

The Stars Aligned

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/31542656) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/31542656>.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	Major Character Death
Category:	F/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationship:	Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy , Theodore Nott/Pansy Parkinson , Luna Lovegood/Blaise Zabini , Harry Potter/Ginny Weasley , Draco Malfoy/Pansy Parkinson
Character:	Hermione Granger , Draco Malfoy , Theodore Nott , Pansy Parkinson , Blaise Zabini , Harry Potter , Ron Weasley , Ginny Weasley , Luna Lovegood , Minerva McGonagall , Narcissa Black Malfoy , Lucius Malfoy , Bellatrix Black Lestranger , Dobby (Harry Potter) , Nymphadora Tonks , Dolores Umbridge
Additional Tags:	Enemies to Friends to Lovers , Enemies to Lovers , Slow Burn , Mystery , Romance , Get Together , so slow , Angst , Fluff , Fluff and Angst , First Kiss , Torture , Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder - PTSD , Battle of Hogwarts , Separations , Kidnapping , Prophecy , Character Development , in another life
Language:	English
Collections:	MirrandasWIPsToRead , The Starlight Duology , _____all dramione fics , Absolute Favorites , dm fics i'd die for , MAN I'M CRYING , To all the fics I've read before , Noa's TBR
Stats:	Published: 2021-08-19 Words: 97,469 Chapters: 50/50

The Stars Aligned

by [dr4c0sl0v3](#)

Summary

"You're a goddamn catalyst, you know that?" He said slowly, the wind picking up and blowing his hair into his eyes. "Every single emotion I feel, they become whole damn explosions because of you."

I sat there frozen, my breath caught in my throat.

I make him feel explosions.

I think of quicksilver eyes and pinkies brushing against one another and shared earbuds.

You make me feel how I imagine touching the stars would be.

Say it. Say it. Say it.

Nothing comes out.

Draco's expression shuttered closed, his spine going rigid. He stood up quickly, towering over me, and he held his broken arm out. "I know we bleed the same, Granger. I bled for

you."

slowburn dramione starting fifth year

book 1 in The Starlight Duology

The books can technically be read individually or out of order, but for the best experience it's recommended that you read the duology in order. Also, enjoy all the parallels between the books :)

spotify book playlist: "the stars aligned" (each song in order fits every chapter)

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Notes

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Chapter 1

May 2, 1998

Don't go.

Stay.

Stay with me. Please.

Because if you left, the world would crumble, and I would shatter in your wake.

—

September 9, 1995

"What's better in your opinion, sausage or bacon?"

Ron and his damn food.

"Depends. Are we talking about on their own, or coupled with eggs and toast?" Harry replied, and I shook my head at the fact that he was bothering to even indulge in this conversation.

Ron took a moment to consider, as if they weren't talking about breakfast foods. He shoveled a heaping spoonful of pasta into his mouth and said, "Coupled with eggs and toast. I mean, who eats sausage or bacon on their own? Bloody ridiculous..."

Ron's incessant babbling churned with the simulated thunderstorm above us and faded to a distant murmur in my ears, my attention fixed across the Great Hall at the Slytherin table. Why did I always find myself entranced with them? Particularly one group?

That one group of students in my year, students who held themselves above everyone else and taunted me for being a Muggleborn. Blaise Zabini sat at the edge of the bench with his back toward me, his head inclined away from Theo Nott, who was whispering something in his ear. Blaise barked out a loud laugh that echoed throughout the Great Hall. Pansy Parkinson was leaning forward towards Theo, her elegant bob framing her face, her elbows on the table and her cheeks braced on her hands. A sensuous half smile seemed to rest permanently on her full pink lips. And to her left sat Draco Malfoy himself.

His left elbow was perched casually on his lifted knee, and his right hand continuously reached down to the table and then popped ripe green grapes into his mouth. My eyes lingered there, on his lips, and I swallowed, heat creeping up my cheeks. He didn't even chew them. His robes were unbuttoned and sloppy, revealing a white dress shirt unbuttoned at the neck. His platinum blond hair was carefully fixed and swept to the side, each hair placed exactly where he wanted it. His grey eyes were fixated on Pansy and Theo, occasional laughs shaking his broad shoulders. My cheeks were blazing now, my heart pounding in my ears.

He's a bully, I remind myself. An arrogant, self absorbed asshole. That's the collective opinion of him, isn't it? So it should be mine too.

But when I found myself looking at him and his friends, he seemed... normal. Happy. And I wondered if there was another Draoo, maybe even the true Draco, hidden beneath the surface.

As if he could feel my eyes on him, his gaze suddenly snapped to me, the storm clouds rumbling

overhead. My breath caught in my throat. He smirked, as if saying, "*Like what you see, Granger?*"

Granger. Even though he hadn't really said anything just now, it was always Granger when he spoke to me. Well, argued with me is more like it. Always my last name. Before that, it was Mudblood. But never Hermione.

I know he couldn't hear my thoughts, but I held his gaze steadily and replied in my head, "*Why the last name? Such a formality. Call me Hermione, prick.*"

Hermione.

My lungs stopped working. How had he heard me?

Hermione.

There it was again. How—

"Hermione!"

I jolted in my seat. I blinked rapidly and found Ron looking at me expectantly.

"Um— sorry— what?"

"I said, don't you think bacon is a bit overrated? I mean, sausages hold way more flavor," Ron repeated, his brow slightly furrowed.

"Oh— sure, Ron, yes," I answered, my mind still spinning. Ron had been saying my name. *Ron*, not Draco.

"Where'd you go? You were zoned out for a second," Harry asked, scanning me up and down as if I was in danger. Always so worried about everyone.

"Oh. Yes, I'm fine, Harry. Just thinking about my schoolwork," I chuckled half-heartedly.

"You always are. Speaking of, could you help me with my Transfiguration essay tonight, Hermione?" Ron asked, plastering on a big smile. Wow, this doofus.

I snorted. "The essay we have had three weeks to finish?"

He shrugged. "What can I say? I guess I'm just too popular."

"Popular with the house elves, you mean, since you spend your free time in the kitchen with them," Harry quipped, grinning. Ron nodded vigorously and gobbled down another bite of pasta.

"Fine, Ronald. Honestly, both of you would have flunked out by now if not for me." As I stood, neither of them argued. "I'm heading to Potions early, I need to speak with Professor Snape about the upcoming exam."

They waved goodbye without looking at me, already engrossed in another intellectually degrading conversation. I heard something about pimples as I walked away, cringing as I moved to leave the Great Hall. I didn't dare to look at the Slytherin table.

I turned the left corner and was halfway up the steps when I heard a deep and condescending voice say, "Leaving so soon?"

I halted. Of course it had to be him, him with that voice.

I spun around swiftly and found myself looking at Draco. He was leaning against the base of the stairwell, turning a grape between his slender fingers.

"I am. And what's it to you, Malfoy?" I retorted, pleased with the disgust in my voice.

He threw the green grape in the air and caught it with the other hand using only one finger, balancing it on his ring finger. Damn him and his smooth movements. "I just thought you'd wanna take another look at me before you left. Clearly, you like what you see, Granger."

Show me the real you.

I scoffed. "Please. I was staring at that big arse zit on your forehead." He scowled.

I turned back around and he said, "Nothing compared to the size of your legendary pimples, Granger." My cheeks reddened, my mind flooded with my hideous acne in third year, which was out of control for a week before I learned the concealer charm. What was it with pimples today?

Before I could stop myself, I turned around and snapped, "Why the last name, Malfoy? Such a formality. Call me Hermione, prick."

His eyes darkened.

That's it. Show me. I want to see who you are.

He stood straight and took a step up. Then another. Then another. All the while, his eyes were fixed on mine, and he tossed the grape in the air over and over. Step. Toss. Step. Toss. Until finally, he was standing face to face with me, on the step below.

This way, we were the same height, and instead of his usual towering over me, our eyes were perfectly matched. His lips pulled back slowly as he said softly, "And what's it to you, Granger? I'm just a prick, after all."

I glared at him and hissed, "Go to hell."

Amusement gleamed in his stormy eyes. His mouth made an O, and his firm fingers slid the grape into his mouth, making a small popping noise. I couldn't help but watch the bulk move down his throat, then vanish. He smirked. "Gladly."

Before anything else could happen, I spun on my heel and continued up the stairs. My chest rose and fell quickly. I didn't look back. I didn't have to. I knew he was still there, watching me go. I felt his eyes on me. Those quicksilver eyes.

I turned the corner and shuddered. Who the hell swallows their grapes whole?

Chapter 2

October 12, 1995

I fiddled with my quill, twisting it and levitating it low above the desk. I was always the first one in class. The early bird gets the worm, right? Dad has always said that.

Professor Snape wasn't in yet. He usually likes to enter right as class begins, the class hushing almost immediately at his appearance. What a drama queen. I took a deep breath, readying myself mentally for my hardest class of the day.

Not hardest academics wise. I've always excelled in Potions. No, it's my hardest class because of none other than Draco Malfoy.

This past month since the "grape encounter", as I've dubbed it, has been uneventful. It has been so solely because I have made it a point to avoid him entirely. I can't look at him without suddenly seeing a grape between his lips, his face a breath away from mine, his eyes darkening like a full moon eclipse... I shook my head, as if to drain the thoughts out of my ear.

In our other classes, it's easy to avoid him. He spends his time snickering in the corner with Pansy, Theo and Blaise, giving me free reign over the class.

But Potions is Draco's territory.

He's a damn Potions whisperer. Sure, he's great in our other classes, but Potions is truly his element. He's always beating me to the punch, answering questions before I can even open my mouth, and smirking at me when he sees me grumble after losing to him yet again. It's impossible to avoid him in this class.

Damn him and his high intelligence.

As students began to file into Potions, I continued to subconsciously levitate my quill while lost in my thoughts. It wasn't until a minute before class started that I noticed the seat beside me was empty.

I turned to Harry and Ron at the desk next to me. "Where's Padma?" I asked. Padma was my Potions partner and who I had always sat with.

Harry cringed. "Seamus accidentally set her hair on fire at lunch. She's gone bloody bald! Madam Pomfrey is regrowing her hair. Seamus feels awful."

Indeed, I glanced toward the back of the classroom and found Seamus sulking, while Dean inspected Seamus's wand, as if the wand itself was at fault for Padma's hair catching fire. I frowned. Who's gonna be my partner?

"Hello, Granger."

Oh god.

That voice.

I turned slowly, hoping I was mistaken. I wasn't. Draco stood there, his hand braced on the desk. His eyes of steel bore into mine, and his mouth was set in his signature smirk.

I frowned. "Malfoy."

He tilted his head to the side, a stray curl falling over his eyes. "Why the long face, partner?"

I flinched. "Partner? Aren't you partners with Theo?"

His smirk stretched into a grin. "Keeping tabs on me, are you now?" He sunk down into the chair beside me. "Theo got hit with a nasty Acne Atrocity Hex. Looks like you're stuck with me."

I winced. "Pimples again?" The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them.

"Again..." He paused, and his eyebrows rose. "You mean when you said I had a big arse zit on my forehead?" He chuckled darkly. "That was more than a month ago, Granger. Is acne really that fascinating to you?"

I sat still. I ignored him, and I started levitating my quill once more.

Suddenly, there was a gust of wind on my ear. Not wind, breath. My chest stilled. I could hear him, every inhale, every exhale, rippling across the curve of my ear. "Or is it me that you find so fascinating?"

I couldn't contain the shiver that danced up my spine. The quill clattered onto the desk. Merlin—

I heard the door slam open. I blinked and the breath on my ear had gone, and I turned to see Draco opening the Potions textbook as if nothing had happened. As if he hadn't almost put his lips on my ear.

There's no way I'm gonna focus now.

"Who can tell me the best magical ingredient for healing?"

My hand shot up and I said eagerly, "Bubotuber plant." Professor Snape nodded, which I had learned was the most praise I could expect from him.

"You're wrong."

My head snapped to Draco, who was now clicking his tongue and shaking his head, looking at me as if he were... disappointed? How dare he—

"Interesting." Professor Snape's eyebrow had piqued in curiosity. "Care to explain your reasoning to Miss Granger, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco shrugged. "It's the wrong answer. Aconite is the most commonly used in healing potions—"

"Bubotuber plant is the vital ingredient to a typical healing potion, and aconite is mainly used for a wolfsbane potion," I countered smoothly, relishing at the look of rage in his eyes after cutting him off.

"I disagree. Aconite acts as pain-reliever, diuretic, heart sedative, and is used to induce sweating to break fevers. Much more effective individually than a bubotuber plant on its own."

Crap. He had a point. But I couldn't let him win. "Well, yes, but—"

"I'll give you one thing, Granger." He had interrupted me now. Draco's eyes seemed to glitter. He tilted his head to the side again, as if assessing me. That stray curl was hanging over his eyes again. I had to resist the urge to brush it out of his face. "Bubotuber plant does have great acne-healing properties. You would know all about that, wouldn't you?"

I glared at him, my eyes full of fire and burning into his. The storm clouds rumbled within his eyes, challenging me, daring me.

Show me the real you.

"That's enough, Mr. Malfoy," Professor Snape said, his eyebrow still raised. "You two will work with each other from now on. Miss Patil and Mr. Nott will be paired when they return to class. Your partnership is quite... amusing," drawled Professor Snape. He turned back to the chalkboard to continue with the lesson.

What the hell? Of all things to find amusing, it was my bloody debate with Draco Malfoy?

I snuck a glance at my new partner, who was gaping at Snape's turned back, no doubt thinking exactly the same thing.

Chapter 3

October 15, 1995

The Great Hall was packed to the brim with chatter and noise, as it always was at dinnertime. I took my usual seat at the end of the table across from Ron. Harry plopped down next to Ron, a frown pulling the corners of his mouth down.

"Umbridge is a bloody maniac," Harry grumbled, reaching over the table to grab a handful of blueberries. "She's ruining everything."

"Tell me about it. Can't even have my rutting shirt untucked when she's on the loose," complained Ron. He shifted in his seat awkwardly. "She uses magic to shove it in. Painfully."

"We should... consult Padfoot. Later," I offered discreetly under my breath. Harry nodded eagerly, and I smiled. Seeing Harry finally have family again was all I wanted for my best friend.

"So, Hermione, how is being partners with Malfoy going?" Ron snickered, picking up his goblet and downing his pumpkin juice in one swoosh.

I winced. "It's absolute bollocks! I can't stand working with him. But Professor Snape seems set on torturing me." Ron howled in laughter, and Harry caught my eye, shaking his head and giving me a sympathetic smile.

Although I wouldn't say it out loud, the main reason it was bollocks was because he was just so much... better than me. I see firsthand why he is the top-ranked in Potions. He's brilliant, really, yet arrogant. He definitely knows I have realized his skills in Potions exceed mine, and he takes every opportunity to remind me of it, while also finding ways to embarrass me.

"Stir the cauldron," he had ordered me, smirking as he held out the ladle. I rolled my eyes, snatching the ladle from his hand and beginning to mix the ingredients.

"No, wait!—" Draco was cut off by a puff of smoke right in my face. When the smoke cleared, I didn't need a mirror to know my hair had bushed up to the max, like a halo around my face.

Draco had grinned, waving the remaining smoke away with his wand. "Counterclockwise, not clockwise," he remarked. I groaned.

As Ron launched into an intense Quidditch conversation with Harry ("Hufflepuff doesn't stand a chance against us! They're too nice! They'll just let us win!"), I cracked open my copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. My parents had gotten it for me as a going away present. I was halfway through now. As I read, I munched on strawberries. I smiled, thinking of Dobby. Dobby knows how much I love them, so he always puts the bowl right in front of me.

Just as the court trial began in the book, I ran out of strawberries on my plate. I paused to grab more from the bowl. I looked up from the pages to see Draco staring at me across the Hall, eyebrows furrowed. His grey eyes were slightly downcast. No, he wasn't looking at me, he was looking at my book. Trying to figure out what it is. His eyes darted up to my face, confusion clear on his face. I sent him a smirk that I hope rivaled his own.

"Hermione? Don't you have prefect patrol tonight by Divination?" asked Ron as he not-so-gracefully shoved a roll of bread into his mouth. I tore my eyes away from Draco's and nodded.

"My patrol is in Ravenclaw Tower tonight. Could you drop my essay off with Professor Trelawney? I told her I was torn up because I saw the Grim in my tea, so she gave me an extension to turn it in by tonight," Ron explained around his mouthful of bread, crumbs rolling off his lips.

My eyes widened. "Ronald Weasley. You saw the Grim? Why didn't you tell me? That's a serious thing!"

His tongue cleaned his teeth, and he grabbed two more rolls and said, "Of course I didn't see the Grim, Hermione. That's how I always get extensions in Divination."

I rolled my eyes and giggled, reaching across and smacking his arm. "Yes, Ronald, I will turn in your essay for you."

Harry laughed. "Hermione Granger, our lifesaver, as always."

Ron grinned, but I could see nothing of his teeth, just chewed bread. He tried to say something, which I think was, "Thanks a million, Hermione."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Draco still staring at my book.

I leaned against the wall, muttering to myself. Ernie Macmillan, the Hufflepuff prefect in our year, was supposed to be patrolling with me tonight. Where is he?

I heard footsteps from the corridor behind me. I exhaled, pushing off against the wall and turning the corner. "Ernie! Where have you been? Patrol was supposed to start fifteen minutes ago—"

But it wasn't Ernie who crashed into me. It was Draco. Why can I not escape him?

He frowned. "You."

