood why Narcissa could never bring herself to tell Draco the truth, why she continued to stand by and let her son exist in his fantasy.

After a few more minutes, Ginny, Theo, Blaise, and Pansy joined Draco in the study. Narcissa lingered for a little longer before finally leaving her son’s side. Tonks held tightly onto Hermione’s hand as they witnessed Draco fall apart in Theo’s arms.

“I’m here, Draco,” Theo whispered to him. “You’re not alone. I’m right here.”

Draco continued to release it all, to allow all of the hurt and anger to spill out. The sound of his cries scraped at Hermione's ears and shattered her heart.

"Hermione, Tonks!" Remus exclaimed as he came rushing toward them.

Tonks shot up to her feet. "What is it?"

"Teddy," he panted. "Harry is bringing him Teddy."

Before Tonks could respond, she disappeared into thin air. Remus and Hermione shared a quick glance before heading over to the fireplace.

"I've done my best the past few months, but I'm not what he needs. He needs his family," Harry said as he carefully handed Teddy to Draco.

Warmth filled Hermione's chest at the sight of Teddy in Draco's arms.

"He has his mother's eyes," Draco stated, his face softening as he gently brushed Teddy's cheek with his thumb.

And then, Remus and Hermione watched as Tonks slowly appeared at Draco's side.

"It's about time you thought of me," Tonks smiled. "I mean seriously, it's like you don't even care about me," she teased.

"Dora?" Draco's voice barely audible as he stared up at her. "Is that... is that you?"

"In the flesh," she replied. "Well, kind of."

Getting up to his feet, Theo quietly motioned for everyone to leave the room.

"There's my sweet boy," tears filled Tonks's eyes as she looked down at Teddy. "He has Remus' nose, lucky for him."

Remus let out a soft chuckle. His eyes also clouded with tears as he watched his wife reunite with their son.

"I know I agreed to be his godfather, but I don't think I can do this, Dora," Draco admitted. "I mean, I'm a mess. Can't your mother and father take care of him? They'd be better suited to do so."

"They probably would be, but I didn't choose them to be his guardian should something happen to me. I chose you, Draco."

"I know, but don't you think-"

Tonks raised her hand. "I'm going to stop you right there," Tonks said. "Look, I'm going to make this quick because, well, truthfully I feel like if I stay here any longer I'll cry and I'd really rather not. I'd like to keep *some* of my dignity."

Crouching down so that she was at eye level with Draco, Tonks said, “All of the good that could possibly come from our DNA is in Teddy. He deserves to grow up in a household that reminds him of such. I’m sure my parents would do an excellent job raising him, but they aren’t who I want to do so. You are. I know it’s a lot to ask of you and that someone your age shouldn’t be given such a heavy responsibility, but I need you to do this for me, okay?”

There was a brief pause before Draco nodded and said, “Okay.”

“Good,” Tonks smiled before standing up. “Take care of him, Draco. Take care of my son.”

“I will.”

The ache in Hermione’s chest slowly began to alleviate.

*He’s going to be okay*, she told herself.

“I have to go,” Remus said to her.

Hermione turned to look at him. “Go? Where are you going?”

“Our son is where he’s meant to be, which means it’s time for my wife and I to do the same,” he stated as he rose to his feet. “Don’t worry, we’ll see you soon. I just have a feeling that there’s one last thing you need to do before you can join us.”

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### ***The Next Day***

Hermione remained by the fireplace for the majority of the night. She took turns watching over Draco and Teddy and also staring at the staircase behind her, waiting for Narcissa to appear, but she never did.

The night was long and quiet but, at the same time, peaceful. It was the first time that Hermione was granted time to process all of her thoughts and emotions without any interruptions. She was able to come to reflect and fully come to terms with her decisions and release every last drop of anger or doubt.

Hermione also took the time to revisit one of the things that Lucius had said to her.

*“There is a certain beauty in letting go.”*

It all made sense to her now.

Lucius wasn’t referring to giving in and learning to be content with that life with Draco. What he meant was letting go of everything that she was still holding onto. And he was right, there was a beauty in it.

There was a beauty in no longer seeing her past life as one she had left behind but instead, as one that ran its course and opened a door to a new one. There was a beauty in looking back fondly on the memories she *had* made with her friends and family, rather than focusing on the ones she would never be able to. And there was a beauty in remembering her and Draco's love and being happy with their story, instead of cursing the world for ending it too soon.

Hermione was ready to let go.

So, when she woke up the next day and felt the familiar tug in her chest, the anxiety and dread that she had felt previously was replaced by excitement. Excitement for her new beginning and for Draco's.

As Hermione materialised, she watched as Draco knelt and placed a bouquet in the grass and rested his forehead against the gravestone.

"We almost made it, Granger," he whispered. "We *should've* made it."

Stepping forward, Hermione said, "I always thought you looked handsome in a suit."

Draco lifted his head and met her eyes.

"Even back at school, I thought you did," she admitted. "But if you had asked me back then, I would've denied it."

Draco let out a small chuckle. "Yes, well, we both know my head was too far up my own arse to ever speak to you at school in the first place."

"That it was," she giggled.

*Tell him that you don't regret it.*

"I would do it again, you know," she said quietly. "I would sacrifice my life a hundred times over if it meant saving you."

"Please," Draco winced. "Please don't say that."

"It's true though."

"I never asked you to do that."

"You didn't need to. It was my choice and I'll never regret it," Hermione said. "This is your chance, Draco. This is your new beginning."

"*You* were my new beginning," he replied.

"I don't have to be your end, though. You have so much to look forward to, so much life to live. For the first time, *you* get to decide what you want to do and who you want to become," she explained. "Don't waste this gift by sitting around and missing me. I'm always going to be with you, even if you can't see me."



Draco shook his head as his eyes filled with tears. "It's not the same."

"How about this," she began. "When you're walking through town with Teddy, which you better do because they have some lovely markets, and you see a northern cardinal, know that it's me. Know that, at that moment, I'm with you."

"Why a northern cardinal?"

"My dad was gone for work for a few months in the States and when he returned home, he said that every time he saw one he thought of me. So now I want you to do the same."