I gulped, backing up a few steps to put distance between us. "Where's Ernie?"

Draco shrugged. "The Entrance Hall, where I was initially assigned. At the beginning of patrol, I got a letter from Dumbledore himself reassigning me here."

I sighed. If Dumbledore reassigned him, it must have been for a reason. "Fine. Let's go." I turned on my heel without another word.

I scurried quickly to try and be ahead of him, but Draco kept up with my pace easily, his long legs creating short and easy strides. "No small talk?" He clicked his tongue. "Always all business with you."

I scoffed, taking a right. "I'm not exactly keen on talking to you."

"And why is that? Have I done anything particularly?" He tapped his chin with his pointer finger, his silver ring glinting in the moonlight streaming through the windows.

"Besides your relentless teasing of me, Malfoy?" I laughed humorlessly. "You're a bully. An arrogant, self-absorbed asshole. That's what everyone thinks of you."

His eyes flickered, and a wave of regret rolled over me, but his eyes hardened before I could think further. "Everyone? But what about you? Surely you don't conform your opinions to fit with others. What do you think of me, Granger?"

That you don't show your true self. That it's all a facade. That only your friends see the real you.

Show me the real you.

I tore my gaze away. "Divination class is just up ahead. I have to stop in and give Professor Trelawney Ron's essay."

He was silent after that.

Climbing the ladder into Divination class, I didn't look to see if Draco was following. I made it into the classroom and he entered shortly after me. "You could've waited outside Malfoy, it will only take a moment."

"Can't separate during patrol. Wouldn't want to leave your delightful presence," he winked.

I bit my lip to suppress my small smile, and walked further into the classroom to find Professor Trelawney sitting on the floor, eyes closed, palms facing the air. Her eyes snapped open. "Miss Granger! Mr. Malfoy! What a lovely surprise. What brings you here, my dears?"

I waved the parchment in my hand. "I'm here to drop off Ron's essay."

She nodded eagerly, taking it from my hand. "Yes yes. Poor thing. The Grim visits him so often."

Draco snorted.

Professor Trelawney looked up at us and smiled. "Thank you, dears. What an odd pairing you two make. Odd, yet lovely."

"Oh, Professor— we're just on prefect patrol together," I clarified, feeling the heat begin to rise to my cheeks.

"Even so, I see a bright future for the pair of you," she beamed. Draco ran a hand through his hair, looking at the ceiling, distaste clear on his face.

"Well, thank you for stopping in—" Professor Trelawney stopped abruptly. Her eyelashes fluttered shut.

Draco tilted his head. "What the hell—"

Professor Trelawney's eyelids popped open, only the whites of her eyes visible.

I gasped. "Malfoy—"

Professor Trelawney's mouth formed a round O, and words began pouring out in an eerie, monotone voice.

"Come fall next year,

The planets will align in the sky.

And falling stars will follow,

As a servant tells a lie.

The war between the lord

And the Boy Who Survived

The course will be altered

A change in the tide.

The young bush

And the raging storm

Lightning brings them together

And changes the norm."

I was frozen in shock. Draco was still, unmoving beside me. Professor Trelawney's eyes closed, and when they opened they looked normal again. "Goodbye, dearies! Thank you for giving me Ron's paper!"

My jaw was still hanging open, so I snapped it shut and nodded slowly, giving her a tight smile. Neither Draco nor I said anything as we turned and left the classroom.

I was done with patrol. I needed to go back to the Gryffindor common room and write the prophecy down.

At the bottom of the ladder, I turned to leave, but I was stopped by a hand on my forearm, a gentle hand with slender fingers. "Granger." His voice was rough. "Was that a..."

"Prophecy?" I met his eyes and gave a short nod. "I have to go and write it down. Please do me this favor and finish patrol on your own."

He opened his mouth, a million thoughts racing across his features, but he just closed his mouth and nodded once.

I released a breath. "Thank you, Malfoy." His eyes bore into mine, scanning my eyes, looking for something. It was an effort to break eye contact, to leave those mysterious silver eyes. I took my arm out of his grip and walked away, the ghost of his fingers etched upon my skin.

Chapter 4

December 12, 1996

Everything is numb.

I'm drowning. The waves are tossing my body around. The salt water fills my lungs.

But I have an anchor, a tether. An image of a raging storm.

I don't let go. My hands are raw and blistering, but I hold on.

October 16, 1995

I didn't sleep that night.

The prophecy played on a loop in my ears, the strange voice making the hair on my arms stand. Before I knew it, the morning sun was glistening through the windows, and it took me longer than usual to get out of bed, to leave the comfort of my pillows and blankets. I couldn't get up until Ginny quite literally dragged me out of bed, letting go of me on the floor.

"Thanks," I muttered as I sat up on the floor, wincing as a headache instantly overcame me.

Ginny raised a brow and sat cross-legged in front of me, my comforter wrapped around my face. "Breakfast has already started. You never sleep in. You usually have to drag me out of bed." She shot me a warm smile. "What's going on in that big brain of yours, Hermione?"

I pressed a palm to my temple. "I was up late last night trying to figure something out." I paused, looking around the dorm to see that we were alone. I cast a quick silencing charm, and Ginny blinked in confusion. "You can't tell anyone what I'm about to tell you, Ginny, okay? I'm going to tell you more than I will tell Harry and Ron. There are certain... details that they will not appreciate." Ginny looked surprised, but nodded, taking my hand in hers. Her sage brown eyes sparkled as she said, "I promise, Hermione. You are my best friend. I know... I know that Harry is yours, but you are mine, and I will always have your back."

I whimpered and squeezed her hand lovingly. I gave her a small smile and began my recap of the past events, starting with Draco and his green grape on the stairwell, and ending with the prophecy the night before. I included every detail. While Harry may be my best friend, there are things I can't go to him for, and this is one of those times. Ginny stared fixated into my eyes the entire time, gasping and slapping her hand over her mouth at the right times.

When I finished, she bit her lip, looking down and running her hand through her fiery red locks. "Draco Malfoy. Yes, definitely an arsehole. But... from what you've told me, he acts different with you."

I shook my head and sighed. "I told you about a prophecy that changes the whole war, and you're thinking about how Draco acts around me?"

Ginny laughed, an incandescent laugh that seemed to fill the room with joy. "I'll get to that in a second. Boys first, always. Don't get me wrong, he's still an arsehole, but just... different. I can't put my finger on it."

I shrugged. "It doesn't really matter, does it? Sure, he's attractive—" I stopped, blushing furiously. Bloody hell. I had never admitted that to myself before. But it's the truth, isn't it? The stone cold, slap in the face truth.

Ginny's eyes popped out of her skull, and she grabbed my face with both hands. "*WHAT DID YOU SAY?*"

I cursed myself internally. Can't take it back now. "He's— his physical appearance is... adequate. But that doesn't attest to what type of person he is."

Ginny smirked, and I instantly thought of Draco. She let go of my face, puckering her lips to blow a stray hair out of her face. "He is good looking, isn't he? You'd have to be blind to think otherwise." Ginny bit her lip to suppress her large grin. "So what are you going to do about that prophecy you two heard?"

That was the issue. What was I going to do about it? After analyzing the entire prophecy, what was the next move? Something was going to happen, something big. Something that would tip the scales in one direction. If it tipped the scales in Voldemort's favor... I shuddered.

Harry or Voldemort. Salvation or destruction. Good or evil.

Oh, Merlin. For everyone's sake, I hoped with all my might it would be our salvation, our key to a better future. A better world.

"I don't know, Ginny." My lips trembled. How often did those words come out of my mouth? Ginny's facial expression told me that it was a rare occasion.

My panic must have been clear on my face, because her eyes softened and she took my hand again. "I'll be here with you every step of the way. First, tell Harry and Ron. We can take this one day at a time."

I nodded gratefully and pulled her into a hug. She hugged me back fiercely, her strong arms encasing me, providing a warmth and comfort I have only experienced with Ginny. "What did I do to deserve a friend like you?" I said over her shoulder, hugging her even closer.

I felt Ginny smile into my hair. "You are deserving of more than you know, Hermione."

Walking down to the Great Hall with Ginny, I pointedly averted my gaze from anywhere near the Slytherin table. Ginny gave my shoulder a reassuring squeeze before sitting down with some other fourth years.

I sat down for breakfast and Harry and Ron were already there, discussing plays for Quidditch. Dobby had put the strawberries in front of me again. I noticed that they were there for every meal. I smiled. I should go down there and thank him in person.

"We can't do that! It's too risky!"

"But if we just swoop down on the left—"

"Trelawney had a prophecy," I interrupted softly so only they could hear, keeping my eyes on the strawberries as I piled them onto my plate.

I looked up to see Harry and Ron gaping at me. Ron was the first to speak. "Trelawney?" he laughed. "Good one, Hermione! She's a bloody psychopath, that one."

"I'm serious," I hissed lowly, and I watched the humor drain from Ron's face. "Last night, when I dropped off your essay. Her eyes rolled back and it just came out of her!" I made sure to not mention that Draco was there with me. They would not take that well, would they?

Harry looked like he was going to be sick. "What was it? Do you remember?"

I nodded gravely, taking the parchment out of my bag. "Here. Read it quickly. I'm going to analyze every detail—"

Ron had already taken the parchment and rolled it out in front of Harry and him. While Harry's eyes grew wider and wider with each line, Ron's complexion paled further and further.

"Young bush?" Harry muttered, his forehead creasing in confusion.

"So we're supposed to watch out for a bloody lightning bolt to strike a bush?" Ron moaned, putting his head in his hands.

I shrugged. "I guess so. But I'm trying to figure out how that would change the course of the war..."

Harry's lush green eyes were hard, his lips in a thin line. "It's okay. You'll figure it out, Hermione. You always do."

Of course. *I* will figure it out. Not Ron, not Harry. Me. It's *always* me.

I should expect nothing less.

I plastered on a smile that felt fake and artificial on my lips as I said, "Yup, I always do."

—

I twirled my hair around my finger, waiting for Potions class to start in five minutes. Ron and Harry hadn't arrived yet, most likely shoveling as much food down their throats as they could. I laughed quietly. My little pigs.

A throat was cleared, a deep rumble released that shook my bones.

I flinched, turning to see Draco sitting next me, facing forward, his face a complete mask of calm as he began to pull his books out of his bag. But his eyes had smudges of purple under them, and I knew that he didn't sleep well either.

"When did you—"

"I'm sorry, did I speak to you?"

Still an arsehole, I see. I scoffed. "You did, actually. Just now."

"Only to ask you why the hell you're talking to me."

I gripped the side of the desk, my knuckles turning white. What the hell is wrong with him? "Malfoy..." I paused as his jaw tensed, his teeth grinding. "Don't you want to talk about what happened last night?"

He turned to me sharply, his grey eyes round and burning. "I'll only say this once. Do not talk to me. Stay the hell away from me, you filthy little Mudblood."

Hurt shot through me, coursing through my veins. Tears began to prick behind my eyelids as I searched his eyes, those quicksilver eyes, looking for something, anything. There was nothing there but ice and hatred.

I thought... I thought that he had moved away from that. I thought it was Granger. He... he called me Granger now, right? But that's all I am to him, isn't it? Another filthy Mudblood he despises.

I guess this really is the real you, Draco. As much as I wanted to believe otherwise.

So I shut my eyes, forcing the tears back. And when I opened my eyes, my face was set in stone. "My pleasure."

Chapter 5

October 28, 1995

Draco had not spoken to me since October 16.

Well, he *had*, but only when it was absolutely necessary during partner work in Potions. And even then, he was short and to the point. No teasing, no self-praise. His shoulders were tense, his jaw set, his steel eyes masked and unyielding. It was like working with a statue. A cruel and beautiful creature set in stone.

When class ended, he would be the first to leave, out the door as the bell rang throughout the school, not even waiting for his friends as they called out after him. Do I repulse him that much? The painful way he is avoiding me is my clear cut answer.

Which doesn't bother me.

It was dinnertime. I shoved two strawberries in my mouth. It doesn't bother me. I grabbed another handful of strawberries and dumped it onto my plate. He doesn't bother me. I don't care about him.

"Hermione?"

I blinked and left my tornado of thoughts. Harry is eyeing my plate warily. I glimpsed down and see a pile of red mush on my plate, more of the goo dripping from my drenched fist.

I squished my goddamn strawberries.

I blushed. "Fresh strawberry jam, anyone?"

Ron looked over and snorted. "Blimey, Hermione. Bloody hell of a grip." Ron leaned forward and dipped a finger in the jam, sticking it on his tongue. His face turned sour. "Not my taste. Needs more sugar."

I rolled my eyes, clearing my plate with a flick of my wand and grabbing more strawberries from the bowl.

Harry was still staring at me curiously, his eyes squinting and crinkled at the corners. "Everything okay? Is it because..." Harry took a quick look around and lowered his voice. "Is it because you haven't figured out the prophecy?"

I clenched my jaw. No, I hadn't finished analyzing it. Most of it was clear, but the last few lines were what I was stuck on. I couldn't decide if the "young bush" and the "raging storm" being united by lightning were of a literal sense or more of a metaphorical statement. And if it was to truly happen, and lightning struck a bush during a storm, how would I even know where? The prophecy gave no indication of a location.

I bit my lip. Perhaps I need another mind working with me. A new perspective. Harry has enough going on, and he's already relying on me to do it, so I can't ask him. As much as I adore Ron, he would be more of a nuisance than a help.

Why is it always me? I haven't figured out the prophecy. It's my job, my responsibility. And then it hit me. Ginny! I could ask her for help. After all, she knew more about the situation than anyone else. Well, anyone else besides him. I don't even want to think of his name, can't without cringing.

I cast Harry a smooth and composed stare. "I'll take care of it. I always do, Harry."

Harry looked tense, but nodded nonetheless. Ron, oblivious as always, said, "Do you think they have some strawberry jam in the kitchen? With added sugar, I mean?"

After dinner, I didn't say goodbye to Ron and Harry, marching straight up to my dorm and slamming the door shut behind me. "Damn it all to hell," I hissed.

Parvati and Lavender were giggling, sitting across from each other on Parvati's bed. Lavender halted mid sentence, both of them clearly startled by my dramatic entrance and foul language.

Ginny looked up from her own bed and said without hesitation, "Hurry on over here, Hermione."

I smiled gratefully, rushing past Lavender and Parvati's curious expressions and plopping down onto Ginny's mattress. Ginny drew the curtains around the bed and cast a quick silencing charm. "You haven't updated me in a while. What's going on?" Ginny asked, settling across from me and pulling a pillow into her lap. She reached into her pillowcase and pulled out a granola bar. I grinned. She really is Ron's sister.

"Malfoy told me to stay away from him. He called me a filthy Mudblood." Ginny grimaced, her brown eyes hardening. "He won't talk to me at all. He evades me at all costs. And I can't for the life of me figure out that godforsaken prophecy, which Harry and Ron are counting on me to do."

Ginny groaned. "Okay, so Draco is an asshole, as we established. What doesn't make sense is why he's suddenly being so harsh. As I said before, something about the way he acted with you before was different somehow. Well, time will tell. Next thing..." She rolled her eyes. "As for Tweedle Dee and Tweedle Dumbass? Honestly, they ask you to do everything. They'd seriously be dead without you." She shook her head. She unwrapped her granola bar, ripping off a piece and tossing it into her mouth. "I'll try to help you with the prophecy as best I can. I'm not as smart as you, but I've got a decent brain. Third in my year," she beamed happily, smiling through her mouthful of granola.

I smiled widely. "Of course you are! Here, let me pull out my notes." I rummaged through my bag and pulled out the roll of parchment, and my white diary fell out of the bag with it.

Ginny pointed to my white diary now lying between us. "What's that?"

I flushed immediately. "It's um... my diary." Ginny's face brightened with interest, taking another large bite of her granola bar. "I have a condition that Muggles call Photographic Memory. I remember everything I think, everything I see, and everything I hear. At the end of every day, I write everything down. I put an Undetectable Extension Charm on the diary, so the diary never runs out of pages."

Ginny's eyes widened, and she bounced on the bed in excitement. "Everything? Including every sodding detail of each interaction you've had with Draco?" I felt my cheeks redden further, and I nodded once. "Well, I'll have to take some time to psychoanalyze Draco's actions, along with your corresponding thoughts."

Oh god. "I—"

"Later," she clarified, smiling as she finished her bar. "But this is so great, Hermione. It's... it's your life. You can revisit every part of it, especially when you're older."

I smiled softly, thinking of my future children reading about my adventures. "It's really something, isn't it?"

Ginny grinned encouragingly. "It's incredible."

I glanced down and noticed the parchment still sitting there, waiting to be read, waiting to be solved. "Let me show you my notes on the prophecy."

Ginny picked up the parchment and rolled it out, beginning to examine my notes:

Come fall next year, - Fall of 1996, sixth year

The planets will align in the sky.

And falling stars will follow, - meteor shower

As a servant tells a lie.

The war between the lord

And the Boy Who Survived

The course will be altered - scales tipped in one direction???

A change in the tide.

The young bush - ???

And the raging storm

Lightning brings them together - will lightning strike a baby bush?

And changes the norm - what norm?

Ginny bit her lip, settling back against the headboard. "So we don't know the specifics of the bush, the storm and the lightning. That's what we're trying to figure out, right?" I nodded in confirmation, twisting and pulling at my fingers absentmindedly. "And then after we interpret that, we have to try and discern where we should try and find it to see the result for ourselves."

I sighed and ran a hand through my frizzy curls, my fingers catching in various knots. "Precisely. Let's go to the library tomorrow before dinner and do some research?"