"There's one problem," Draco said.

Hermione lifted a brow. "And what might that be?"

"They aren't native to the UK."

A smile crept its way across her lips. "Then you won't be able to argue that it's just a coincidence when you see one, you'll know for certain that it's me, okay?"

"Whatever you say, Granger," he smiled back.

"Yup, I still love hearing you call me that," Hermione said. "One last thing, I need you to promise me something, Draco."

"Anything."

"I want you to promise me that you'll live a full life. Promise me that you'll take risks and that you'll laugh on the good days and cry on the hard ones. Allow yourself to be vulnerable, allow yourself to be human. You deserve to experience everything that life has to offer. Promise me that you'll live, Draco. Can you do that for me?"

"Yes."

"I want to hear you say it. Say that you promise."

"I promise," Draco said. "I love you, Hermione."

"And I love you, Draco. I always will."

"I hope you know that the second I arrive in whatever afterlife awaits me, I'm finding you."

"I'm counting on it," Hermione smiled. "Until then?"

Draco nodded and choked back his tears.

"Until then."

Hermione took a moment to memorise every last detail of Draco. His hair was messier now, a small piece dangling on his forehead. His face was somehow even more defined, and the tension that he always used to carry in his shoulders had dissipated. And even though there

was still sadness that lingered in his eyes, she could see it. Hermione could see the hope beginning to return.

Draco let out a shaky breath before placing the resurrection stone on the ground and covering it with dirt.

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When Hermione opened her eyes and took in her surroundings, she found herself back at King's Cross, only this time, it wasn't flooded with hundreds of people. The only people besides herself who were in attendance were standing just ahead, all smiling as they waited for her to approach.

"Come on then," Tonks shouted. "We haven't got all day."

Placing one foot in front of the other, Hermione rushed forward and quickly closed the distance between them. As soon as she was close enough, she felt three pairs of arms wrap tightly around her.

"It's good to see you all again," Hermione smiled.

Making her way through the group, hugging each individual person, Hermione finally reached the end and looked up at Lucius.

"Hey there, *Lulu*," she smirked.

Lucius cocked a brow. "Lulu?"

Hermione nodded proudly. "It's my nickname for you, do you not like it?"

He took a moment to think it over. "I suppose I can allow that, *Hermione*," he replied.

To Hermione's surprise, Lucius presented his arm to her. Slipping her arm through the crook of his elbow, she laced her fingers around his bicep and followed him onto the train. As they took their seat, Tonks to her left, Remus to her right, and Narcissa and Lucius sat across from her, Hermione leaned back against the soft cushion.

"So, where does this take us?" she asked the group.

"Home," Narcissa smiled warmly.

"Home," her lips curved into a gentle smile as she echoed the word, her heart filling with a mixture of emotions.

For a long time, Hermione didn't know what home was anymore. Home used to be with her parents, but that changed when she obliviated them. Then, home became whatever new spot herself, Harry, and Ron camped out at during the Horcrux hunt. And after that, home no

longer became a place but instead a person - it became Draco. Whenever she was with him, that was when she felt at home.

It wasn't until after she died that home started to become something Hermione never thought she would be able to find again. She no longer had her parents, her friends or Draco. But now, as she sat on the Hogwarts Express, she realised that home wasn't a place or even a person, it was a feeling.

Home was the fluttering in her heart, the excitement that filled her stomach, and the anticipation for the unknown. And one day, when the time was right, home would become the love that filled the air when she greeted Draco at King's Cross.

"Home," Hermione said once more. "It feels good to be home."

## Chapter 16

*September 28, 1998*

The afterlife was everything Hermione had expected it to be; serene and blissful. It was a stark contrast to the building where she had previously spent her days.. It was open, colourful, and calm. It wasn't a place where people went when their life ended. It was somewhere for people to start a new one.

Tonks and Remus had settled into their new home quickly as did Lucius and Narcissa. Both couples chose a modest house, which had taken Hermione by surprise when it came to the Malfoys. They were all fairly close to one another and agreed to get together at least once every two weeks.

Things were good.

Hermione had just put the final touches on her home, a small cottage on the water where every morning she woke to the gentle sound of waves crashing and birds chirping. It looked just like the one she had envisioned for her and Draco.

"I'm heading out for a visit, but I'll be back this afternoon," Hermione informed Hedgwig.

A few days ago, Hermione discovered yet another beautiful thing in letting go. She no longer had to sit in front of a fireplace to look over her loved ones. Instead, all she had to do was simply close her eyes, think of them, and then there she was - walking alongside them. Of course, they were none the wiser, but Hermione liked to believe that they could feel her presence.

So, as Hermione closed her eyes, she focused on the details of Draco that she had committed to memory and felt herself being gently pulled away.

When she opened her eyes, Draco rushed past her as he dragged Pansy behind him. Hermione followed them up the stairs and into Teddy's room.

"Merlin's beard, Draco," Pansy scoffed. "What's with the rush?"

"I need your help. It's an emergency," he said as he dragged her up the stairs and into Teddy's room.

Hermione followed closely behind, Draco and Pansy unaware of her presence.

"Are you going to tell me what the emergency is or—oh!" Pansy's eyes went wide as she took in the scene before her.

Hermione covered her mouth with her hand as she let out a soft giggle. Teddy was lying on the changing table with a piece of cloth wrapped around his bottom half, the fabric looking eerily similar to that of the curtains.

“Bippy usually changes his diapers but I sent her out to get some things in town. I heard him crying and when I picked him up I... well it was obvious what was wrong,” Draco explained. “So, do you think you can help?”

“You asked me to come over so that I can change Teddy’s diaper?” Pansy questioned.

“No Pans, I sent for you so that we can kick our feet up and talk about your new suitor of the week over a glass of firewhiskey,” Draco sarcastically replied. “Yes! Clearly that’s the reason I asked you to come!”

Pansy let out a sigh and guided Draco over to the changing table.

“Where are the other diapers?” she asked, to which Draco shrugged. “Men,” she groaned as she rolled her eyes. “Accio diaper.” Suddenly, a clean diaper soared through the room and into her grasp.