Ginny agreed, and I wrapped my arms around her and gave her a quick squeeze before drawing back the curtains. The lights were dim, and Lavender and Parvati were already in their respective beds, each of them flipping through a *Witch Weekly: Beauty Edition* magazine.

"Hermione, don't forget about the Halloween costume party on Tuesday," Lavender said as I passed her bed. "Fred and George are selling costumes for ten galleons each, but from what I've heard they have hidden hexes that you don't know about. Colin Creevey's eyebrows are completely gone! So I'm going to make my own costume, maybe you should too."

The costume party, I completely forgot. I need to make a costume this weekend. I smiled. "Okay, thank you."

Lavender gave a thumbs up and went back to reading her magazine. I made my way over to my bed and looked at the clock on my bedside table: 10:14. Damn it. It's too late to shower: my hair will

dry horribly if I sleep with it wet. I'll shower tomorrow.

The lights shut off as I shrugged off my robes and climbed into bed. I pulled the covers up to my shoulders, staring up at my red drapes. The clouds outside cast dancing shadows on the canopy. The top of the bedpost created a shadow that resembled an angel wing.

I closed my eyes, only to be met with startling silver ones.

I jerked up, looking around. No one was there.

Cautiously, I laid back down, once again staring at the soft shadows drifting across the canopy. I closed my eyes once more, and there they were, glinting eyes in a sea of darkness. But I wasn't startled. It was just my mind, and my mind was showing me those eyes. Those quicksilver eyes.

I fell asleep staring back at them.

October 30, 1995

There was nothing in the library under "young bush" except for a children's book about a baby bush, and nothing about lightning striking a bush. Ginny and I resolved to look again after Halloween.

"Alihotsy leaves." Draco stuck out his palm to me, his gaze fixed on the cauldron between us. I huffed and pressed them into his hand, digging my nails into his skin. He remained cool and composed, with no visible reaction as I pierced his skin. I let go, cursing internally.

"Billywig wings." He did it again, sticking out my hand and not looking at me.

Oh, this jerk. "Say please," I sneered, sliding the jar of wings further away from him on our desk.

Silence.

Come on.

"I didn't hear you say please. You're gonna have to use some manners if you want to keep brewing the potion," I cooed, tapping my fingers on the desk.

He whirled to face me. His mask was cracked, his eyes blazing and hot.

That's it, Malfoy. I want to see you crack.

His lips began to pull up at the corners in a small smirk. He leaned forward, his face inching closer and closer to mine. His hair has fallen just over his right eyebrow. I held my breath. My limbs refused to move. He exhaled, his breath caressing my cheeks like a soft breeze. I could smell him, mint and library books and honey. His eyes didn't leave mine. He was so dangerously close now, only an inch between us. All I could see is his eyes, those mesmerizing quicksilver eyes.

I sucked in a breath—

And he's pulling back, turning back to the cauldron, the jar of Billywig wings in his hand. Heat rushed to my cheeks. He was leaning towards me to reach the jar.

Damn him.

I blinked, readjusting my curved posture and sitting up straight. "Are you going to the Halloween party in the Gryffindor common room on Tuesday night?" I asked casually, hoping he didn't notice my blush.

More silence. He doesn't even have the decency to respond to my question-

"Yes. Pansy, Theo, Blaise and I will be attending." His tone was clipped, and his eyes didn't leave the potion.

I nodded nonchalantly. "Well... I guess I will see you there, then."

He didn't answer, simply continuing to brew the potion. Now he was just grabbing the ingredients himself, no longer bothering to pretend we were doing this together.

I sighed softly in defeat, pulling *To Kill A Mockingbird* out of my bag and opening up to my bookmark. I was almost done now. Scout was starting to walk home in the dark with Jem.

Someone attacked Scout and Jem. I gasped, gripping the book and edging farther off of my seat. I heard a quiet scrape, glancing up to see Draco had finished the potion and slide the cauldron towards the edge of the desk. His eyes slid over to me, his brow drawn together. Oh, so book reactions are what it took to get him to look at me?

His eyes darted down raked over the pages, scanning, looking for the title of the book, no doubt. Oh no, you don't. I snapped the book shut and slid it back into my bag before he could see anything. He clenched his jaw, opening his mouth—

The bell rang throughout the classroom. "I will test your potions myself on a pass or fail system. Class dismissed," Professor Snape droned from the back of the classroom, exiting the classroom before anyone else.

I stood up, expecting Draco to already be out the door, but he was still beside me, packing his things quietly. Maybe he's waiting for his friends this time?

Sure enough, I looked to the left corner of the classroom to find Blaise, Theo, and Pansy in an animated conversation. Blaise was leaning against the wall with his arms crossed, his expression unimpressed. Theo was rolling his eyes and taunting Pansy with wide eyes and a large grin. Pansy's back was to me, but her stance was confident, her shoulders rolled back.

"You're not snogging Draco, you're so full of it—"

I tensed, my eyes snapping to Theo as he continued to snark.

"Oh yeah? Watch me, Theo," Pansy purred. I gulped.

Pansy spun gracefully and sauntered up to Draco. She was a good six inches shorter than him, and he didn't even look surprised as Pansy placed her fingers on Draco's cheeks and brought his lips down to hers.

I blushed furiously, turning away. Theo's laughing grin had faded, his mouth slightly agape, his eyes wide. Blaise was chuckling, shaking his head in amusement. "Are you watching, Theo?"

I blinked and Theo was leaving, muttering something about having to go to our next class early.

Pansy finally drew back, a satisfied smile on her lips. She looked directly at me, her smile growing wider. She turned and left without another word. Blaise trailed close behind snickering and jerked

his head, telling Draco to come along.

I was frozen where I was standing, my eyes glued to my feet. I looked up in time to see Draco pause in the doorway, his back toward me.

"See you at the party. From what you just saw, it'll be one hell of a time."

And he was gone.

Chapter 6

October 31, 1995

When Ginny had asked earlier that day what my costume would be, I still wasn't sure. She had proceeded to screech as if I had told her I was dying.

I had been thinking about it for days. I wanted something plain and easy. I couldn't do anything extravagant even if I wanted to now, not with only a half hour left until the party.

For the past few nights I had lay in bed and gone through different costume ideas. Pirate, astronaut, even a plain Muggle. But I didn't like any of them. I always ended up staring at the shadow of my bedpost, the shape of an angel wing, closing my eyes only to see those silver ones like every night...

A lightbulb sparked in my head and I grinned to myself. An angel? That could work. I opened my trunk and fumbled through it, looking for things I could use. I found a plain white dress that my mum had packed for me for special occasions and two white feathers. This could work. I used a multiplying charm to gather more feathers and a sticking charm to fuse them together in the shape of angel wings. I quickly threw the costume on.

The door burst open and Ginny appeared, panting, her eyes wide. She was wearing a tight dress with black and yellow stripes that hugged her body and showed off her curves, with small wings on her back and a golden crown resting on her head. I grinned. Queen Bee. Very fitting. She scanned me up and down and clicked her tongue after a moment. "Not bad, Golden Girl. But it needs a few things."

She sat me down on her bed and began to work her magic, pulling out a pink bag with dozens of cosmetics inside. After applying Merlin knows what on my face, Ginny pulled out her wand and muttered some charms, the same ones she taught me last year to fix my hair and tame my curls for the yule ball.

She pulled back and studied her work, her lip between her teeth. "One more thing."

She ruffled through her trunk and emerged a moment later with a thin golden ring in her hand, glinting as the setting sun yawned and approached its slumber. Ginny flicked her wand and the ring grew larger, now the size of a small plate. With a simple Levitation Charm, she had created a halo floating above my head. She smiled. "Go take a look."

I approached the full body mirror and couldn't help but gasp aloud. My white dress was simple and elegant, with thin gold thread lining at the seams. I shifted in the full body mirror, turning so I could see my back. I centered the white wings, the arcs curling around my shoulders and the tips peeking out behind my waist. My makeup was modest and refined: the subtle golden eyeshadow on my eyelids was the exact shade as my halo and my dress. My pink lips were plump and glossy, like how Pansy's always look. My ringlets were controlled and spiraled perfectly across my shoulders, and the floating halo took the costume to a whole nother level. I looked... pretty. Really pretty.

I spun to Ginny and crushed her in a hug before she could protest. She quickly shoved me back, cursing. "*Hermione! Do not wrinkle your outfit!*"

I giggled. "Thank you, Ginny. I absolutely love it."

She rolled her eyes. "Yes, yes, what would you do without me?" She grabbed my forearm and tugged me towards the door. "Come on. We're just in time to be fashionably late. Everyone is down there by now."

Suddenly I was hit with a vision of grey eyes, but I quickly shoved it down and buried it. He is gonna be here tonight, but tonight is not about him. It's about having fun with my friends, and whether he's there or not makes no difference.

Music shook the ground as we descended the stairs, and an avalanche of noise filled my ears. Ginny took off across the room and said a quick goodbye over her shoulder. At the bottom of the stairwell I had to stop and take a moment to look at everything.

Damn, Fred and George really know how to party.

Glowing jack-o-lanterns were suspended in the air, and tiny fireworks were exploding high across the room on their own accord. A rainbow of neon lights flashed wove through the party. Lee Jordan was in the corner, headphones in and blasting music throughout the room through large suspended speakers. The furniture had disappeared and an impromptu dance floor had taken its place. The entire table was covered in pints of firewhiskey and butterbeer, with dozens of red cups and shot glasses that were magically replaced when one was taken. I spotted Harry and Ron on the dance floor, with matching cowboy hats and red cups in their hands. Ron was jerking around awkwardly in what I realized was dancing and I stifled a laugh. Harry was gulping down his drink like his life depended on it. But I knew I wasn't looking for them. I surveyed the room again, and a platinum blonde head caught my eye.

He was leaning against the far right wall, engaged in a conversation with his friends. Theo was beside him dressed in a bright yellow jumper, gold lining around his eyes. His brown hair fell messily across his forehead, and from a distance I could see small sun shaped earrings poking out from his hair curling around his earlobes. So he is the sun, then.

I shifted my gaze to Pansy, who was facing Theo. She was wearing a flowing black gown, silver sprinkled across the fabric, and the otherworldly glitter made it seem as if she was wearing real stardust. Her body turned and a silver crescent moon necklace caught in the flashing lights. She is the moon. Had they planned that matching costume? From the way Theo's eyes darted across her body whenever Pansy wasn't looking, it seemed not.

Now onto Blaise, his white shirt and pants were fully covered in yellow smiley faces, rainbows, and pink flowers. What is he?

Finally, I turn my gaze to him, and I'm met with those quicksilver eyes staring right back at me.

He left his hair untamed, and it shifted across his head with every breath. His fingers were poised on his bottom lip, and his silver ring was on his pointer finger as always. I could see that his nails were painted black. He was dressed in an all black suit. His eyes were rimmed with thin black eyeliner, making his eyes all the more prominent and piercing. I would say that he isn't even wearing a costume at all, but then I saw the small black horns peeking out from his blonde hair and coiling around his head.

He's a demon.

His gaze was disinterested and his focus shifted back to Theo, who was chatting animatedly. I gulped, and before I knew what I was doing I was edging through the crowd and suddenly I was standing in front of them.

Theo's mouth stopped moving abruptly and his gold-rimmed eyes bulged, and an awkward silence hung between me and the group. Draco's eyes were on the floor, and Blaise looked up at the tall ceiling and drank his firewhiskey. Pansy was the only one who looked at me, and her eyebrow rose as she said, "The Golden Girl is an angel. How sweet."

Theo shook his head as if gathering himself and then stepped forward with a large grin, holding out his hand. "Theo Nott, m'lady. I don't believe we've been properly introduced."

Hesitantly, I took his hand and shook it slowly. "Hermione Granger. Pleasure."

His eyes were bright and gleaming and his grin grew even wider. He turned my palm down, gripping my fingers lightly as he leaned down and pressed his lips to my hand. "The pleasure is mine, darling."

"Quit your incessant flirting," Blaise said, swatting Theo's hand out of mine. Theo maintained his charming smile as he backed up a step. Behind him Pansy's were eyes blazing, shooting death glares at my hand. Blaise's black eyes were amused as he placed his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels and said, "Blaise Zabini."

I nodded. "Hermione Granger." I couldn't help but eye his bright apparel curiously.

Blaise let out a low chuckle and plastered a fake, overly joyful smile on his face. "Can't you tell? I'm a Hufflepuff."

I snorted in laughter, and slapped my hand over my mouth to suppress it, but Draco wasn't even looking at me. He was still staring fixedly at the floor, as if it was the most fascinating thing in the room. Do I bore him that much?

"So, does the Golden Girl drink?" Pansy asked, holding out a shot of firewhiskey to me. She must have just gone and gotten one for me.

"Oh, not really, thank you though," I rejected politely, but Pansy did not lower the glass.

"Come on," Theo cut in, whisking the shot glass out of Pansy's hand and holding it out to me. "Let loose a little. It's Halloween. All the demons have come out to play," he winked. Pansy's fingers were white around her shot glass.

"I don't know—"

"Give it up, she won't drink," Draco interrupted, and my words died in my mouth. He took a quick look at me and shrugged. "She's too much of a prissy. Golden Girl won't so much as taste alcohol, let alone get drunk—"

It was my turn to cut him off, and I did so glaring at him and by downing my shot of firewhiskey in one go. The liquor scorched my throat, and I bit my tongue to keep my cough down.

I looked at him, and his mouth had snapped shut, his eyebrows drawn together. His eyes were on mine, scanning. What is he looking for?

Theo threw his head back and let out a loud whoop. "Looks like she *can*, Draco!"

Daphne Greengrass walked by us, her blonde hair swept back in a tight ponytail. She was wearing a low cut red dress that was cut high on her thighs. I had realized earlier that many girls were using the costume party as an excuse to dress up nicely.

"Oi! Daphne!" Theo called. Daphne twirled gracefully, her green eyes on Theo. He grabbed her arm and pulled her forward past Pansy and into his arms, and his lips engulfed hers immediately, her surprised squeal muffled.

Pansy's face was bright red, and she huffed and left, returning a few seconds later with a plate full of shots. Blaise laughed lowly beside me. "I'm ready to rage." She downed another shot.

I glanced up to see Draco, but he was gone. Where did he go? I bit my lip. So I'm still too much of a prissy for him to tolerate my presence, aren't I?

I looked back at Pansy, who was still holding the plate full of shots. I took one in each hand and poured them down my throat one after the other. Pansy's eyes crinkled at the corners, and Blaise grumbled his approval after I said, "Bring it on."

—

The lights are so loud.

The music is really bright.

How many shots have I had? I lost count after twelve.

"I'm getting some shots more!" Pansy screamed in my ear, a ringing piercing through my skull. I giggled and nodded, and she was gone.

Pound. Pound. Pound. Who is hitting my head? Stop that.

Oh! Maybe they're knocking on the door! I stumbled through a sea of people and shoved the portrait open, bursting into the corridor. No one is knocking. I turned unsteadily to go back inside. "What is the password?" the Fat Lady asked.

Wait, what is the password? "I need shots," I grumbled, swaying on my feet and smiling up at the portrait.

The Fat Lady shook her head. "Wrong password."

I scoffed and turned away. Maybe there is more firewhiskey in the kitchen. Yes, I'll go there.

Wow, the ceiling goes so high, I noticed as I gazed up at it.

Ow. I'm on my butt now. How did that happen? I lean against the wall and laugh hysterically. I am funny.

I looked up, and sitting across from me against the other wall was Draco, his knees bent. He's so pretty. His eyes were full of distaste as he looked at me. "You're a bloody mess," he stated.

I laughed harder. "I'm a mess in a costume. Wow, that rhymes!"

I opened my eyes and he was kneeling in front of me. Awe, he's pretty *and* fast! "You need to get some rest," he muttered. His arm scooped my legs and the other grasped my back, and abruptly I was in his arms.

"You're so soft and fluffy. I like fluffy," I mumbled. His chest rumbled against me, and I closed my eyes, comforted by the vibrations.

I cracked my eyes open and the world was black, except for Draco's face hovering over mine. He

was adjusting something, a blanket on top of me. "You're stupid for drinking this much," he hissed under his breath.

"Why don't you like me," I whispered. He stopped moving, and his eyes snapped to mine, realizing I was awake.

And then a cool palm was cupping my cheek, and all I could see was those eyes, those quicksilver eyes. "You're an angel," he murmured.

The shadows were a warm blanket that embraced me.

Chapter 7

December 14, 1996

I'm burning.

The flames licking my skin leave a wasteland behind.

Kill me. Please just kill me. Please.

Just tell him I'm sorry.

November 1, 1995

I woke up with a pounding headache, unable to sit up. So I lay in bed in the cozy sheets, groaning.

"Good morning, party animal."

I pried my eyes open and was startled to see big hazel ones in my face, framed by a curtain of short black locks, full pink lips pulled into a smirk.

What?

"Pansy?" I croaked, sitting up slowly. A wave of nausea hit me and I slammed back against the headboard, moaning. The headboard was soft and cushioned.

But... my headboard is made of wood.

I squinted through the sunlight blazing through the window. Where am I? I adjusted my focus and looked around. Green drapes. Silver accents. Snake emblems. I slowly glanced down in horror. Green and silver sheets.

I'm in the Slytherin dorms.

I looked up at Pansy, who was pouring a cup of what smelled like earl grey tea. "I must admit, I wasn't expecting you of all people to get so pissed." She gave me the side eye as she finished pouring the tea into a delicate little teacup with a daisy on it. She placed the cup in my hands gently, not breaking eye contact. "Needless to say, you pleasantly surprised me."

My eyes darted down to the tea. Would she have done anything to it? My suspicion must have been clear on my face, because she let out a small laugh and said, "Relax, it's just earl grey tea with a hangover potion. If I were to poison you, I wouldn't do it when you already look like shit."

My hands were shaking, but I carefully brought the teacup to my lips and took a sip. The warmth coursed through my veins, and I felt my shoulders loosen and my headache reduce to a dull throbbing. "Um... thank you," I said, my voice coming out clearer than before.

Pansy smiled, and it was... *nice*?

Since when were we friends? And why the hell am I in the Slytherin dorms?

I gulped down the warm liquid until the cup was drained. "I don't remember much about last night, but how did I..."

"Get here?" Pansy laughed. She reached over and grabbed the teapot, looking down as she refilled my cup. "You were bloody wasted, about to pass out. I used a Levitating Charm to bring you here. We got locked out of the Gryffindor common room and I didn't know the password, so I brought you back here."

You're an angel.

I shook my head. "Really? I could've sworn Malfoy found me—"

"More than a dozen shots of firewhiskey does that," Pansy shrugged, placing the teapot back on the bedside table. "You hallucinate and remember things that didn't happen. I would know, firewhiskey is my best friend."

You're stupid for drinking this much.

My imagination is definitely not vivid enough to imagine Draco Malfoy carrying me in his arms and tucking me in bed.

I pulled my bottom lip between my teeth. "It felt pretty real to me."

Pansy giggled, her black hair shifting across her cheekbone. "Yeah, well, I remember Dumbledore himself dancing on the table, and that sure as hell didn't happen."

I didn't know how to deal with a nice Pansy Parkinson who pours me tea and apparently takes me back to her dorms when I'm drunk. Where is the girl who mercilessly bullied me alongside Draco when we were younger?

"Well... thank you for everything, Pansy. I really should get going."

She just continued to look at me with that weirdly nice smile as I pushed the covers back and climbed out of bed. I looked down to see that I was still wearing my costume, and in the mirror across the room I could see that the wings were crooked and broken on my back and the halo hovered limply above the crown of my head. I paused at the door, my hand drifting over the handle. What will people think when they see me coming out of the Slytherin dorms?

"There's a back exit that leads straight to the Great Hall," Pansy offered, reading my thoughts. "The Professors are giving us an hour-late start since it was Halloween yesterday, so class doesn't start for another half hour."

I turned to see her standing awkwardly at the back of the room, holding back a tapestry to reveal a hidden door and a descending staircase. She rocked back on her heels slightly, her rustling robes filling the silence between us.

I gave her a tight smile and stepped around her into the stairway. On the first step I turned around to face her, and her head was tilted as she studied me. "I...I don't know why you are being so nice to me, but thank you. Truly."

She gave a small shrug, her expression dismissive, and shut the door in my face.

"Where were you this morning? We didn't see you in the common room," Ron inquired as I sunk onto the bench and piled bacon and eggs onto my plate.

I shoved a spoonful of eggs into my mouth and bit off a chunk of bacon. I grabbed the pitcher of

pumpkin juice and filled my goblet, then finished it off in a few gulps. I slammed the cup on the table and let out a satisfied sigh. Harry and Ron were staring at me expectantly, and Ron's mouth was pulled into an amused grin. My appetite was rivaling his.

Crap. How am I supposed to tell them that I'm friends— sort of— with Pansy Parkinson, that I got dead pissed, that I slept in the Slytherin dorms, and that all I remember about last night is Draco Malfoy's arms, which wasn't even real?

The quickest solution is that I don't. So as I poured myself more pumpkin juice I said nonchalantly, "I woke up early with a massive headache from all the loud music and the shouting, so I visited Madam Pomfrey for some pain relieving potion."

Harry nodded. "Loud as it was, the party was mind-blowing, wasn't it? That was the most fun I've had in a long time."

"And Lee's music was great! I think we spent the whole night on the dance floor, Harry," Ron piped in. He turned his eyes to me and confusion began to cloud his expression. "Where were you during the party, Hermione? I don't think I saw you all night."

I was with Malfoy's friends, who I admit are pretty interesting. I was getting hammered by shot after shot of firewhiskey just to show Malfoy that I could.

"I was just sitting and trying to read despite all the flashing lights," I lied easily, picking something I knew they would believe. Something typical of me.

Harry smiled. "Of course. Well, next time there's a party you should come find us on the dance floor! I have some killer moves."

"Not as good as mine," Ron retorted.

I smiled, glad that I had fibbed without any issues. "Definitely."

The conversation moved to something else, something uninteresting about Ron's hair. I finished my last bite of breakfast and got up to return to Gryffindor Tower to change into my robes.

I took a left and began running my fingers through the tangle of knots across my shoulders. What was I thinking, getting drunk off my arse just to prove that I could? I don't even like drinking. And who the hell cares what Malfoy thinks of me? Certainly not me. Plus, he never even gives me a second thought, I'm sure of it. Even at the party, he barely glanced at me. I scoffed out loud, my fingers catching in a particularly large knot. I am nothing to him, which just emphasizes how completely insane I am to even consider he carried me to safety. I rounded another corner, groaning. I have been such an idiot.

I stopped short in my tracks when I saw him.

He didn't seem to notice me, big surprise. He was leaning against the right wall, his leg bent and his foot up. He was still in his black suit and black turtleneck, though the outfit is now wrinkled at the edges. His white blonde hair was completely mussed, poking out in all directions, framed on either side by the black horns still attached at his temples. He was looking out the opposite window. His eyes were hooded, and a cigarette was sticking out of his mouth, smoking wafting from the tip.

He finally realized I'm there because his eyes slid over to me, heavy lidded and unbothered. "I'll admit I was surprised when you drank so much last night."

"That's a vile habit," I blurted out, indicating to his cigarette. I continued to weave my fingers through my hair subconsciously.

He shrugged. "It's the only thing that has come from Muggles that is useful."

His eyes returned to the window, and that was it. He gripped the cigarette between his pointer and middle fingers and slipped it out from between his lips, puffing smoke into the air.

I stalked over, standing right a few feet in front of him and blocking his view. I suppressed my urge to cough as the smoke wafted into my face. His lips curved into a pout. "Won't you move aside? I can't see the oh-so-lovely clouds."

"Your beliefs disgust me," I spat. "You have no human decency, do you?"

His eyes darkened, his pupils dilating slightly. "Be careful."

"I can do whatever the hell I want," I hissed, my hands curling into fists at my sides. "I am sick of the horrid way you regard me. You will treat me with the respect you would an acquaintance."

The cigarette poked up in his mouth in surprise and he pulled it out swiftly, clasping his hands behind his back and taking a step toward me. "And why is it that my Royal Assness bothers you so much? You may recall that I have always been this way." Another step, and I gulped and took a few back to get farther away.

"It's just... it's different now. I don't know," I stuttered. Merlin, where the hell am I going with this? What possessed me to confront him like this?

"I can assure you that nothing has changed." He clicked his tongue. "What is it about me that pushes your buttons, Granger? What makes you tick?" He asked with faked innocence, sticking out his bottom lip in a show of contemplation.

"Oh, so it's back to Granger, then? I thought it was 'mudblood'," I sneered, my expression sour.

He kept prowling toward me, eyes blazing, and I kept backing away slowly, keeping the distance. He can't get close to me. But then my back hit the opposite wall, and I have nowhere else to go. Triumph flashed across his features, and suddenly he's stopping only a foot away.

"You didn't answer the question," Malfoy said lowly.

"And you didn't answer mine," I countered.

His nostrils flared. He took another step and leaned forward, his left hand coming up to brace the wall, right by my head. Merlin. His face was mere inches from mine, and I could see nothing but his burning eyes and his demon horns. I could smell smoke and coffee in his breath.

"And so the demon and the angel meet again," he purred, a smirk playing across his lips.

I said nothing, just continued to stare into his grey irises.

"Do you want to know what I think?" Malfoy drawled, getting even closer. "I think that you're bored."

My breath hitches in my throat, and his grin deepens. "Being a Gryffindor princess has too many expectations, and you're tired of it. You don't have fun anymore, not really." One tilt of my head and our noses would touch. "Which is why you got hammered last night, isn't it? You were trying

to have fun for once. To let yourself go."

I don't let the truth of his words sink in and I shook my head. "You're wrong. I'm happy."

He smirked, clearly not believing me. His eyes travelled down to my messy hair, and his eyebrow crept up his forehead. His right hand came up from behind and stuck the cigarette between his teeth. His eyes didn't leave my hair as his hands inch forward and begin to tug at my hair softly.

"It's tangled," he muttered, softly dragging his slim fingers through my locks.

I can't breathe. I can't think. A low thumping had filled my ears. "What are you doing," I whispered.

His eyes widened, fingers going slack in my hair. He straightened abruptly, and when his eyes met mine I saw nothing but the cold statue I have grown used to working with in Potions. More smoke curled from his lips, and he turned and walked away.

—

When I walked into Potions, Pansy's lips widened into a mischievous grin and she winked at me from where she sat in the back with Blaise. I gave her a timid smile and sat down. Draco was already there, out of his costume and back to his regular robes.

During class, Draco sat beside me completely and utterly still. After Snape explained today's activities, Draco did not move a muscle, just stared ahead calmly. It seemed like I was going to do our "partner work" for today. As I made a Calming Draught I went through the motions absentmindedly, not bothering to raise my hand to answer questions.

As the potion brewed, I transferred my quill from one hand to the other over and over, playing catch with myself to distract from my thoughts. The only thing I could think about was pale fingers untangling my hair. The horns of a demon. Smoke.

I concluded that since our encounters were confusing and only added to my stress, the best thing would be to stay away from him as best I could. No more rigid tension or heated arguments. Just... neutrality.

I finished the potion easily, with one minute to spare. As I began to pack my things, Snape spoke to the class menacingly. "You will have a Potions Project with your partner that will be worth half of your grade. The assignment is to create an inventive and useful potion, along with an antidote. This will be due at the end of the year, and will be graded on a complete pass or fail system. I suggest you start immediately."

My head snapped to Draco, and he's already looking at me.

Chapter 8

And just like that, my plan to avoid him was flushed down the drain.

The class exploded into a flurry of protests and complaints, and partners were already fighting over their project. Snape quieted the class with his booming voice, and I detected a hint of satisfaction in his tone. He enjoyed the chaos.

I won't be the one to break eye contact. His eyes were wide and his brows were arched in frustration. The feeling is mutual, Draco.

The bell rang and I'm still standing there with my bag slung over my shoulder and my hand braced on the desk, looking down at Draco, still sitting there like he had been all class. The class continued to chatter loudly as they exited the classroom following Snape. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Harry and Ron shooting nervous glances my way.

Draco kept his steady gaze on me as he stood up and grabbed his bag, and I had to adjust my line of sight because now he was standing and towering over me by at least eight centimeters.

A malicious grin spread across his face. "Looks like I can't get away from you, can I?"

I swallowed. "No, I guess you can't."

"What a shame. I was enjoying my time without you so much," he murmured.

I shut my eyes tightly. I don't know what to do. When I opened them again he had backed away a few steps and his grin had vanished, but his eyes were still on me, hard and unyielding. Good. Distance is good. I can focus better with distance.

I cleared my throat and stood straight, feigning confidence. "This sounds like it will be a very difficult project, so I think we should start working right away. Today."

His mouth quirked up at the corner. "I prefer to work alone."

I huffed in frustration. "Yes, I noticed. But we don't really have a choice. Professor Snape made it clear that this is a partner project."

His eyes left mine and narrowed at the floor, thinking. "We will do work individually and exchange our notes, then."

I scoffed. "That is completely insufficient. *Nothing* will get done."

"Like it or not, that's the way it's gonna be—"

"Like it or not, we are doing this project together, end of story. I won't have my grade suffer simply because your attitude ruins my project," I interrupted sharply.

A menacing growl emerged from his open mouth, and before he can say anything I added, "I will see you in the library tonight at six o'clock." And I turned on my heel and stormed out of the room.

"You're not actually gonna work with him, are you?" Ron questioned as I sat down for dinner.

"Malfoy?" His jaw clenched and he jerked his head slightly. "I don't have a choice, Ronald. He's my partner."

"Maybe you could ask Professor Snape to switch partners with someone?" Harry offered, his green eyes full of worry.

I shook my head. "No. I don't want to irritate him or anyone else, almost everyone has already started planning with their partner."

"Well you can't work with him! It's *Malfoy*, for Merlin's sake!" Ron hissed, leaning forward across the table.

I pursed my lips. "It's fine. It's just a project."

"And he's just a conceited arse," Ron retorted, rolling his eyes. I bit my tongue to hold back my protest. Why do I want to defend him?

My gaze drifted to the Slytherin table yet again, and I saw them. Pansy was laughing. Theo was gesturing wildly with his hands, telling a story, no doubt. Blaise was sitting still, but his stance was relaxed and his head was resting in his propped hands. Draco was nowhere to be seen, and I found myself longing to hear Theo's story.

"He's not a good person, Hermione," Harry said gently, breaking my focus. I shifted my eyes to his face. "If you're really going to work with him, you need to be careful."

Goddamn. I can't deal with them. I nodded grimly and stood up. "I'm not hungry," I muttered as a goodbye, leaving them with their mouths gaping.

My stomach rumbled in protest, but I ignored it as I wove through the hallways. It was already 5:50, so I started en route to the library.

I entered the library and started to head for the back shelves, where the books about magical ingredients are kept. When I got there, I sat down in the corner against the bookshelf and settled in, waiting. In the meantime, I took out *To Kill A Mockingbird* and reread the first chapter.

When the clock struck six o'clock Draco rounded the corner and sat gracefully across from me against the other bookshelf, sticking his legs out so his feet were beside my hips. His hair had been fixed and was swept out of his face, and his eyes were tired, as if just being here exhausted him.

"I knew I would find you here. Getting right to work, no dilly-dallying allowed," he stated mockingly.

I rolled my eyes. "What do you want to do? I mean, what type of potion should we create? It needs to be spectacular. Something that no one has ever done before."

His mouth twitched. "That *is* the point, Granger."

There it is again. My last name. Are we back to that? "You know what I mean."

"I don't have any ideas. Do you?"

"Well, I was thinking we could develop a tracking potion to find lost things."

"No."

I bit my lip. Okay, then. "Another idea I had was a voice-changing potion."

"There's a spell for that," he said in a bored voice. His eyes were on his hands as he twisted his ring around his finger.

"Okay, well how about a potion that heightens your adrenaline and awareness for an extended amount of time-"

"Let me stop you right there," he interrupted and looked up at me, and my words died in my throat.

"Like you said, it needs to be spectacular. I'm the top student in Potions." I scoffed, and he continued. "Those ideas are good, but not good enough."

"First off, I'm right there behind you in ranking," I hissed, slamming *To Kill A Mockingbird* shut on my lap. "Secondly, what is your revolutionary idea if mine are not good enough, then?"

His eyes darted to my book, but I was already slipping it in my bag. He merely replied, "Hasn't hit me yet".

"Alright, genius. Let's just do some browsing and see what we find," I crooned, leaning forward to get a book beside his head.

I scanned the shelf for a particular book I know has useful information. My shoulders were level with his and my arm was outstretched, my fingers skimming over the book bindings. I kept my eyes on the books but he was looking at my face, his expression solemn. His pink lips were parted. I felt a blush coming, but I found the red spine and tugged at it, swiftly settling back across from him with the book. When I looked up at him, he had already cracked open a dark blue book.

I began to read, considering how each ingredient would work together. Some of the pictures of the magical fruit ingredients looked quite appetizing, consisting of bright colors and textures described as smooth and plump, and I couldn't stop my mouth from watering.

"You didn't eat dinner."

I blinked and glanced up at him, and he was still reading.

"What?"

"Your hunger is written all over your face, and I can hear your grumbling stomach from all the way over here," He said simply, still not looking at me. My cheeks started to burn.

When I didn't say anything, he sighed and set his open book aside, reaching into his bag and pulling out a carton. He doesn't look at me when he places the container onto my lap and starts reading again.

It's full of strawberries.

"You... you like strawberries?" I asked carefully. I had never seen him eat them before.

He glimpsed up at me through his heavy eyelids, then looked back down at his book. "I guess they're pretty good. Pansy gave them to me." He rolled his eyes.

I blushed again. Pansy. His... girlfriend, of sorts. Is that what you call someone you snog? "Thanks." He didn't respond, just flipped a page. I plopped a strawberry in my mouth, and when the delightful flavor spread across my tongue I couldn't stop the moan of pleasure that seeped out of me. His jaw twitched, but he said nothing. Then I remembered that he wasn't even at dinner tonight.

I swallowed the fruit and decided to try my luck. "I... I didn't see you at dinner. Did you eat?"

"No."

Oh. Crap, he brought these strawberries for himself, didn't he? "Then here, have some," I suggested, picking up a strawberry with two fingers and holding it out to him.

He looked at me sideways. "I'm fine, Granger. I don't want to eat."

"Come on, you brought these fruits for yourself, anyways," I protested, feeling guilty for taking his food from him.

"Just eat it."

I shook my head, still holding out the fruit. "Surely you must be hungry—"

"I'm not going to eat. Leave it," Draco seethed, his eyes burning again. My mouth had fallen open, taken aback. Why did he always get so angry? He turned back to his book, a scowl stretched across his features.