Hermione watched as Draco intently observed Pansy, mentally taking notes of every step. When Pansy started speaking about the wings of the diaper, Hermione could quite literally see the wheels turning in Draco’s head as he tried to figure out what in Merlin’s name she was talking about.

“It’s not as hard as it may seem,” Pansy said.

“I don’t know, Pans,” Draco sighed as he lowered himself into a chair and dropped his head into his hands. “I feel like this was all a mistake. Maybe I should just bring Teddy to my aunt and uncle’s. I’m sure they’d be happy to take care of him.”

“Stop that,” Pansy ridiculed. “Stop thinking that you aren’t capable of doing this. Tonks wanted you to take care of him, correct?”

“Yeah but-”

“No buts! She wouldn’t have said that if she didn’t believe in you. It might take some time, but eventually, everything will just fall into place.” Pansy crouched down beside Draco and placed her hand on his knee. “Look at me, Draco.”

Slowly, he lifted his head and met Pansy’s stare.

“You’re not going to damage him.”

“But what if I do?” he asked. “What if I’m no better than my father?”

“Worrying that you might ruin him in some way proves that you’re already far better than Lucius,” Pansy replied. “You’re going to get the hang of it, Draco. Just take it day by day.”

Stepping forward, Hermione placed a hand on Pansy’s shoulder and said, “Thank you for being there for him.”

*October 19, 1998*

“Yoo-hoo!” Blaise whistled as he stepped into the manor. “Where for out thou father Malfoy?”

“Ah! Mister Blaise Zabini,” Bippy exclaimed. “It’s so good to see you. Master Draco is-” The sudden appearance of Theo behind Blaise caused Bippy to stop mid-sentence.

“If it’s not my favourite girl,” Theo smiled. “How have you been, Bipster?”

“Oh, Mister Theodore Nott,” Bippy blushed. “Bippy has been well. Bippy has missed Mister Theodore Nott.”

“Apologies for not coming around lately, I was travelling a bit,” Theo replied. “You wouldn’t happen to know where Draco is, would you? Blaise and I are here to give him a break from diaper duty.”

“Bippy last saw Master Draco in the study.”

“Wonderful, thanks sweetheart,” Theo winked.

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As Blaise and Theo entered the study, they both silently watched as Draco made incoherent and ridiculous noises at Teddy, who just stared back at him with a blank expression.

“Come on kid, just repeat after me,” Draco encouraged. “Bah, bah, bah.”

Theo and Blaise were able to suppress their laughter until Draco made a fart noise with his mouth. Immediately, Draco’s head whipped around and he angrily stared at his friends as they burst into laughter.

“Don’t let us interrupt,” Blaise chuckled as he waved his hand.

“Yeah, no, please keep going, maybe you should grab your death eater mask while you’re at it,” Theo added.

Draco swiped a book from a nearby table and threw it across the room. Blaise and Theo were able to dodge it but Hermione wasn’t as lucky. As soon as she materialised in the room, the book passed straight through her head.

“Hey, what the hell was that for?” Blaise and Hermione asked simultaneously, though Blaise’s was the only one Draco could hear.

“Next time it’ll be a knife,” Draco threatened.

Blaise raised his hands in surrender before walking over to Teddy and picking him up.

“So, I know I’m not a parent or anything, but care to explain what that had to do with raising a kid?” Theo questioned.

Draco dragged his hand down his face and let out a frustrated sigh. “He’s supposed to be making noises by now.”

“Says who?”

“Says the hundreds of books!” Draco exclaimed as he motioned over to the stack in the corner of the room.

After Pansy’s visit, Draco sent Bippy to collect every book she could find on parenting. He was shocked when she returned with enough material to fill an entire library. Unlike when he was a spy for the Order, there was a guide on how to navigate this part of his life.

He read every book three times. He had it all mapped out. Every milestone that Teddy was meant to hit and when. And right now, at almost six months old, he was meant to be discovering his voice and making sounds. But aside from the occasional involuntary bodily noise, Teddy was silent.

“Mate,” Theo said as he approached Draco. “He’s doing fine, you are doing fine.”

“Then why isn’t he talking?!” Draco snapped, worry consuming his eyes.

“He’s a kid who was brought into this world in the middle of a war and lost both of his parents,” Theo stated. “It seems only logical that he might be a bit behind.”

“Yeah, my mother told me that I was a slow learner,” Blaise added.

“No Blaise, you’re just a fucking moron,” Theo joked which caused all of them to laugh. “But seriously, Teddy is going to be fine.”

Draco had been struggling with his new role as Teddy’s guardian, but Hermione believed in him. She always knew he would be an excellent father ever since she first saw Draco hold him and that hadn’t changed.

If Hermione was certain about one thing, it was that Teddy couldn’t be in better hands.

### ***October 31, 1998***

As Draco stepped out onto the front steps of the manor, he felt the cool crisp air against his skin. Adjusting Teddy’s jacket to make sure that he was warm, Draco stared down at the child

in his arms. He was dressed in a small lion outfit and had whiskers drawn onto his cheeks. Draco thought that it was the type of costume Hermione might've liked.

There was something about standing with Teddy in his arms, both of them dressed in costumes for a muggle holiday, that caused something to click. For the first time, Draco felt at ease. There was no panic, no worry, just a sense of joy as Teddy tucked his face into Draco's chest.

"Ready for an adventure little guy?" Draco asked. Teddy gurgled happily in response, and a rush of love and belonging washed over Draco - something he hadn't experienced since being with Hermione.

He always thought his purpose in life was to be the perfect Malfoy heir. And then, when he met Hermione, he thought that it was to love and protect her. Then he lost her and Draco felt like his life no longer had any meaning. He was terrified that he'd never be able to patch that hole in his heart. But now, as he walked out to the gate to join his friends and held Teddy, he felt that void begin to fill.

He had found his new purpose. It was this. It was taking care of Teddy.

"He's doing excellent," Tonks whispered, tears forming in her eyes as her lips stretched into a smile.

"Yeah, he is," Hermione replied as they watched Draco and Teddy walk away.

### *April 11, 1999*

"Master Draco, your guests have arrived," Bippy announced.

"Thank you, Bippy, please let them know that I'll be down in a moment," Draco instructed.

It was Teddy's first birthday and Draco had spent the last week making sure that everything was perfect. He knew that Teddy wouldn't remember any of it but he didn't care. Draco wanted to make sure that he made every moment special for him. He wanted to make sure that he was always prioritising his godson.

Putting the final touch on the gifts, Draco made his way downstairs to join everyone. Pansy, Blaise, and Theo were crowded around the fireplace and Harry and Ginny were on the floor with Teddy sitting between them.

He couldn't hear what they said, but whatever it was caused Teddy to look over at Draco. The second Teddy spotted him, his eyes lit up and a glowing smile appeared on his face. Draco felt his heart pounding in his chest as he watched Teddy stumble up to his feet and slowly place one foot in front of the other. Everything dropped from Draco's hands as he knelt and held his arms out.



“That’s it, you got it,” Draco said encouragingly. “Just a few more steps.”

The room went silent as everyone stopped what they were doing to witness Teddy walking for the first time. Even though Draco was his legal guardian, they all felt like Teddy was their child as well. Very early on they discovered that it took an entire army to raise a child, especially at their age. They all pitched in to help Draco. From taking turns changing dirty diapers, bathing, feeding, and just hanging out with him. So as they watched Teddy hold himself up and wobble his way over to Draco, they couldn’t help but feel a sense of pride.

“One more, that’s it,” Draco smiled.

With one final stumble, Teddy reached Draco, collapsed into his grasp and giggled as Draco scooped him up into his arms and spun him around.

“Did everyone see that?!” Draco asked as he excitedly looked around the room. “He did it all on his own!” As he continued to scan the room, he realised he wasn’t going to find who he was looking for. It hurt to remember that Hermione wasn’t with him to experience these moments but he tried to remember what she told him – she was with him, even if he couldn’t see her.

Turning his attention back to Teddy, Draco whispered, “I’m so proud of you.”

Hermione stood off to the side, her clasped hands pressed to her lips as she watched with tear-filled eyes. While everyone celebrated Teddy, Draco looked up and unknowingly met Hermione’s gaze.

“I’m proud of *you*, Draco,” she said to him.

## **5 Years Later**

***March 13, 2004***

“Uncle Draco, uncle Draco!” Teddy shouted as he rushed down the stairs.

“Teddy? What is it? What’s wrong?” Draco asked as he shot up from the couch, tossed his book aside and ran over to the bottom of the stairs. “Are you okay? Did you get hurt?”

Teddy shook his head. “It finally happened, it fell out,” he said as he smiled, revealing his missing front tooth causing Draco’s shoulders to drop in relief.

“This means the tooth fairy will come and give me money, right?” Teddy asked.

Draco almost forgot about the stories he had told him about what happens when a kid loses their teeth. He only mentioned the tooth fairy because he remembered Hermione telling him about all of the little things her parents did for her as a child, like putting money under her pillow in exchange for a lost tooth.

“Yes, of course the tooth fairy will come,” Draco replied. “Just put the tooth under your pillow just like we talked about.”

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“I don’t see why I have to wear this!” Harry shouted from inside the bedroom.

“Stop your whining and come out already,” Draco replied.

Reluctantly, Harry opened the door and shamefully walked out of the room. Laughter instantly escaped the back of Ginny and Draco’s throats as they took in his appearance. Harry was dressed in a sparkly, light blue fairy outfit. He had on white tights, slippers, and a small plastic crown and he had a plastic wand with a star on the end of it.

“You look so lovely,” Ginny chuckled.

“A true vision, Potter,” Draco mocked.

“Piss off the both of you,” Harry scoffed. “Why can’t I just wear my normal clothes?”

“Oh come on, this is for Teddy,” Draco replied.

“Yeah I know but I don’t see why I need to wear a damn tutu to grab his tooth.”

“Imagine if he woke up and the horror you’d cause if he saw his uncle Harry grabbing it and not the magical tooth fairy,” Ginny said.

“I think he’d be more horrified seeing me dressed like this,” Harry suggested as he motioned to his outfit.

“You’ll never let him live this down, will you?” Hermione asked Fred as they watched the three of them bicker.

“Never,” Fred smirked.

“Potter, can I ask you a question?” Draco asked.

“Sure, whatever.”

“Do you hate children?”

Harry’s jaw dropped. “What?! No!”

“Then you and your sparkly arse better march its way up to Teddy’s room, retrieve the tooth and slip a couple of galleons underneath his pillow,” Draco instructed.

“Fine,” he groaned as he held out his hand.

“What, do you want me to shake your hand or something?”

“No, I’m waiting for you to give me the money.”

“Run out of that ‘chosen one’ money already, Potter?” Draco mocked as he reached into his pocket, retrieved some money and dropped it into Harry’s hand.

“Bloody hell, Malfoy. You just carry a handful of galleons in your pocket at all times?”

“Yeah,” he replied nonchalantly. “Don’t you?”

“No, he doesn’t,” Ginny interjected. “Remind me to knock a few of my teeth out. I could use a few new pairs of shoes.”

### ***May 2, 2004***

“Do you have the flowers?” Draco asked, to which Teddy nodded and held them up in the air. “Good,” he smiled before holding out his hand. Once Teddy’s small fingers wrapped around Draco’s pointer finger, they began making their way into the graveyard.

Draco never wanted to replace Remus and Tonks, it’s one of the reasons why he had Teddy refer to him as uncle Draco. He wanted Teddy to remember his parents, so he often told him stories about them, though, he really only had ones about Tonks but every once in a while he’d recall something about Remus that was worth mentioning.

Draco and Teddy would visit their graves every year on the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts. Death was something that could never be avoided in life and Draco wanted to find a way to show Teddy that, while it’s sad and hurts to lose someone, it doesn’t mean that they aren’t still with you. They’d spend most of their day there. They’d sit and Teddy would tell his parents all about the last year of his life, updating them on every big and small event.

“... and then Bippy and I put the cake in uncle Draco’s bed,” Teddy giggled. “The icing went everywhere. He had to throw his sheets out and everything.”