"You can't talk to me like that," I said, my voice soft yet firm.

His gaze snapped to mine again, his eyes still hot. "Like what, exactly?"

"Like I'm someone you can boss around," I clarified, my fingers beginning to pull at each other with nerves.

Draco grinned, but there was no joy in it. "Aren't you?"

I sighed, not knowing how much more of him I could deal with. "No, I'm not. I only listen to myself."

Draco shook his head slowly, his grin replaced with a thin line. "It doesn't seem like that."

Here we go again. I groaned, "What's that supposed to mean?"

His eyes were hard as they bore into mine. "It just seems like you're always taking care of everyone," Draco said slowly, putting an emphasis on the last word.

I leaned forward slightly, curious. "Is that such a bad thing?"

"Well, no. But you are so worried about everyone that you forget about yourself," Draco said easily. I tilted my head in question, but he tore his gaze from mine and was reading again.

"Like forgetting to eat dinner," Draco added, raising his eyebrow at me before narrowing his gaze at the uneaten strawberries on my lap.

"You didn't eat, either," I argued, but I bit another strawberry anyways.

"That's different."

He turned another page roughly. His tone was firm, so I decided not to push it. "Why do you care?" I asked abruptly, my words muffled by the food in my mouth.

Draco looked up at me, clearly not understanding what I had said. "What?"

Am I really going to ask him this? I gulped down my food and tried again. "Why do you care if I eat dinner or not?"

His jaw clenched, but all that Draco said was, "It's unhealthy, and makes you grumpy and a pain to work with."

"I thought I'm always a pain to work with," I quipped suspiciously.

"Even moreso when you're operating on an empty stomach."

I bit my lip and looked down at my lap, at the food he had given me. That doesn't really make sense. It's so... not like him. "But you don't even care about me."

Silence. Then: "That's not true."

My eyes locked onto his, and his grey eyes were shielded, masking emotion. What did he just say? I loosed a heavy breath, wondering why he felt the need to lie to me. "Why lie, Malfoy? We both know it's true."

Draco slammed his book shut, and I jumped in my seat. His eyes darted to the floor and he ran a hand through his hair, messing up the careful placement. When his eyes returned to mine, the mask was cracked. His pupils were dilated and the corners of his eyes were crinkled. "It's not that I don't care about you, Granger." My breath hitched, and his eyes shot to my lips. "It's that I do care," Draco continued quietly. "And I don't *want* to care." Draco's eyes came back to mine, and they were open, telling me something.

He... he cares about me?

I didn't know what to say to that. I just said, "Oh."

Something flashed across his features. Hurt? But the statue was back before I could think about it more. He broke eye contact and shoved the book into his bag and said stiffly, "Alright, we've found enough for today. Let's go."

"Go where?"

"The Slytherin common room. I have some rare ingredients we can use to experiment."

I winced. Last time I was there I don't even remember getting there. And, as Ron would put it, it's 'enemy territory'. "I don't think I should go there..."

"You're coming," Draco stated, standing up and leaving. Reluctantly, I followed him.

I trailed a few feet behind Draco, not sure what to say or do after what just happened. Soon, he was muttering the password in front of a blank wall, and a hidden door swung open. He stepped in and looked back at me, jerking his head at me to follow.

I took a shuddering breath, stepping into the lion's den.

Chapter 9

It was not what I expected at all.

When Harry and Ron had come here undercover in second year, they had returned and described it in two words: evil and menacing.

I disagree.

The Slytherin common room was a long, low underground room with rough stone walls and ceiling, from which round glass lamps were hanging on chains, emitting a comforting green glow. A fire was crackling under an elaborately carved mantelpiece ahead of me, and several Slytherins were silhouetted around it in carved chairs.

The common room has lots of low backed black and dark green button-tufted, leather sofas, framed by dark wood cupboards. One of the wooden tables had a Wizard's Chess set on it made of black and white marble. The room was decorated with tapestries featuring the adventures of famous Medieval Slytherins: diving off of cliffs, soaring through the sky standing on brooms, exploration of hidden caves, and countless other depictions.

The overall architecture of the room was incredible, each of the walls intricately carved with elegant patterns, leaving literally no stone left untouched. The tall arching windows encompassing the room gave way to an expansive view of the Black Lake itself, and I saw a school of dozens of silver fish swim by.

Draco followed my line of sight and said over his shoulder, "We often see the giant squid swooshing by— and sometimes more interesting creatures."

Not evil and menacing, no. It was dark and breathtaking.

A beautiful underwater shipwreck.

My awe must have not been conveyed, because Draco saw my expression and let out a low laugh. "Too twisty and brooding for your taste?"

I met his gaze and shook my head slowly. "No. I like it."

His mouth twitched as he turned back around, and I thought he was going to smile.

I walked up behind the closest couch, which was facing another identical couch with a dark coffee table between the two. An arm was slung over the back of the furniture. A head turned to face me, and a handsome tan face was illuminated. "It's Granger!" Theo exclaimed, grinning broadly.

"Don't wet your pants with excitement, Theo." Pansy said from beside him, rolling her eyes dramatically. Her head was resting against his arm, but there was a good meter or so between them. That makes sense, considering she's with Draco. They're clearly good friends, though.

Theo turned to Pansy, smirking. "Like how you did in second year?" he teased, his grin widening with amusement.

Pansy's cheeks reddened. "You little—"

"Shut the hell up, old married couple," Blaise moaned, shaking his head. He was sitting in a velvet

green armchair adjacent to both couches and facing the fireplace, the fire dancing across his ever so cool and composed face. Both Pansy's and Theo's mouths simultaneously snapped shut, eyes wide. "What brings you here?" Blaise asked, tilting his head slightly in curiosity.

"Oh, Merlin, I'm so sorry, am I not allowed in here?" I asked, wincing. The last thing I wanted was to get on the bad side of the *Slytherins* of all people.

Blaise shrugged. "Technically, yes you're allowed. But it hasn't really been done, like..."

"Ever."

Draco's deep voice travelled from where he had settled on the opposite couch, on the edge closest to the Blaise. His arm was thrown casually over the armrest, his hand dangling over the side. His posture was relaxed, comfortable. I shifted on my feet awkwardly, unsure whether to sit or not. Draco's eyes locked onto mine, and he looked down at the spot on the couch next to him and back up at me, his eyebrow lifted. *Sit*, he was saying. I nodded shortly and crossed in front of the fireplace, settling beside him. I made sure to keep a respectable distance between us. The cushions felt like clouds, and I bit back my sigh of comfort.

"Not like anyone has really wanted to come in, anyways." Pansy added, her face thoughtful.

Theo pouted, his bottom lip jutting out. "Pity. We're so fun to be around."

"I'm... the first person from another house to be in here?" I asked warily, suddenly feeling myself go stiff. Technically, Harry and Ron were the first, but they didn't know that. I was the first to be accepted here. The cushions didn't feel so inviting anymore, more... intimidating.

Draco shook his head slightly, his gray eyes blinking slowly against the fire. "It's really not a big deal."

"But it really is." Theo countered, picking up a black goblet from the coffee table and taking a sip. He was smiling and his tone was light, but I now felt like a trespasser.

"I'll get going, I'm so sorry—"

"Stop apologizing, Granger. No harm done. You've already been in here, technically speaking," Pansy remarked dismissively, ushering to the black spiral stairs behind her that likely lead to the dorms.

Theo abruptly choked on his drink, and the liquid shot out of his mouth and back into the goblet he was holding. "She *what*?"

"This should be good," Blaise chuckled, settling further back into his chair.

Pansy pursed her lips and I could tell she was trying not to laugh. "That's for another time."

Theo bounced in his seat in anticipation. "No! You can't just say something like that and not explain, Pansy!"

Pansy glanced over, asking for approval with her eyes. I shrugged. I don't mind them knowing. She turned to Theo and stated, "She slept here on Halloween night after the party. That's all you need to know."

A hysterical laugh erupted from Theo's lips, his muddy eyes blown large. His chest was shaking wildly, and in between gasps he said, "She *slept* here? With *you*?" He laughed even harder.

"Something you wanna tell us, Pans? Always had a feeling you liked girls."

Pansy's hazel eyes bulged and she slapped Theo's arm, and his laughter died down a little when he winced on impact. "Complete arse. I feel the same suspicion about you. Do you and Blaise rendezvous in the broom closet during passing period?"

Theo smirked, his expression challenging. "We do, actually. Care to join us?"

"Not that your company isn't delightful, but why are you here?" Blaise interrupted, shooting Theo and Pansy disproving glares like a parent would to children. It was as if they had come out of a trance with only the two of them inside and they were back to sitting side by side unmoving, their eyes now on me.

I turned to Blaise, leaning forward to see over Draco. "Draco said he had rare ingredients we could use for our Potions project." I replied.

"Ay, Daddy's money really pays off," Theo grinned, his bottom lip caught between his teeth.

Pansy turned and took one look at Theo's face and snorted. "You look like a crazed puppy."

"Well, crazy puppies don't piss their pants, unlike some people," Theo wiggled his brows.

"It was *one time*—"

"Do you want to tell her, or should I?"

"Theodore Sileo Nott, I will end you." Pansy said in a deep and slow manner, her face scrunched up.

Theo faced me anyways, ignoring Pansy's death glare. "Pansy fancied Gilderoy Lockhart a little too much for her own good. I was sitting next to her first time he walked into our Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom, she got all red, and I looked down and saw a wet stain slowly spreading across her robes."

"I hate you." Pansy muttered. Theo turned back to her, unfazed by her continued lethal stare.

"In your dreams." Theo cooed, licking his lips.

"Ever piss yourself, Granger?" Blaise asked casually.

I let out a small laugh. "No, not since I was a toddler." I shifted my attention to Draco. He wasn't talking much. "Have you, Malfoy?"

He glanced sideways and shot me a minute version of his signature smirk. "Daily."

"This is a disgusting conversation topic." Pansy sighed, back in her position resting on Theo's arm.

Suddenly, Theo was drawing his arm out from under her, and she flinched slightly in surprise. He leaned forward and braced his right elbow on his knee, using his left hand to reach into his pocket and pull out a small tin, popping the lid off. "Would you like a mint, Granger?" Theo offered, holding the container out to me.

"Oh... thank you." and I meant it. I couldn't remember the last time someone had offered me something. I reached across the small table and picked out one of the light green mints. I brought it up to my lips and paused.

Don't fraternize with the enemy, Ron had said after class after seeing Pansy's affectionate wink at me.

They're not really the enemy, are they? You-Know-Who is, I had replied coolly.

Ron's expression had darkened. *They've always been the enemy, and always will be*.

A bitter laugh rose in my throat. If only he could see me now. True enemies don't make you feel better than you have in a long time, or make you laugh, or give you mints.

I popped it in my mouth.

"Your special mints, Theo? You're so stingy with those," Blaise observed.

Theo gave me another charming grin. "It's my welcome gift to Granger. We welcome you to our humble abode."

Pansy's face was purple. I tried to silently ask her what was wrong, but she didn't look at me.

"Anywho, Theo, didn't you have a story to tell us?" Blaise asked.

"A story?" I asked inquisitively, perking up with interest.

Draco started to lean towards me, moving so slowly it was almost imperceptible. As Pansy was saying something, I felt the soft ripple of his breath across my cheek. "Theo is quite the author," Draco explained under his breath, so softly that only I could hear. "Creates stories in his head and tells them to us."

I blinked and looked up at him, and his eyes were on Pansy, but his body was angled towards mine. "I like them," I whispered to him, and his jaw visibly tightened. "Your friends."

His eyes met mine briefly before shifting back to Pansy, his lips parted ever so slightly. "If you can't tell, they like you too, Granger," he murmured. I wasn't able to fight back my smile.

Theo rubbed his hands together. "Oh, that's right! Settle in, gentlemen, lady, and Pans." Pansy smacked him on the arm again, and his laugh was bright. "This is a good one. A story of pirates and knights and faraway kingdoms..."

Theo launched into his story, and pure excitement bubbled inside of me. I couldn't remember how many times I had seen Theo's waving hands across the Great Hall and wished I could hear what he was saying.

My hands were at my sides, and a light touch grazed my fingers. My eyes trailed down, and there was Draco's slim fingers, hovering over mine. I looked up at him in surprise. He had a faded smile as he listened to Theo. He looked happy. Truly happy. My eyes went back to our hands, and his hand rested beside mine. His thumb was touching my pinky, just the smallest point of contact.

His skin was warm.

I zoned back in to listen to Theo's story, his eyes glossy and captured with an image in his head only he could see. "Captain Pam dove off her pirate ship into the sea, transforming into a colorful underwater horse..."

We can work later, I thought. After the story.

We didn't work later.

Theo's story had gone on for around two hours, and every second of it was impossibly fascinating and delightful. And after that, we had continued to talk about the story and other random things until the fire had faded to a dull crackle.

When everyone started getting tired, the conversation had decreased to a low mumble. Soon, the only sound was steady breathing. Theo had passed out on the arm of the couch, his head cradled in the crook of his arms. Pansy's head was in his lap. Draco's legs were stretched under the table and his head was twisted, his cheek on a green pillow. His eyes were hooded and drowsy, starting to close. My limbs were strewn across the couch, my head propped comfortably by a pillow. My eyelids too began to droop lower and lower.

I hadn't moved my hand. Draco hadn't, either.

So there we lay, connected by two fingers. A featherlight touch.

Yawning, Blaise stood up and stretched his arms in a rainbow. "Evening, Granger," he said sluggishly, trudging up the spiral staircase.

I blinked slowly, squinting at the iron clock hanging over the fireplace. It was already 1:24 AM. I winced. I needed to go back.

I sat up carefully, my tangled curls falling across my face. I brushed them aside.

His hand is so warm.

I took one last moment and sucked in a breath, withdrawing my hand.

Draco's eyes shot open and greeted mine, sleep clouding his irises.

"I..." I hesitated. "I have to go now, it's late."

He just looked at me.

"I'll see you tomorrow," I continued, standing up and brushing off my lap. I took a step to leave.

Draco's right hand shot out and closed around my wrist. His eyes were closed. "Goodnight, Granger," Draco whispered, eyes still shut.

I couldn't breathe. He was so warm. A burning sun. "Goodnight, Malfoy."

It took a lot of willpower to turn, to walk away as my wrist slipped from his warm grasp. To stumble through the hallways and back to my world of bright fire, away from their world of still waters.

When I entered the Gryffindor common room, the fire was blazing and Ron and Harry shot up off the couch, sprinting over to me.

"Where the bloody hell have you been?" Ron cursed, shaking my shoulders. I blinked rapidly, struggling to adjust to the high energy level.

"With— with Malfoy. Doing our project." Not a total lie. We worked on it for about an hour at the beginning.

"Until 2 AM? We were worried sick!" scolded Ron, gripping my arms tighter. I cringed under the

intense pressure.

Harry shoved him off with a disappointed look and took my shoulders gently. "Are you alright, Hermione?"

I nodded. "I'm fine, guys. Really. I just need some sleep."

Ron clearly wanted to say more, but a pointed look from Harry shut his mouth. I gave them a tight smile and mumbled goodnight, dragging my feet up the stairs in exhaustion. I shrugged off my robes and let them drop onto the floor. Curling up under the covers, sleep came easy.

I dreamt of pirates, knights, and a burning sun.

Chapter 10

December 4, 1996

Hold on.

I am holding on. For him.

Only for him.

November 2, 1995

I didn't want to leave my dreams.

The world of technicolor and wonder faded, and Captain Pam's hazel eyes and long flowing black hair blurred and soon there was nothing but the sunlight bursting across my eyelids.

I went through the motions and took a hot shower. I let out multiple sighs as the water scorched my skin, close to burning me. But I loved it. I could never take cold showers, or even warm. It always had to be hot, as hot as I could tolerate without burning myself. It was as though the heat cleansed my skin of the dirt of my burdens. The heat felt so renewing. So nice.

But it doesn't burn.

Not like his skin.

Not like the burning sun I dreamt of.

Does he have a fever? Is he sick? He was so, so warm.

I left my hair damp and loose around my shoulders and stared at myself in the mirror. A natural blush sat on my cheekbones, and my eyes were wide and gleaming. I looked... healthy. I smiled to myself. Maybe it's because I didn't skip dinner, thanks to Draco.

Down at breakfast, Theo's head was down and his eyes were closed, and Blaise was yawning widely. Draco wasn't there yet. I sent a friendly wave to Pansy, who returned it with grace, before sitting down at my usual spot. Ron's face was bright red as he stared down at the table, like he was holding in a sneeze. From the way Harry was glaring at Ron, I knew that Harry had told Ron to back off and hold his tongue.

The atmosphere was tense, to put it lightly. I could cut through it with a knife.

"I'm sorry about last night," Ron blurted, not meeting my eyes. Harry blew a loose breath of exasperation out of his mouth. Ron didn't seem to notice and continued, "I was just worried. We both were."

I gave him a small, tight-lipped smile. "I can take care of myself, you know."

Ron nodded slowly, as if contemplating that fact. "Yeah. But we can never know with Malfoy. Don't forget that he's the enemy."

I shifted my gaze to Harry, who looked uncomfortable as he shifted in his seat, but he didn't argue Ron's point.

"Someone can be a bully and not the enemy," I argued defensively. I didn't let myself think long about why I was defending Draco. Things between us were... good? Is that the best way to describe it? Certainly not hostile anymore.

"He's a pureblood elitist," Ron hissed, eyes bulging out of his head. "You can't be serious right now. If he's being kind to you, he must have a reason. A motive. How many times has he called you Mudblood? How many times has he tormented us, him and his posse of arses?"