Tonks and Remus were sitting across from Teddy, smiling and laughing as they listened to their son’s countless stories.

As Teddy lowered his head and rubbed his hands together, Draco could tell that he wanted some privacy. Standing up, he leaned down and said, “I’ll be right over there if you need me, okay?”

“Okay,” he whispered as he slowly nodded his head.

With a bouquet of orchids in his hand, Draco made his way down the row until he reached the headstone with her name on it. Removing his wand, he slowly moved his hand through the air and cast a charm to clean all the weeds that grew around the area over the past year.

Kneeling, Draco placed the flowers on the ground and said, "Hey there, Granger."

"Hey there, Draco," Hermione smiled as she took a seat on the grass.

The first few times that he visited Hermione's grave, Draco was tempted to dig up the resurrection stone. Just for a second, he'd always tell himself. All he wanted was to see her and hear her voice one last time, but he knew that if he did, he wouldn't be able to say goodbye again. Eventually, the desire died down.

Now, he would do just as Teddy did - he'd sit and update her on his life.

"Business is going well," Draco began. "I had a meeting with Lewis Jenkins last Tuesday. I think the bloke finally realised after two years that I'm not set out to destroy the werewolves."

Three years ago, Draco began working on establishing a nonprofit, just like Hermione had wanted. It was his way of still having a piece of her. He ended up creating an organisation to advocate for the mistreated, starting with house elves. For the last two years, he fought for their rights and equal treatment. Many would say that he was far too aggressive but Draco argued that he was the right amount of forward and didn't take anyone's shit, which clearly worked considering he got the ministry to enact a law last year.

With the nonprofit gaining credibility, and Draco's 'The Grim' nickname slowly fading out of the headlines and being replaced by 'The Reformed', he was able to start reaching out to other groups such as the werewolves - in honour of Remus and for Teddy's sake.

While Teddy hadn't received any backlash for his father being a werewolf, Draco knew that it was only a matter of time. He wanted to try and get a head start on it in hopes that, by the time Teddy attends Hogwarts, the prejudice towards werewolves would be at a minimum. Kids were cruel, and Draco knew that better than anyone.

"It's going to take a lot more work with the werewolves than it did with the elves," Draco continued. "No one ever saw the elves as a threat or capable of harming, even though that's extremely untrue, but nevertheless, people are terrified of what they don't understand and werewolves, unfortunately, fall under that category."

Draco's mouth stretched into a smile as he said, "The money I would pay to see you in one of those courtrooms, Granger," he chuckled.

"You would destroy them."

"I would destroy them," they said simultaneously.

"Teddy's doing well," Draco continued. "He's brilliant, just like his mother... and his father, I guess. And he's funny, I mean actually funny. I don't think anyone has ever made me laugh more than he has - except you, of course."

Every day there was something that reminded Draco of Hermione. From things like Teddy reaching for one of her books, all of which Ginny and Pansy were able to fix, or something as

small as seeing a fire and reminiscing on the times that he and Hermione would sit by the campfire during the Horcrux hunt.

Draco was able to push through most days and smile back at the memories, but every once in a while the same pain he felt when he lost her would creep its way back into his chest. The first time it happened it felt like he was having a heart attack. He thought he'd never be able to rid himself of the feeling, but then Teddy walked in. That's when he decided that, no matter how painful it may be to not have her, Draco couldn't give up. He had to remain strong for Teddy.

"Was she pretty?" Teddy asked.

Looking over his shoulder, Draco looked up at Teddy who was standing behind him.

"Hey bud, want to sit?"

Teddy shook his head, walked around and took a seat in Draco's lap.

"To answer your question, yes, she was very pretty. The most beautiful person I had ever set my eyes on," Draco replied.

"Did she die the same day as my mum and dad?"

"Yes," Draco nodded, his voice cracking slightly.

"Hermione Jean Granger," Teddy read off. "Can you tell me stories about her too, uncle Draco?"

"I'd love to," he smiled.

Repositioning herself so that she was sitting beside Draco, Hermione rested her head on his shoulder. "Tell him about the love we shared," she requested. "And make sure to tell Teddy that death doesn't always have to be sad and that goodbyes aren't forever."

### ***February 7, 2005***

Draco entered the quiet library, the soft glow of the moon casting shadows on the shelves filled with books and picture frames. As he reached for a book, he caught sight of a small figure on the ground to his right – it was Teddy.

"It's late Teddy, what are you—" Draco's voice caught in the back of his throat as he stared down at Bippy in his arms. Her eyes were closed and her body was still.

Teddy looked up at Draco, tears streaming down his face, and said, "I found her like this. I-I don't know what happened."

Draco's heart ached at the sight of Teddy cradling Bippy's lifeless body. Bippy had always been there for Draco, throughout his entire childhood she was the one person he knew he could always count on being there, and now, she was gone.

Crossing the room, Draco crouched beside Teddy and wrapped his arms around him.

"It's going to be okay, Teddy," Draco said. "Bippy lived a full life and is at peace now."

Teddy nodded, his chin quivering. "It's just so hard to say goodbye," he cried.

Draco let out a sigh and kissed the top of his head. "I know, but goodbyes aren't forever. You'll see her again one day."

"Do you think that she's with my mum and dad? Maybe even Hermione?"

The mention of her name tugged at Draco's heart. "Yeah," he whispered. "Yeah, I think she is."

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Hermione and Narcissa were meeting for their weekly tea when suddenly, a cracking sound ripped through the air. Turning, their gaze landed on the kind house elf.

"Missus Malfoy and Miss Granger!" Bippy exclaimed as she rushed towards them. "Bippy has missed you dearly," she told Narcissa as she wrapped her tiny arms around her waist.

"I have missed you as well, Bippy," Narcissa said with a soft laugh.

"And Miss Granger," Bippy turned to Hermione. "Bippy is very excited to meet the woman Master Draco loves so much!"

"It's very nice to meet you as well, Bippy," Hermione smiled. "But wait-if you're here, that means that you..."

Bippy lowered her head and stared down at her feet. "Bippy has been with the Malfoy family for a long time."

"She had been around before Lucius was born," Narcissa told Hermione.

The house elf lifted her head. "Bippy is okay, Bippy is just happy to be with Missus Malfoy and Miss Granger."

"Well, we are happy to have you with us," Hermione replied. "Would you like to join us for some tea?"

Bippy's eyes lit up. "Miss Granger wants Bippy to join, as an... equal?" she asked hesitantly.

“Of course, you *are* an equal, Bippy.”

For the remainder of tea, Bippy joined Narcissa and Hermione. They listened intently as she shared several stories about Draco and Teddy, each warming Hermione’s heart and causing her smile to grow wider and wider.

### ***September 1, 2009***

As Draco stood on the platform with Teddy, watching as students bustled around and bid farewell to their parents, he went over their checklist one final time.

“Jumper?”

“Check,” Teddy said.

“Robes?”

“Wearing them.”

“What about socks, books, quills, parch—”

“I’ve got it all,” Teddy assured him.

“Right,” Draco nodded.

Teddy was dressed in his school robes, excitement radiating off of him as he glanced around the train station. Draco looked forward to sending Teddy off for his first year at Hogwarts for years, but now that the day had finally arrived, Draco couldn’t help but be sad.

It was a thrilling day, another milestone, but it also meant that a chapter was closing. Teddy was heading off on his own, and Draco feared that when he saw him next, he wouldn’t be needed anymore.

Teddy turned to face Draco, his smile quickly fading as he took note of his expression.

“What’s wrong?”

Draco shook his head. “Nothing.”

“You’re a terrible liar,” Teddy teased. “I’m going to be okay. There’s no need to worry.”

“I know you will be,” Draco smiled as he placed a gentle hand on his shoulder.

“Uncle Draco?”

“Yes?”

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course.”

“I know you told me to call you uncle Draco out of respect for my parents and all but...”

Draco felt his heart rate increase. He could see that Teddy’s mouth was moving but the words were a mumbled mess in his ears. He had hoped that one day he would ask this but he never thought that he actually would.

“... is that okay?” he asked. When he got no response he said, “Hello? Uncle Draco?” Teddy waved his hand in front of Draco’s face until he finally blinked.

“Sorry, huh, what?” Draco asked.

“I was just wondering if it’s okay if I call you dad?”

Pulling him into a tight embrace, Draco said, “Yes, of course that’s okay.”

“Er—dad, you’re kind of crushing me,” Teddy choked out.

“Sorry,” Draco apologised as he loosened his hold.

The sound of a whistle coming from the train, signalling that it was almost time to depart, caught Teddy and Draco’s attention. Quickly wiping the tears from his eyes, Draco cleared his throat and said, “You better get going.” Teddy nodded before throwing his arms around Draco’s waist one last time.

“I’m going to miss you.”

“I’m going to miss you too,” Draco replied.

“I’m going to make you proud,” Teddy said as he pulled away and wiped away his own tears. “I promise you.”

“You’ve already made me proud. You’re going to do great things, I know it. I love you, son.”

“I love you too, Dad,” he smiled. “I’ll see you at Christmas.”

“I’ll wait to put the star on the top of the tree until you come home.”

“Until then?” Teddy asked.

“Until then,” Draco smiled.

Bending down, Teddy picked up his trunk and made his way to the train. Draco watched as Teddy boarded the train and he scanned the windows until he located Teddy again.

With a final whistle, the train slowly began exiting the station. Draco walked along the platform, keeping his sight on Teddy and waving him off until he reached the end and could no longer see him.



“Remus,” Tonks groaned. “You’re getting snot all over my jacket.”

“I’m sorry,” he said between sobs. “It’s just, Teddy looked so handsome in his robes.”

Tonks flashed Hermione a look that said, “*He’s such a sap.*”

Hermione let out a soft chuckle before walking over to where Draco was standing.

“You did a great job raising him, Draco,” she said.

Draco continued staring at the space where he last saw the train.

“I wish you could have been here for this, Granger,” Draco muttered to himself.

Hermione placed her hand in Draco’s. “I was,” she whispered. “I’ve *always* been with you, Draco.” Hermione looked around the train station. “One day, you and I will meet in a place just like this. But until then, I’ll remain right here, by your side.”

## **14 Years Later**

***February 15, 2023***

“I got the job,” Teddy smiled as he clutched a bouquet and stood in front of the grave. “It was down to me and Phillip McLaggen, the prat’s arrogance finally caught up with him,” he chuckled. “I start on Tuesday. There are a lot of expectations for me as an auror. Minister Shacklebolt said that you were one of the greatest he had ever seen.”

Feeling his emotions start to get the best of him, Teddy took a moment to look around and observe the other individuals that were visiting their loved ones. This was the first time that Teddy came to visit on a day other than the anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts. It was far less crowded and almost serene. The warmth of the sun and the melodic sound of the birds chirping helped bring a sense of ease.

Straightening his spine and taking a deep breath, Teddy said, “Victoire and I got engaged on Sunday. You should’ve seen her face when she saw the ring. I wish you could be here with us to celebrate,” he admitted. “I miss you a lot, Dad.”

Kneeling, Teddy placed the flowers in between the two graves and cleared the weeds, just like Draco had taught him. Running his hand across the headstone, he traced over the name etched into the plaque.

Draco Lucius Malfoy.

Teddy took a deep breath and closed his eyes as memories of him and Draco flooded his mind. He remembered all of the holidays, especially the ones where Draco and Ginny would pull pranks on Harry. He remembered the lengths Draco went to whenever he’d lose a tooth,

and how it was either Harry, Theo, or Blaise that he'd catch dressed as a fairy as they snuck into his room. He remembered when he got his first broom and Draco teaching him to fly, going to Hogsmeade to collect his school supplies, and his first quidditch match and looking over to see Draco proudly cheering him on.

There were so many memories with Draco that Teddy would cherish forever, but the one that held a special place in his heart was from when he was eight years old. They were walking around town to visit the markets when Teddy spotted a northern cardinal. Teddy remembered the look on Draco's face when he pointed it out. It was the first time that he had ever seen him cry, but it was strange because even though tears were streaming down his face, he was smiling.