"Ron, that's enough," Harry chided, clenching his teeth and shaking his head at his friend.

I couldn't deny the truth in his words. Draco's track record wasn't good, and neither were his friends'. But last night...

Last night, I saw no trace of those bullies from third year. I saw kind and humorous people. I don't want to judge prematurely, but they seem to have really improved as human beings.

As for Draco...

Something had changed last night. We were friendly now. Nice.

And he cares about me. He said so.

It's not that I don't care about you, Granger. It's that I do care. And I don't want to care.

That old question from September returned to my mind. What does the real Draco look like? After he had called me a Mudblood that day in Potions, I had shut the hypothesis out completely. But now...

"I'll only say this one more time." I focused back in on Ron. He must've been talking, because a trail of words came to a stop on his lips. "I can take care of myself."

I shot up from the table and walked away, not bothering with goodbyes. I'd rather skip breakfast than tolerate them any longer. Instead of turning left and leaving, I walked straight ahead to the other side of the room. To the Slytherin table.

Draco was there next to Pansy now, munching on a bowl of cereal. I stopped in front of him, and the spoon froze midair before his mouth.

"Look who it is!" Theo cheered sleepily, eyes half open and his face propped up on his palm. Other Slytherins were looking over in surprise.

I smiled. "Hi Theo, Blaise, Pansy."

Blaise nodded in greeting, not pausing from drinking his pumpkin juice. Pansy winked.

Draco cleared his throat, his eyes soft and the spoon still hovering in front of his mouth. "To what do we owe the pleasure?"

"I came over to ask about later. Do you want to meet in the library again tonight, same time?" A bold question. A strong implication: what are we? Are we friends now?

Draco nodded curtly before shoving the spoon in his mouth and chewing loudly. I cast one last smile at his three friends before turning on my heel and walking out of the Great Hall.

"Cereal catch your tongue, Draco?" Theo teased as I walked away. I grinned.

The best way I could describe our situation, I concluded, was mutual respect.

In Potions, we worked together. Technically we have been partners for months, but now we were actually working together.

I thought there was nothing better than Draco's work in Potions. I was wrong: our combined work as a team is.

We took turns, alternating with each step in the instructions. On the very rare occasion he made a slight mistake, I caught it. Instead of hissing at me like he would have before, he nodded and corrected himself. Professor Snape even went as far as saying our potion was done almost as well as his own, which I know means we did it perfectly.

A tentative smile here and there. Not overly nice, but not mean anymore. Without outright saying it, it's clear that we care about each other's well being. At least... I think it's clear.

What did I say last night when he told me he cares about me? 'Oh'? What the hell?

Should I say something? Tell him that I care about him too? Because I do.

I really do.

At dinner, I ate my spaghetti quickly and quietly, shoveling forkfuls into my mouth and barely stopping to chew. Ron had turned his back to Harry and I and kept a conversation going with Seamus, throwing a few wary glances my way, but I ignored him. Ron really thinks I'm some prissy who needs to be looked after at all times.

Harry was sitting across from me, looking almost in pain, his eyes darting between me and Ron. "We just want you to be careful, Hermione," Harry said, so quietly that only I could hear. "You even went over to their table this morning looking... friendly." It was clear he was talking about the Slytherins. "You know how they are. I don't know what I would do if something happened to you."

I tugged my lip between my teeth and nodded. He's my best friend; I should explain. "Harry, I know what I'm doing. I'm not exactly... friends it's the Slytherins. I'm not stupid. I know what they've done to us in the past, and I know their ideals go against my entire existence." I reached forward and clasped my hand with Harry's. It was calloused and clammy. Not warm. "But... on the off chance they're different now, I owe them that benefit of the doubt. I need to see for myself. I need to see who they are."

Confusion clouded his green eyes, but he squeezed my hand and whispered, "I trust you, Hermione."

I shot him a grateful look before pulling my hand away and standing up to head to the library. "And I'll talk to Ron," Harry added over his shoulder as I walked away, and I squeezed his arm in passing.

I was ten minutes early and I went to the same spot in the library as last time, settling comfortably in the corner. It was 6:05 when Draco sank down across from me, cigarette hanging limply from his lips. "Evening, Granger."

"You shouldn't smoke in here. Or at all."

He pulled the cigarette out and grinned. "It feels bloody spectacular."

"It ruins your lungs."

Draco pouted. "Really? I thought it boosts your growth."

A small laugh escaped me. "It does. But only for women."

His mouth quirked up. "Exactly. Haven't you noticed I've grown four inches?"

I rolled my eyes, smiling. Draco held his hand out, the cigarette rolling in his palm, his eyebrow arched in a question.

I shook my head. "No."

He smirked, edging his open palm closer. "Come on, live a little. Have some fun."

There it was. Fun. Something my life was utterly lacking lately. He must've known that word would trigger me, because I snatched the cigarette from his palm and took a sharp inhale, only to double over with coughs rattling my entire body. I sat back up, eyes teary, and he was biting his lip to keep back from laughing. "Wow. So fun."

Draco's eyes squinted in contemplation, then widened in shock. "Oh."

My hands shot to my face, feeling all over. "What?"

The surprise stretched as he said, "You didn't grow. You're not a woman."

I blushed furiously, bursting into laughter. I slapped his arm as a low laugh shook his shoulders. He took the cigarette from between my lips and placed it between his, his eyes gleaming. I flushed even more.

"We're already behind, we should get to work," I managed to say without stuttering after our laughing had ceased.

Draco nodded in agreement, pulling a few books out of his bag. "Right."

"Why were you late?" I asked as I took my own books out. He looked up at me curiously. "I mean, you weren't late-late, but you were... late." Merlin, could I sound any more stupid?

He pondered for a moment, then his eyes lit up. "Oh, a pretty fourth year Ravenclaw asked me if I wanted to take a walk with her around the Quidditch pitch after dinner tomorrow, and I unfortunately had to decline."

"And why's that?" Because of Pansy?

Draco smirked. "I have a standing date with the Gryffindor princess every night."

I blushed again. "Not because of Pansy?" I asked before I thought whether or not that was wise.

His eyes froze on their path in his open book. Silence, then: "And because of Pansy."

I nodded, not letting the weight of his words resonate within me. "Pansy seems like a great girl."

A laugh of disbelief left Draco's lips, his eyes still on his book.

"What?"

He looked up at me. "It's just a funny thing to hear come out of your mouth, after... after everything."

It is, isn't it? "Yeah. Yeah, I guess it is."

We sat in silence, reading, taking notes on parchment. The only sound was the faint tick of the clock overhead.

At 7:30, I placed my book and my notes down for a break, rubbing my eyes with the back of my hands, and Draco followed my lead a minute later. "What did you think of Theo's story?" He asked, fingers drumming on his knee.

I smiled to myself, thinking of last night yet again. "I loved it. Especially the part where Captain Pam fights the Black Knight deep in the ocean on water horseback."

"And when the Black Knight struck her and she was unconscious and sinking!" Draco exclaimed. "Just when you think all hope is lost—"

"An army of underwater sea creatures come and fight alongside her!" I finished for him, and we were both chuckling softly in our little corner of literature.

"Does he always tell stories like that?" I asked.

His eyes were on me but his gaze was far away when he said, "Since we were kids."

A true author. "It's..."

"Childish?" Draco offered, his expression weary.

"I was going to say wonderful," I finished, smiling softly.

His eyes were bright. "Ah."

Draco pulled his wand out and used it to light another cigarette, sticking the stick between his teeth and puffing out a whiff of smoke. I shook my head at him in disapproval, but he simply smiled around the cigarette. I took out *To Kill A Mockingbird* to finish the last page of the chapter I had left off on earlier.

"Granger."

I looked up, and the cigarette was gripped between his fingers and his eyes were mine.

"Yes?"

His gaze dipped to my book and then back to my face. "What book is that?"

I gestured to the open novel on my lap. "This one?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "No, the one in Switzerland. Yes, that one."

I shut the book and held it up in front of me, his eyes following it. "It's called 'To Kill a Mockingbird' by Harper Lee."

"A book about killing birds?" He clicked his tongue in surprise. "I never pegged you to have a

violent hatred toward mockingbirds. They seem so sweet."

"It's a metaphor, Malfoy. She's a Muggle writer."

He nodded slowly, drinking in the cover of the book. "That explains why I've never seen it."

"Is that why I've caught you staring at it before?" I ventured, raising my brows at him.

His lip twitched. "I stare at it because the color of the binding is hideous."

I gestured to the book in my hand and said, "You're a Slytherin. Shouldn't you like green?"

"That's not green. It's like..." Draco cringed inwardly. "Mucus green."

I shook my head furiously in disgust. "Gross."

"Why are you always reading it?" He continued, his lips pursed in thought. His cheekbones stuck out rather boldly. Sharply.

"It's an incredible book," I clarified slowly, unsure of where this conversation was going. "It was a gift from my parents. Every time I reread it, I catch more details that make the story so much more fascinating."

Draco snorted, dragging the cigarette across his jawline. I shivered. "I doubt a muggle book could be as fascinating as a wizarding one."

"Oh, but it is."

"And what exactly is the premise of this book? If not murdering small birds?" He was really curious now, puffing out another breath of smoke. The strong scent clouded the air, but it didn't smell bad. Not at all.

"A young girl grows up learning firsthand about racial prejudice and inequality."

Draco rolled his eyes and said, "That sounds ridiculous."

"It's revolutionary, actually," I argued, correcting him. "Mark my words, it'll be a classic that they teach to Muggle boys and girls in primary school."

"I highly doubt that."

And then it hit me.

If I can see Draco's reaction to racial prejudice, that would help me figure him out. I can see if he was still that ignorant arse from third year. I can see if his views had really changed.

I can see what he really thinks of me.

See if it's all an act, like Ron was saying earlier. A boy playing double agent in an undercover mission.

I know what I have to do.

"Read it, then."

Draco's eyebrows shot up in alarm, the stick hanging limp between his lips. "Do I really wanna

waste my time with that?"

Yes. Spend your time on this. This could work. "Just... try it. If you read a few chapters and don't like it, you can say 'I told you so'."

"I'm very excited to say that to you," Draco crooned, grey eyes challenging.

I held out the book to him face up. I didn't hide my smile as he took it and I said, "We'll see about that."

His grin was a flame.

Chapter 11

November 14, 1995

Draco slammed the book down on the dark mahogany table in front of me, his hand tense and stark veins popping out. "This book is stupid," he hissed, sinking down beside me on the emerald velvet couch.

I had been coming here almost everyday after dinner these past two weeks, a decision strongly encouraged by Pansy and Theo, along with quiet support of Blaise.

And I listened.

I needed this. With them, everything just... disappeared. If only for a while. The responsibilities. The relentless and impossible expectations. The pressure. With them, I was just me. Hermione.

Harry and Ron had stopped asking where I was going after the first two nights, which I had answered with "That's irrelevant".

I think they know. Ron barely speaks to me, and when Harry does it's with a carefulness that wasn't there before.

This is good for me, space from Harry and Ron. I love them, nothing will change that. I just need time away for a while. To figure out what I want. What's not working.

I looked up from my parchment and glanced sideways at Draco. His face was scrunched up in frustration, searching for an answer to a question he had not yet voiced. My knees were bent and brought up to my chest. My parchment with my Arithmancy homework was rolled out on my knees, and the tip of my quill was between my teeth. "Why is that?"

He groaned and grabbed the muddy green book from the table, waving it in my face. "This guy Tom Robinson. He is so obviously innocent. The beatings on the girl are on the right, so you would need to hit her your left, obviously. And he—he doesn't even have a left hand! W—why are they even entertaining the alternative? T—taking it to *court*?" He was stumbling over his words in exasperation, lips tripping across each other.

I successfully suppressed my smile and merely replied, "You'll see. Keep reading."

"They're acting completely ridiculous." Draco continued anyways, shaking his head. His hair fell across his eyes, and he blew air up out of his mouth to try to fix it, but to no avail. Much to his dismay, because his expression grew even more frustrated.

A small giggle escaped my throat. "Just keep reading, Malfoy."

"What are we talking about?" Pansy's voice echoed, and I traced the voice to find Pansy collapsing onto the chaise across from us, laying back and kicking her legs out and setting them on the cushions.

Draco shook his head and sat back against the pillows. He grumbled, "Some book Granger is making me read. It's bollocks."

"It's not bollocks," I protested, sending a disapproving look at Draco. "It's a rich text full of truth."

"Clearly not 'full of truth'. Like I said, he's obviously innocent—"

"Snoozeville," Theo whined, coming up and shoving Pansy's legs off the couch to sit next to her. She huffed in annoyance. He ignored her and shut his eyes in faked exhaustion, pleading, "Why don't we talk about something we all understand, nerds?"

"Like what?" Draco asked, eyes on Theo but fingers near mine. An inch closer and they would touch again.

I wonder if he still burns.

Theo's eyes rolled up in thought. "Like..." His eyes straightened, and I could almost see a physical lightbulb spring on in his eyes. "Cookies."

My eyebrows crept up my forehead. "Cookies?"

Theo instantly beamed. "I make killer snickerdoodle cookies. We should sneak into the kitchen so I can make them."

"How the hell do you know how to make *snickerdoodles*?" Blaise piped in, sinking into his usual armchair, a black goblet in his right hand.

For a moment, a shadow passed over Theo's face, but he blinked and it was nowhere to be seen. But his eyes were slightly duller and his voice was distant when he said, "My mum used to make them when I was a kid. She made them the Muggle way. Said it was more rewarding to take that first bite after spending so much time making them."

"Okay, but we can't go right now," Pansy informed, staring up at the wrought iron clock above the mantle.

Blaise traced Pansy's line of sight and asked, "Why not?"

Her head turned to him, and her expression was a familiar one. It was the *are you serious?* face that I have used with Ron and Harry countless times. "The house elves don't finish up until 8," she explained, looking for a moment of realization in Blaise's face.

The right corner of Blaise's lip twitched in what I had learned to be amusement. "How do you know that? Keeping tabs on the elves?"

"How else do you think I get so many snacks for us?" Pansy snapped, gesturing to the coffee table wildly. Indeed, everytime I came here the table had been piled with a multitude of fruits and chocolates.

Theo's hand, which held a ball of chocolate on a path to his lips, stopped in front of his lips. His eyes bulged at Pansy and he exclaimed, "*You* get these?"

"Yes! I even got strawberries for Draco! I told you guys this!" Pansy scolded, her mouth open and rolling her eyes in disbelief.

Strawberries for Draco. For when he skipped dinner.

Theo popped the chocolate into his mouth and chewed for a moment, then replied with brown teeth, "Forgive me if I don't listen to every word you say."

"Shut up, you two. We will just go at 8:30." Blaise said smoothly, and Pansy and Theo

immediately closed their mouths. I grinned. They were like two children always bickering, and Blaise was their impromptu parental figure that had to keep them in order. Blaise turned to me, face as composed as ever, and asked, "You in, Granger?"

I don't know why, but Ron's voice began to echo through my mind, and my grin faded off my face promptly. *How many times has he called you Mudblood? How many times has he tormented us, him and his possey of arses?* I shifted in my seat, placing my homework to the side. "Oh, um..."

A small spark. I didn't have to look down to know it was Draco's hand. Just a finger again, resting beside mine, only touching infinitesimally. So warm, exactly how I remembered. Burning.

"What's wrong?" he implored softly, with surprising gentleness.

I took my eyes away from Blaise and found Draco's grey irises, clear and delicate. "What do you mean?"

"You look like your puppy died," Pansy's voice cut in, and I turned to her.

"Oh no. Do you have a puppy at home? Did it actually die?" I could hear the clear despair in Theo's words, and his shoulders sagged. He looked absolutely heartbroken.

"Idiot," Pansy muttered.

"No. No, I'm fine, guys," I assured them, pasting on a small fake smile I have mastered over time.

"You're clearly not," Draco countered lowly, and that deep voice sent a spark running up our tiny point of contact and up my spine. So, so warm. Flaming.

"You can tell us what's going on," Theo added, albeit hesitantly after pausing for a moment. "Who am I gonna tell? The only blokes I talk to are these three, and I don't even like them," he added as an afterthought, and that earned an actual smile from me.

Pansy snorted, "Shut the hell up for once, Theo—"

"No you shut up," Theo shot back, and he turned back to me, his expression apologetic. "Granger, you have the floor."

Dozens of past scenarios flashed across my vision.

Doing my homework, then staying up all night to do Harry's and Ron's as well.

Not getting anything more than a thank you after writing entire essays for them.

My gut wrenching with disappointment when they never offered to help me with anything.

You'll figure it out, you always do!, they always said. My role in the dynamic of things. The problem-solver.

I parroted Ron and Harry when I responded, "Thanks. But I'll figure it out. I always do."

"No, you damn well will not."

I whirled to Draco, and he was rubbing his neck, looking down and shaking his head slowly.

"What?"

He raised his eyes to mine, and they were dark. Unyielding. Cold hard steel. His mouth was set in a firm line. "Come on, Granger. Don't do that."

"Do what?"

Fire. The one point of contact between our fingers. My body was on fire.

Draco shook his head, biting his lower lip and looking up to the ceiling briefly, like he was in pain. His voice was shaking ever so slightly when he said, "Don't... keep everything to yourself. You always look like that, like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders."

It does feel like that a lot of times. And he noticed.

"You know you can talk to us, right?" Blaise said, and when I looked at him his face was softer than I've ever seen.