When Teddy asked what was wrong, Draco responded with, "Nothing, nothing at all."

It wasn't until later that night when he was being tucked in for bed that he finally asked what was so special about the bird. Draco had told Teddy stories about Hermione before but it wasn't until then that Teddy realised just how important she was to his dad. He didn't know how to explain it, but when he looked into the bird's eyes, an intense feeling that he could only describe as warmth and love washed over him.

The bird was Hermione, Teddy had decided. She was there and she was watching over them.

Draco might not have been his biological father, but he was the best dad that Teddy could have ever asked for. There was never a day when he wasn't reminded how much he was loved. Even when Teddy went on about how he wanted to be a groundskeeper when he got older, Draco supported him. Of course, that's not what he ended up doing.

Just like Draco, Teddy ended up becoming an auror. Victoire was nervous about it, stating that if even a great wizard like Draco could lose his life on a mission, so could he. But Teddy didn't want to confine himself to a desk job just because it was the safer option. All of his life, Draco told him that if he chose to be anything, he should choose to be brave and that he shouldn't be afraid to take risks.

Along with becoming an auror, Teddy also stepped up to help oversee the operations of the nonprofit. He wanted to make sure that it always stayed within the Malfoy family - a family that Teddy was more than proud to be a part of.

"I hope you don't mind, but I went to the Ministry yesterday and legally changed my name. I wanted to carry on your legacy," Teddy said. "Edward Remus Lupin-Malfoy, has a nice ring to it, don't you think? Though I'm sure most people will stick to just calling me Teddy. Also, construction on the cottage concludes next week. Victoire and I will be moving in after the wedding. I gave the designer that giant file of yours, we wanted to make sure that it was perfect, that it was just like how you and Hermione envisioned it to be."

"You doing alright?" Theo asked as he approached Teddy.

"Yeah," Teddy smiled.

“Okay, I’ll just be over there if you need me.” Looking down at Draco’s headstone, Theo said, “You’re such a wanker for dying first. The second I see you again, I’m punching you in the face.” As he placed his hand on the top of the stone, his lips pulled into a soft smile. “Go get your girl, mate.”

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Draco had thought about death more times than he probably should’ve. There were several moments before and during his time as a Death Eater when he expected to lose his life. He figured it would either be at the hands of Voldemort, during the battle and sometimes when she got mad enough. He even thought that Hermione might end up being the one to end his life. But never once did he think it would be while working for the ministry as an auror. And he certainly didn’t expect his downfall to be for a random stranger.

Draco was on a protection assignment. He was meant to ensure the safe travels of a researcher who had recently received a handful of threats. Ironically, the person he died protecting wasn’t the researcher, it was a civilian. Draco was checking the perimeter of a building like usual when he heard a high-pitched scream. When he closed in on the source of the sound he spotted a young woman on the ground. As he tended to the gash on her leg and worked on stopping the bleeding, someone stabbed him from behind. Draco instantly turned around to return the favour and killed the individual.

It wasn’t the wound itself that ended up killing Draco though, it was the apparation. The young woman had fallen unconscious in the one minute that he looked away and he knew that he needed to get her to St Mungo's as quickly as possible. The second the healers wheeled the woman away, Draco collapsed onto the floor.

He could’ve fought to stay alive, he could’ve pushed through and opened his eyes. While he had lost a lot of blood and his wound was deep, it wasn’t caused by magic, so the healers were able to repair the damages rather quickly. Draco was unconscious but held on and remained stable. But then, he heard Teddy talking to him.

“It’s okay, dad,” Teddy whispered. “I’m grown now, I can take care of myself. If you want to go, you can. I’ll be okay. You can go be with her, you can go be with Hermione.”

Knowing that Teddy would be alright and remembering that he still has Ginny, Harry, Theo, Pansy, and Blaise, provided him with the reassurance and peace he needed to let go.

Now, Draco stood amid a crowd and took in his surroundings. It looked like platform 9 ¾, only far cleaner, and the people rushing around him weren’t overly excited first years dressed in school robes. It was individuals varying in ages, all reuniting with their loved ones. Draco scanned the sea of people when suddenly, he heard a voice call his name, he heard her call his name.

“Draco!”

Turning around, Draco locked onto the golden brown, almost honey-like eyes that he had been dreaming about for the last twenty-five years. She was just as he remembered her. He simply stared at her, taking in her beauty as a rush of joy, excitement, and peace washed over him.

“Get over here, Granger,” he smiled.

Immediately, Hermione started running towards him. As soon as she was close enough, she lunged forward and threw her arms around his neck. Draco buried his face in her curls as he tightly held onto her. He could feel her again. He could feel the warmth of her body pressed against his and the rhythm of her heart syncing with his.

Draco felt tears prick at the corner of his eyes as he pulled away and held her face between his hands. She was real. He was with her again. He had been longing for this moment for what felt like an eternity. And now, here she was, standing before him.

“I told you that I’d find you,” he said, his voice shaking with the weight of his emotions.

“I never doubted you,” she smiled.

Leaning down, Draco pressed his lips to hers and for a moment, time seemed to stand still.

“Master Draco!” Bippy exclaimed, causing Hermione and Draco to pull back and look over at her. “It’s so good to see you again. Bippy and Missus Hermione have been waiting for you!”

“It’s good to see you too, Bippy,” Draco smiled as he knelt and pulled her into a hug. Standing back up, he returned his attention to Hermione. Gently, he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear and said, “I have to tell you something, Granger.”

“What’s that?” she asked.

“I, unfortunately, couldn’t keep the promise that I made you.”

Hermione’s head cocked and her brows knitted together in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“I promised you that I would live a full life,” he explained. “I guess it was your fault for believing me in the first place, because how could you possibly expect me to live a full life without the one person I wanted to share it with?”

Hermione smiled and tears filled her eyes as she said, “I love you, Draco.”

Four words.

It only took four simple words to completely mend the pieces within Draco that had been shattered ever since the day that he had lost Hermione.

“I love you too, Hermione.”

Holding out her hand, Hermione said, “So, what do you say? Ready to start our life together?”