"Well, can we blame her for being hesitant?" Pansy's expression was pained, and she continued, "We used to *bully* her. A lot."

And there it was. The elephant in the room. The only sound was the faint crackle of the fire.

What do I say to that? I don't think *Yeah, that really sucked* is an appropriate answer. So I decided to do what I usually do with Ron and Harry. Lie. "No, it's not that."

It was Theo who spoke first. When he met my eyes, his face was miserable. His voice came out cracked. "I think I speak for all of us here when I say that I'm sorry. For all of that. For how mean I was. How mean we were." He cringed inwardly. "I was a stupid, idiot kid."

Pansy muttered, "You're *still* a stupid idiot kid."

"Pans, I swear to God—"

"I'm just saying—"

"Can we be serious for *one second*—"

"What he's trying to say," Blaise projected over them, shooting them death glares that silenced them, "is that we're sorry. All of us. Right, guys?" Blaise raised his brows at his friends.

Pansy shrugged. "You're pretty cool. For a Muggleborn, I mean." She winked at me.

Theo put his face in his hands. "Pans, God *damn*—"

"Jesus Christ, it was a *joke*—"

"But no more jokes. Right?" Blaise urged, widening his eyes at them.

Pansy looked at me and nodded vigorously. "Yeah. Yeah, no more."

"Because we like you," Theo stated matter-of-factly.

"We do. Truly." Blaise rumbled. He smiled at me, and I returned it genuinely.

Out of the corner of my eye I focused on Draco, but he said nothing. His head was bent, his blonde hair covering his face, his gaze fixed on the floor. Out of everyone, he owed me the biggest apology, and yet he sat there in silence.

"Ooh! It's 8:30! Time for cookies," Theo announced cheerfully, shooting up out of his seat. Blaise was already stalking towards the far wall. Pansy stood and beckoned for me to follow them as she and Theo trailed after Blaise. Draco was still, not moving a muscle.

But he still seared my skin with his. Hot. So hot.

I stood, not looking at him, wrenching my hand away and walking away.

—

We took a passage hidden behind a bookcase, and it led to the corner of the large kitchen underground. I hadn't looked back to see if Draco had followed.

The kitchen was all steel and wood. Dozens of steel pots and pans hung overhead and on the walls, and all the countertops were aged and faded wood. There were five large ovens on the far wall stacked on top of one another, stretching ten feet up into the air.

Theo's eyes were shining, and he rubbed his palms together. "Time to work my magic. Would you all so kindly wait right outside the kitchen? There should be a table."

Shuffling feet as they exited out the left door. I purposefully didn't look, because I couldn't bear to see him right now.

Theo immediately began to work, pulling out a large steel baking tray from the far right cabinet and aluminum foil from the third drawer. How he knew where everything was, I have no idea.

I need to ask him. He said the most, back there. So he will know.

"Theo?"

He looked up at me and jumped a little, startled at my presence. His face broke into a smile.

"What's up, princess?"

"Can I ask you something?"

"Of course you can," he answered, looking down as he started to spread the tin foil across the tray.

"I..." I paused. "What changed? Between me and you guys?"

Both his face and his hands froze, hovering over the tray. His molton brown eyes flickered when he finally looked at me. "Please try to understand. Growing up like we did, being taught what we were taught, being fed lie after lie after lie..." He glanced down and cursed under his breath, placing his hands on the counter. His shoulders were visibly tensed. "It's hard. To get past all of it. But..." Theo brought his eyes to mine, and they were full of a quiet despair. "We're trying. We all are."

I nodded once, because I know. Things you were taught all your life are not things you can get rid of easily. Being raised thinking magic isn't real, then being thrown into a whole nother world... That was tough. It took a lot of effort to adjust to. "Thank you, Theo," I said quietly. "I don't know what else to say."

He blinked rapidly, clearing his mind. Then he puckered his lips and answered, "How about, 'What can I do to help? I want to taste your cookies'?"

I laughed, grateful for the shift to a lighter mood. "Alright. What can I do to help? I want to taste

your cookies!"

"Grab the cinnamon and mix it with sugar in a bowl, they're on the bottom shelf," Theo ordered, suddenly very serious. "Two cups of sugar and half a cup of cinnamon." He waved his hand to show me the far right corner, where there was a tall and skinny door with a sloppy label: *Pantry*.

I gave him a thumbs up and went in. The room was a decent size, a tad smaller than the Gryffindor common room. In the center of the room was a small round wooden table with various colorful stains on it. The shelves lined all three walls and were packed to the brim with containers and jars. I bent down and skimmed my fingers over the ingredients, until I finally found a jar of cinnamon next to a jar of sugar. Right next to them was a medium sized white bowl, and inside were two measuring cups, for one cup and half a cup. I laughed a little to myself, knowing Theo put all of these right here.

I gathered the materials into my arms and stood up straight, turning to leave. And Draco stood in the doorway, looking slightly taken aback. His hand was braced on the doorframe, his eyes clouded.

I cleared my throat. "Oh... what are you doing?"

Draco blinked, and his body jolted a little. He straightened up, at full height now, and said stiffly, "Theo told me to mix cinnamon with sugar..."

He trailed off when he noticed the ingredients in my hands, and his jaw tensed.

I shrugged awkwardly, the equipment clinking against each other. "He told me that too. Does that really need two people to—"

"Yes, it needs two people!" Came Theo's holler from the main kitchen. "It cannot be messed up. Make the measurements precisely. *PRECISELY*."

Draco shifted on his feet and shut the door, then came over and took everything out of my hands. I just stood and watched as he walked past me and placed them on the table. "I'll measure out the cinnamon?" He proposed, offering me a tense smile.

I pursed my lips and nodded, going over to stand next to him shoulder to shoulder. "Sure. I'll do the sugar."

I reached across from him and grabbed the jar of sugar and the measuring cup, popping open the jar, and Draco did the same with the cinnamon. I refused to look at him as I plunged the cup into the jar, gathering the sugar. I dug the cup deep, deep, deep, and soon the cup was scraping the bottom and making a loud crackling noise. *I hope this sound makes you want to tear your hair out, Malfoy.*

Draco's hot fingers closed around my wrist, and the noise immediately stopped. I snapped my gaze to him, and his eyes were hard.

His throat bobbed. "Granger..."

What more could he want from me? I clenched my teeth. "What?"

The silver in his eyes swirled, and his tongue flicked out and across his lips. "I'm sorry."

I said nothing, just continued to stare at him. His pupils were blown wide and dilated, and they were darting across mine, scanning.

He gulped and started again. "I owe you a personal apology. Not just part of a group one. I'm... really sorry."

Oh.

He wanted to do it privately. For me.

"It's okay, Malfoy," I uttered meagerly. But I looked deep into his eyes, so he knew. That I meant it.

Draco got the message, because relief flashed across his features and his shoulders instantly relaxed. "Okay."

The door slammed open and Theo barged in. There was flour covering his robes. Draco and I jumped apart, his burning fingers leaving my skin. But Theo wasn't even looking at us, he was looking at the bowl between us, and the absence of ingredients in it. His eyes shifted to Draco's right hand, which was holding a measuring cup currently overflowing with cinnamon spice.

Theo threw his hands up. "Guys, I said *precisely*. God damn, do I have to do everything myself? Get out of my kitchen."

—

"And... my masterpieces are complete."

We were sitting around a small round table, just a few feet away from the entrance to the kitchen. The fireplace blazed weakly, casting a dim glow over the room as Theo set down the hot tray of snickerdoodle cookies, fresh out of the oven. While they were baking, Theo had come out and given each of us a golden goblet filled with milk.

"About damn time," Pansy sighed as Theo sat next to her. "It's been two hours."

"You can't rush perfection, sweetheart," Theo purred into Pansy's face, and she scrunched up her nose in reply. He faced the table and declared, "Dig in ladies, Pansy."

Blaise, who was in the middle of a sip of milk, choked and set his goblet down abruptly. "Did you just call me a lady—"

Draco piped in, "And me—"

Pansy complained, "And implied that I'm *not one*—"

"It doesn't matter, just eat it!" Theo chuckled, pushing the tray forward with a fingertip.

I grabbed the nearest one, tearing a piece off of the fresh dessert and placing it in my mouth. The flavor burst forward, engulfing my mouth in a wave of warmth and cinnamon. My eyes bulged in surprise, and a low moan left my throat. I looked around the table and saw similar reactions. Pansy's entire cookie was already gone, and her face was glowing with delight. Blaise was dunking his in milk, taking another large bite. Draco was studying the cookie carefully, turning it over, like he couldn't believe what he just ate. And Theo was sitting back in his chair, arms crossed over his chest, with the smuggest look on his face that I have ever seen.

Draco looked up at Theo. "This is actually like... not awful."

"It's really good!" I praised, clapping a bit in the palm of my hand. Theo did a mock bow with his

hands, grinning.

Pansy swallowed a gulp of milk and let out a satisfied sigh, her lashes closed and resting on her cheeks. "Not bad. I wouldn't mind another one."

"Mind one? Give me more." Blaise reached forward and grabbed two more, instantly dunking one in milk and closing his teeth around it.

Theo wiggled his eyebrows in an *I told you so* manner. "Told you. I'm quite skilled in the kitchen."

Draco grunted. "Please. You literally know one recipe."

"One *killer* recipe," Theo quipped, and Draco stopped to think, then shrugged and nodded in agreement.

"And what does the recipe kill, exactly?" I giggled, tearing off another piece and devouring it.

"Hungry stomachs, darling. This is the solution for world hunger," Theo answered silkily. Blaise began to cackle, then I was, then we all were.

There at that old round table, four Slytherins and one Gryffindor sat at 11 PM on a school night, laughing about a cookie recipe. On the outside, it was just five friends.

Chapter 12

November 15, 1995

I told Draco that we would meet an hour later today, at seven instead of six. I need to finish up some Arithmancy homework I'm behind on.

I was sitting on an armchair right by the fireplace in the common room. Gryffindor, not Slytherin. I'd been spending a lot more time there, but I feel the need to stay loyal to my roots and do my work here. Particularly because of the confused looks I have been getting from multiple Gryffindors, questioning my growing absence. So voila, this is my appearance.

I miss the velvet green cushions. Come on, we seriously need to step up our furniture game.

"Hermione, can we talk?"

I glanced up from my homework to see Ron looking down at me. His fiery red hair was sticking out in all directions, like Harry's always is, as if he's been yanking it. His face was contorted in reluctance.

I gulped, knowing I had been avoiding this for too long. "Okay."

Ron crouched down so we were at the same eye level, tugging at his bottom lip with his teeth. "I just wanted to say I'm sorry. I know I should trust you, and I do. I just don't want anything to happen to you."

I suppressed my whimper. I wanted to cry. I wanted to tell him how long I have been waiting for him to say this. And here it was, finally. We could be okay again. "I know," I said. "Just please show it from now on, that you trust me? Because I'm okay."

Relief washed over his features. He nodded furiously, his large hands shooting out and clasping my elbows. "I will, I will, I will."

I leaned forward and threw my arms around his neck, holding him close to me. He squeezed back harder, his hands tangling in my hair. I breathed him in, and he smelled of freshly cut grass and chocolate. I sighed. "Oh, Ronald, I missed you."

He pulled back and grasped my hands, smiling wide. His skin was cold, not warm. "I missed you too." I was riding on a wave, a wave of utter solace and comfort. Things were okay.

His eyes suddenly lit up. "Oh, which reminds me." He reached down into his bag and pulled out a roll of parchment and our Charms textbook, waving the materials in my face. "Can you write my Charms essay? I have quidditch practice."

The wave crashed.

I managed to force a smile. "Sure."

"Ron!" Harry's voice travelled from outside the common room, and I turned to see Harry's head peeking out from behind the portrait, his cheeks flushed. "Let's go! We're late!"

I turned back to Ron, and he was placing his homework on my lap. He hurried out the door and over his shoulder called out, "Thanks a million, Hermione!"

When the door swung shut, I let out an exasperated sigh, burying my face in my hands. They're my best friends, I know that. But are best friends supposed to only use you for their personal benefit? To do all of their dirty work?

That's the way it feels now. That's the way it's felt for a long, long time.

"You don't have to be embarrassed."

I lifted my face, and I saw Parvati sitting on the couch with a Witch Weekly magazine open on her lap, her black eyes wide with enthusiasm.

"About what?"

She winked. "That sexy little hug. It's okay, I already know that there is something going on there. I won't tell anyone."

Sexy? Oh, Merlin. I shook my head vigorously, a nervous laugh escaping my mouth. "Oh, no, that was nothing. We're just best friends."

Parvati flipped her dark locks over her shoulder and gave me a knowing look. "It seems like it's more."

I immediately thought of grey eyes and smoke.

I shook my head again. "I promise you, it's not."

She clicked her tongue, clearly not believing me, and shifted her gaze back to her magazine. "Whatever you say, Hermione."

I began to furiously work on Ron's essay, rushing to finish so I could meet Draco at seven. It was like my brain was split in two, one part working on the essay and the other thinking, turning over Parvati's words.

Do other people think that? That Ron and I are together, or are going to be? I grimaced.

It was logical, I suppose. Expected. I'm supposed to end up with Ron. Expected to.

And yet my mind wandered to quicksilver eyes and warm skin.

I came running into the library at 7:05, crashing down across from Draco, panting heavily. I had finished Ron's essay and put it on his bed at exactly seven and had proceeded to run like hell across the school.

Draco looked very amused as he watched me try to catch my breath. "Tiring evening?"

I couldn't speak, so I just nodded, still gasping for air. He muttered something under his breath, and I looked up and saw him holding out a black goblet to me, filled to the brim with water. He placed it in my hands tentatively, eyes still humorous. "Drink up, Granger."

I shot him a grateful look and threw my head back, draining the goblet with a few gulps. I gave the cup back and shut my eyes, sighing with satisfaction. "Thank you."

"Do you want to work in the Astronomy tower tonight?"

My eyes shot open, and he was staring at me, waiting for my answer. His eyebrows were slightly raised in question.

"Oh, sure. Why?"

He shrugged, crossing his ankles. "Change of scenery. And who knows, we might be inspired."

Draco stood up, his hair shifting across his forehead. His robes fluttered around him in an invisible wind. Smirking down at me, he offered his hand. I took it, electricity coursing through me, and he pulled me off the ground and onto my feet. So warm. Electrifying.

And then it was taken away. He dropped my hand and started walking, jerking his head at me to follow.

I scurried after him, jogging a bit to catch up. "Are you ill?"

He looked over in surprise. "No."

Then why do you burn? "Oh. Okay."

We walked in silence, our steps in sync. Walking up the spiraled steps, Draco let me go first, then shoved my back a little so I tripped across the steps. I let out a loud laugh and shoved him back, and he rocked back on his heels, chuckling. His face was glowing, his eyes lit up by the moonlight coursing through the windows.

Bursting through the door still giggling, he headed over to the rim of the tower and sank down, swinging his legs over the edge. I looked between him and the safety of sitting by the wall. Is that safe? It's like he read my mind, because he looked back and waved me over encouragingly, his eyes soft.

I could get used to that, his soft eyes.

I came over and sat next to him, slowly guiding my legs over the ledge, making sure not to glance down. He bumped my shoulder lightly and pointed up to the stars, his expression serene. "That constellation right there?" He put his hot finger under my chin, guiding my gaze to a cluster of bright stars. "That's me. Draco."

He looked back into my eyes, a certain fondness in his expression. The fire flowed through me, through his finger on my chin. He dropped his hand and spoke quietly. "My mum picked my name. Draco is her favorite constellation."

I peered at the constellation again. "I can see why. It certainly has a lot of attitude."

He snorted, bumping my shoulder again. I turned back to the night sky, the stars sparkling and glittering like scattered moondust. My mind suddenly flashed with scribbled words across parchment. *And falling stars will follow.* Guilt hit me like a truck. When was the last time I worked on solving it? Since before Halloween?

I turned to Draco slowly. "Malfoy."

"Mm?" He was gazing at the constellations, a quiet peace surrounding him.

I cleared my throat. Here goes nothing. "Can we... can we talk about the prophecy?"

His head whipped toward me, his tranquil expression gone. His right eye twitched the tiniest bit.

"What's there to talk about?"

"Well..." You're the one I want to talk about it with. You're the one I want to talk about *everything* with. I released a loose breath. "It weighs down on me because I can't figure it out."

His right hand lifted and tugged at his messed hair, pulling the strands in between his fingers. "Don't think about it. It's not your place to solve this."

I shook my head, my dark curls bouncing around my face. Hasn't he gotten it by now? It's *always* my place to solve it. "Trelawney said it in front of us for a reason."

He stared at me in disbelief and groaned. "Merlin, Granger, you don't have to do everything—"

"Yes I do!" I screamed, and his mouth snapped shut, his eyes widening. "I have to do everything. Figure everything out." My voice dropped and began to waver, tears gathering and putting a strain on my voice. "That's just what I'm meant to do."

His eyes were crackling with an unborn emotion. His right hand came up and cupped my cheek, sending fire rippling throughout me. My breath hitched in my throat. "Why do you think you aren't meant to just be yourself?" Draco breathed, his face full of anguish. "Just *you*?"

I whimpered, leaning a little into his touch. "It doesn't feel like that."

"And who says you have to do it alone?" He murmured, skimming his thumb across my cheekbone. I shuddered.

"There's not exactly a line of people waiting to help me with things—"

"Don't do this alone," Draco whispered, his eyes darting across mine. The moonlight highlighted the planes of his face, the curve of his moving lips. "Let me help you."