“It’s all I’ve ever wanted,” he replied before taking her hand and boarding the train with her.

As they took their seats, Draco reminisced on the life that he had left behind. The truth was, he had lived a full life, to an extent. Being Teddy’s father fulfilled him in ways that he never imagined it would. It gave his life meaning, but there was always something missing. It was Hermione. But now, as he sat with her on the train that they had first met on when they were eleven, he finally felt whole again. Everything that they went through, all of the pain and heartache, was worth it because he was with her again.

He had found his way back to her.



*January 22, 2024*

The gentle hum of guitar strings danced through the air as every guest rose to their feet. As Victoire stepped forward, her hand gripping tightly onto Bill's arm, a smile so bright it could outshine the sun appeared on her face as her eyes landed on Teddy.

Reaching the altar, Bill pulled Teddy into a tight embrace and kissed Victoire on the cheek before joining Fleur. Harry, who was officiating their wedding, instructed everyone to take a seat before beginning with the ceremony.

"We are gathered here today to celebrate one of life's greatest moments," Harry announced. "And to cherish the words which shall unite Theodore Remus Lupin-Malfoy and Victoire Apolline Weasley in marriage. Teddy and Victoire have prepared their own vows and will be sharing those with us now."

Victoire handed her bouquet to one of her bridesmaids before unfolding a piece of parchment and clearing her throat.

"Teddy," she smiled as she wiped away her tears. "Growing up, my dad always told me to never settle. He told me that I deserved a man who would not only make me laugh on the easy days, but also on the hard ones. He said that the man I marry should always fight for me and if he were to ever fight *with* me, he should know to surrender every time because I'm always right."

Teddy, Victoire and all of their guests let out a collection of laughs.

"Most importantly, my dad told me that if I ever hand my heart to a man, that I should be sure he would be gentle with it and would give his life to protect it. You are everything that my dad had told me to look for and that I, as a young girl, had imagined to find one day. You are selfless, kind and give without the expectation of anything in return. You are everything that is good in this world and I am forever grateful to have spilled my drink on you that day in the pub," Victoire giggled. "I promise to always laugh at your jokes, even when I don't think they're funny," she smirked. "I promise to hold your hand on the good days and hold it even tighter on the hard ones. And I promise to love you, in this lifetime and the next. I hate to break it to you, but you're stuck with me for eternity."

Teddy let out a soft chuckle and mouthed the words, "I love you," to her as he reached into his pocket and retrieved his vows.

"Victoire, just like you, my dad also told me about the kind of man I should marry," he joked which earned laughter from everyone. "My dad was one of the lucky ones, he had experienced a once in a lifetime love that most only ever hear about in fairytales," Teddy looked over at the row of empty seats he had requested to represent lost loved ones, unaware that Narcissa, Lucius, Tonks, Remus, Draco, and Hermione were currently occupying them.

As Teddy continued with his vows, Hermione looked up at Draco and kissed his cheek.

"What was that for?" Draco asked.

"Nothing... everything," she replied. "Thank you for telling him about us."

Draco smiled before placing a kiss on her forehead.

“Our story was one that deserved to be told, Granger.”

“His words were always full of so much love whenever he would talk about her,” Teddy continued. “But the thing that stuck with me the most was the look in his eyes. You could tell that every time he spoke about her, memories of them together would be playing in his mind. That look, the one of pure, genuine and raw love is what I wished for myself, and I found that with you. Victoire, I promise to always have your tea ready in the morning and let you steal the covers during the night. I promise to continue to fight for you and I promise to never let a day go by where you aren’t reminded of how much I love you. I hate to break it to you, but *you* are stuck with *me* for eternity.”

Harry proceeded with the remainder of the ceremony and as Teddy and Victoire slipped rings onto one another’s fingers, Hermione swore she saw a tear fall from Draco’s eyes.

“It wasn’t a tear,” he argued. “It was sweat, it’s hot out here.”

“Right,” Hermione playfully rolled her eyes.

“It is my honour to present to everyone, for the first time, Mr and Mrs Theodore Lupin-Malfoy and Victoire Lupin-Malfoy!” Harry announced.

Everyone shot up to their feet and clapped their hands as they cheered for the newlyweds. Flower petals were tossed into the sky as Teddy and Victoire made their way down the aisle, hand in hand and wide smiles on each of their faces.

As the guests began to trickle out, Remus, Tonks, Narcissa, and Lucius followed closely behind. Hermione went to join but Draco grabbed her by the hand to stop her.

“I don’t want to miss the bouquet toss, Draco,” she complained.

“I’m afraid you aren’t allowed to participate in that activity, Granger.”

“I know that I won’t be able to catch it, but it’s my favourite part of a wedding.”

Draco shook his head, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth as he knelt down on one knee.

Hermione’s eyes grew wide. “Draco, what are you-”

“Hermione,” he said as he grabbed her left hand. “I know I’ve already done this once before but it didn’t really count. So, I’m doing it again.” Reaching inside his jacket, he removed a small box and opened it, revealing the ring that used to reside on Narcissa’s finger. “As Teddy said, our love is that once in a lifetime kind that most people only hear about in fairytales. From the moment you threatened to shoot a hex through my skull, your name has been carved into my heart. You have shown me the good in myself when I believed there was none to be found. You have shown me that it’s okay to be vulnerable, to be human, and you showed me that I am capable of both loving and being loved. The love that I had for you in



our past life was one I didn't even know was humanly possible, but I promise that is nothing when compared to the love I have for you in this one. Hermione Jean Granger, will you-

"Yes," she blurted out.

"I didn't even finish," Draco laughed.

"I don't care," Hermione said, her cheeks stained with tears. "Yes, yes, a thousand times yes." Leaning down, she took Draco's face between her hands and met his lips with hers.

Wrapping his arms around her waist, Draco rose to his feet and spun her around.

"I love you, Hermione," he muttered, his face buried in the crook of her neck.

"And I love you, Draco."

In that moment, home became the feeling of his arms around her waist and the synchronisation of their hearts beating.

And home was the love that fluttered in her chest.

*Fin.*

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