I chewed my lip. Last time I had asked him about it, he had called me a slur and ignored me for weeks. "I thought you didn't want to."

"I want to," He said firmly, immediately. His warm hand still rested on my cheek, and the metal of his ring on his pointer finger was cool against my skin, a balance to his heat.

"You do?"

He nodded once, his eyes still tunnelling into mine. What changed between now and then? What made him want to talk about it now?

I smiled a little when I realized the answer was our friendship. "Okay."

Something flashed across his features before his hand dropped and the night breeze kissed my cheek in its place. He turned back to the stretch of the universe before us. "Okay," he said.

That weight was lighter than before, a dull ache instead of a heavy burden. I racked my brain, trying to figure out how we were going to do it. Magic is so complex, you'd think there'd be a spell or something to solve riddles.

My eyes widened with realization. Bingo. "That's it!"

He turned to me, eyebrows raised. "What's it?"

"Our project. We can make a potion that helps analyze riddles and prophecies!"

Draco's lips stretched into a small smile, eyes shining. "There you go, Granger."

I beamed, reaching for my bag and pulling out our research. "Let's get to work."

He nodded in agreement, doing the same. To help myself focus, I took out my MP3 Player and stuck the earbuds in my ears, playing my favorite song on repeat like I always do when I'm working hard. We sat side by side in silence for about an hour, taking notes on different plants we can use.

Draco tapped my shoulder, and I slipped my right earbud out. "What is that?" he asked, his eyes flicking down to my MP3 player laying beside me.

"Oh, this?" I pulled out my other earbud and picked the device up and handed it to him. "It's a Muggle invention called an MP3 Player."

He held it in the palm of his hands and cocked his head to the side, studying it. He picked up an earbud and said in confusion, "Why do you stick it inside your ears?"

I smiled lightly. "Because it plays music."

His gaze shifted to mine, full of surprise. "Really?"

"Yes, really."

Draco nodded in approval, looking almost impressed. "What have you been listening to?"

"Just a Muggle song."

"What's the name?"

"It's called 'Don't Dream It's Over' by Crowded House," I replied, and I ached to listen to it again. My absolute favorite song, ever since I heard it on the radio in the car with my parents when I was six.

His brow crinkled in distaste. "Crowded house? Muggles crowd in houses to make music?" He squinted at me with skepticism. "That's kind of weird, don't you think?"

A laugh burst out of my lips. "It's the band name, Malfoy."

The corner of his mouth turned up. "Ah. Well, it must be a pretty good song," he remarked, swinging his feet.

I frowned in uncertainty. "Why do you think that?"

Draco grinned. "You've been humming it for the past hour."

I blushed. I didn't even realize I was doing that. "Admittedly, yes, it's my favorite song."

He wrinkled his nose and huffed, "Why is a Muggle song your favorite? What do Muggles even write songs about? How boring their lives are?"

I crossed my arms over my chest. "Why don't you listen and see for yourself?"

He rolled his eyes and grumbled, "Fine."

Draco shoved the earbuds into his ears, muttering to himself. I picked up the MP3 Player from his

hands and pressed the replay button. I hummed the song softly to myself, never able to get enough of it.

I sat and watched him listen. I watched his expression change, first annoyed, and then stunned. Oh god. Does he hate it that much?

He took the earbuds out and placed them on his lap. "What did you think?" I asked, pulling at my fingers a little. I prepared myself for an outburst, a rant about how dumb the song is.

His eyes locked with mine. "The song is about not giving up when the world and negative people or forces are creating adversity for you," he answered softly, affirmatively. "It's about not letting negative people or forces get between two lovers, friends, or just those on a path of liberation and transcendence who can help each other and work together in spite of what is up against them. It's about never giving up, never giving in and throwing in the towel, because it's never over."

I wasn't breathing.

He was speaking my innermost thoughts.

He was voicing my exact reflections on it, things that had ran through my head since I was child. He was explaining in the perfect words why I love it so very much.

What had Ron and Harry said when I played them the song? They said that they like Queen better. Had never asked me why I liked it, or what it was really about.

Draco tilted his head again, and his hair fell over his eyes. "Right?"

I let out a trembling laugh. "Yeah, it is. That's exactly what it is."

He looked pleased with himself. "I like it."

I perked up, my spine straightening. "You do?"

He smiled faintly. "Yeah, I do."

I gestured to the gadget in his lap and offered, "Well, you can have it."

Draco shook his head immediately, rubbing the back of his neck. "No, I can't take that from you, Granger."

I thought of the other one I kept in my nightstand and nodded encouragingly. He should get to have this from me. "It's fine, I have another one. There are other songs on there too that you might like."

He paused, his fingertips drumming on his full lower lip. "Are they like that one?"

My brain shuffled through my playlist. Crowded House, Queen, The Beatles, Elton John... "Yeah, some of them."

He hummed in approval, casting me a sideways look of gratitude. "Thank you. Truly. "

Draco began to stick the earbuds back in, so I focused back in on my research. As much as I dislike Divination, there are certain tea leaves that we can utilize for an element of concentration and focus.

"There's two."

I took my eyes off of my book and peered at Draco. He was holding an earbud between two fingers, the wire wrapped around his wrist.

"What?"

"Two little things," he explained, holding it out closer to me. "One for each ear." His eyes were soft again. I love when they're soft.

I took the earbud and placed it in my right ear. He must have watched me do it last time, because he pressed the replay button, and the beautiful tune filled my ear. We didn't need to work anymore, I decided. We could just listen. I think he felt the same, because he just sat there.

We gazed out into the sea of starlight. His fingers brushed mine, and his hand laid to rest beside mine, where our pinkies touched ever so lightly. We sat shoulder to shoulder, fingers barely grazing, sinking into the symphony of dreams.

Hey now, hey now

Don't dream it's over

Hey now, hey now

When the world comes in

They come, they come

To build a wall between us

We know they won't win

Chapter 13

December 1, 1996

I love you, Draco. I'm such an idiot kid, for never saying those three stupid words.

I love you, I love you, I love you. For infinity.

There's no one else. You're the only one. If it's not you, it's not anyone.

You're it for me. Always.

If only you could hear me.

November 16, 1995

Humming the song yet again, I descended the stairs light on my feet, ready to head to dinner.

Ginny and some other fourth year girls were sitting on the couch, giggling in a cluster.

I walked up and tapped Ginny's shoulder. "Ginny."

Her orange hair whipped around and her eyes landed on mine, lighting up instantly. "Hermione!" She quickly excused herself and leapt into my arms, crashing me in a tight hug. She pulled me into the corner by the window, bouncing on her feet. "We haven't caught up in so long!"

I wilted a little, realizing how little time I have had with her since befriending the Slytherins. "I know, it's been a while."

Ginny leaned forward, her long hair brushing her cheeks. "There are whispers about you," she told me quietly. "About where you disappear to." She laughed. "Romilda's theory is that Viktor Krum apparates here and you meet him in the woods."

I felt the blood drain from my face. "Viktor?" Memories of a beard scratching my face as we kissed flashed through my mind, and I shook my head adamantly. "No, we only write to one another."

Her eyebrow rose slowly. "Then where do you go?"

I grinned. "That's why I called you over here." I ruffled through my bag and pulled out my diary, the white leather smooth against my skin. I placed it in Ginny's hands. "Start on Halloween."

Her muddy eyes widened in excitement, and her lips stretched into a satisfied smirk. "Ah finally, the juice!"

—

"Thunderbolts and lightning, very, very, frightening me!"

Theo was screaming the lyrics to *Bohemian Rhapsody* at the top of his lungs, lying face up on the couch opposite of me and tossing a black ball up in the air. I had shown them the Queen song this morning, and Theo was already obsessed. Draco had reluctantly let Theo borrow his MP3 Player for the day, but only after Theo was literally begging on his knees. He had been blurting out the lyrics in every class, he had memorized it so fast. Pansy was sitting by his feet, her arms crossed across her chest, looking quite sour.

"Blaise!" Blaise looked up from his parchment, his brow raised at Theo. "You do the low part, okay? Follow my lead."

A small grin sprawled across Blaise's face, and he nodded eagerly.

"GALILEO!" Theo screeched.

"Galileo," Blaise boomed.

"GALILEO!"

"Galileo."

"GALILEO FIGARO—"

"Do you ever shut up?" Pansy hissed, slapping Theo's foot with her palm.

Theo paused, sitting up on his elbows. "Well that was a rude interruption. Do you ever wake up and think, 'why am I so damn annoying?'"

"Oh, *I'm* the annoying one? You're completely butchering the song," Pansy retorted, sitting up on her knees and edging closer to him, her face full of humor.

"On the contrary, I think I make it so much better," Theo threw his legs over the edge of the couch and smirked, scooting right next to Pansy and wiggling his brows.

Pansy seemed unimpressed, but there was a faint flush on her cheekbones. "The song is just okay to begin with."

"*Just okay?*" Theo placed his hand on his chest in mock hurt. "It's an absolute masterpiece."

"I like Elton John more," Pansy replied, shrugging casually.

Theo's face softened, and his voice was gentle when he asked, "What song?"

She crossed her legs, resting her elbow on her knee and propping her chin up with her hand. "Tiny Dancer," she said low under her breath.

He laughed lightly. "I haven't heard that one. Don't think Granger showed me."

Her face brightened. "Let me show you, then." Theo took the MP3 Player out from a pocket in his robes and placed it in her palms.

"I hate you."

I looked up from my homework in alarm to find Draco standing over me, his face contorted in rage. "What?"

His nostrils flared. "I said I hate you."

"Aaaand we're out."

Looking extremely uncomfortable, Theo shot up from his seat and headed to the stairs, pulling Pansy by the arm behind him, and Blaise followed suit. "You can show me the song upstairs," I heard Theo whisper to Pansy.

Blaise paused on the last step before disappearing and looked back at us. "Don't kill each other, I don't want a mess to clean up."

Draco shoved my homework off of my lap and onto the green cushions of the couch, gripping my wrist and pulling me to my feet. His eyes were large and furious, and he shoved *To Kill A Mockingbird* into my chest. He kept his warm fingers around my wrist and his other hand on my chest, the book the only thing between us. "What are you thinking? Why the hell do you like this book?" He growled. "And why did you make me read it?"

Something coursed through me. Anticipation? I had been waiting for him to finish. I kept my face neutral and stated, "It's an incredible book, Malfoy. Tragic, yes, but—"

"Tragic?" Draco glared at me, shaking his head. "No. It's *vile*."

I managed to continue acting composed. "It's a simple truth."

He threw the book on the couch and dragged his hand through his hair, searching my face in complete incredulity. "You've got to be kidding me."

I stepped a little closer, only a few inches between us now. I stared up into his face, feigning defiance. "I'm not. That's how it used to be in the Muggle world, and some people still act that way."

Draco shook his head, his hair draping across his eyes again. "Granger. They convicted him of a crime he so bluntly didn't commit, then murdered him in cold blood." He ground his teeth, and his shoulders were moving up and down at a rapid pace. "All he wanted to do was go back to his family."

I gulped. "I know."

"*You know?* Do you even hear yourself?" Draco's features flashed, and he looked hurt. Betrayed. "The town was brainwashed into thinking the color of his skin meant he was lesser than them, treating him like scum of the earth and using him as a bloody slave." His fingers curled on my wrist, and a shiver shot up my spine. "That's like me mistreating Blaise just because he's African. Muggles are seriously messed up."

Here we go. I nodded once, and made sure to speak slowly and clearly. "You're right. How unfair is it to judge someone on something they can't control?"

His face relaxed a bit, as if relieved that I thought this. "Completely unfair."

"I agree."

The anger came back, rolling over his features. Draco's tongue flicked over his lips. "The fact that this even occurred in Muggle history is despicable—"

Now. Do it now. "You're a pureblood, right?" I interrupted.

He rolled his eyes. "Why is that a question?"

"That's a yes, then," I confirmed, and he snorted. "And how did you manage to pull that off?"

His brow furrowed, and his bottom lip got caught between his teeth. "What do you mean?"

"How did you make yourself a pureblood?" I challenged. "It must have taken a lot of work."

Draco scanned me up and down quickly, as if checking to see if everything was intact. "Do you know basic biology, Granger?" He clicked his tongue. "I didn't make myself a pureblood, I was born one."

"Precisely," I shot back. "And I was born a Muggleborn."

His grey eyes faltered. His hot fingers were trembling against the skin inside my wrist.

His face came closer to mine, and I smelled the coffee in his breath. He looked bewildered, unsure of himself. "You're different," Draco murmured.

I pressed my lips together to keep them from quivering. "How am I different from every other Muggleborn at the school, Malfoy?"

"Because you're..." He hesitated, his pleading eyes flickering between mine. "You're you," he whispered. "You're Granger."

"And what about the past five years up until about a month ago?" I pushed, pouring my deepest thoughts out into the open. "You didn't treat me any different. Actually, scratch that. You treated me *worse*."

A moan loosed, low in his throat. "That was before I really knew you." He clenched his jaw. "And I'll say it again. I'm sorry, okay?" Tears tugged at my eyes and I looked down, but then his other hand grabbed my chin and shifted my eyes to his. Misery was clear in his silver irises. "I'm sorry for how I treated you. I'm sorry."

I nodded against his fingers, forcing the tears back. "We're friends, aren't we?" I asked, barely audible. His eyes never left mine, and his head jerked once.

"I can't be friends with someone who has prejudice against people like me, and the people who I come from," I said firmly. He opened his mouth, but I continued, "Even if I'm the exception."

Draco's eyes fluttered and he took a shaky breath. "Since I was born, I was taught that your blood is filthy." His eyes opened, and they were desperate and frantic. "It's all I've known my whole life."

I drew back from him, backing up and snatching a sharp knife from the cheese board on the coffee table.

His fingers curled into a fist at his side, and he approached me slowly, caution flashing across his face. "Granger..."

I brought the blade to my palm and sliced it open, gasping at the sudden intense pain shooting up my arm.

Draco's mouth was hanging open, but he jolted and grabbed a bunch of napkins from the table, racing to me and grabbing my arms. "Shoot. Shoot. Shoot." He was clamping the napkins down on the wound, and I bit my tongue to keep my scream in, tasting blood. "What the hell are you doing —"

"Draco."

He froze, his hands stilling.

"Look at me, Draco," I whispered.

His eyes screwed shut, and when they opened they were on mine, panicked and open, shifting like waves in a gray sea.

"Now look at my blood."

His gaze flicked down to my bleeding palm, and dozens of emotions ran across his face as he watched my blood churn and flow.

I lifted my other hand to Draco's cheek, and he bit his lip when our skin connected. "Do you know that we bleed the same?" I mouthed, never leaving his thundering eyes.

I blinked and his arms were around my waist, clutching me close to him, his head dropping onto my shoulder. His warmth spread throughout my body and I sunk in against him. He smelled of mint, green grapes, and old books. My arms were still at my sides, but I brought them up and around him, weaving my fingers into his silky hair. We were as close as we could be, and yet I longed to be closer to him.

"I know. I know," Draco mumbled into my curls. "I know it's wrong. I know now. I'm trying to erase it." I felt the shuddering breath course through him. "I'm trying."

A small sob escaped my lips, and I held him tighter, tugging at his hair. "Okay. Okay."

He pulled back, keeping his hands on my waist, and I saw blood smeared throughout his thick locks. "Damn it, Granger, you're killing me," he mumbled, looking down and grabbing my hand. He began to wrap it in the napkin, slowly and carefully.

I let out a small half laugh. "I had to prove my point, didn't I?"

He shook his head in disapproval, his blood soaked strands of hair curling on his forehead. "You're impossible."

I heard the steady beat of footsteps and looked up to see Theo at the base of the spiral stairs, his face slack with horror, his eyes darting from the blood on my hand to the red in Draco's hair.

Blaise, there's a literal bloody mess," he hollered up the staircase. "They actually are killing each other!"

—

"You said my name. My first name."

We were sitting in the nook by the window, looking out into the depths of the Black Lake. Draco had wrapped my hand nicely with napkins, then transfigured it into proper bandages.

"I know," I replied, abruptly remembering that I had said that in the heat of the moment. I covered it up swiftly by saying, "You said it yourself, we're friends. No need for formality anymore."

He hummed, and a black whale with glowing golden eyes swam across the glass, the moonlight flickering and filtering through the shadows. Beautiful and damning.

"Are you going to start calling me by my first name now?" I asked, crossing my arms over my chest and lifting my eyebrow.

Draco smirked a little, popping another grape in his mouth and turning to the window. "All in good time, Granger."

Chapter 14

November 22, 1995

My cut had healed nicely, with only a faint pink scar left over to commemorate the whole event. Draco had checked it every day since that night, doing a full analysis to ensure nothing was infected and then casted multiple healing charms.

He stuck his wand between his teeth as he unwrapped the bandage, his grey eyes narrowed and scanning my palm. His immense concentration meant he didn't see the blush rising to my cheeks, which happened whenever he put his wand in his mouth and tilted his head to the side.

"Your song," he muttered, his eyes still focused on my wound.

"What do you mean?"

Draco glanced up through his eyelashes, the firelight filtering through them and dancing across his pupils. His fingers rose swiftly and removed the wand from his mouth, and he lowered the tip to my hand. "'Your Song' by Elton John. I like that one."

I hummed softly. "I like that one too."

He murmured a few spells, and the faint glow emerged from his wand and settled into my open palm.

"Pansy likes Elton John too," I said gently.

A bulge moved down his throat. "I know." His eyes flicked to mine briefly before going back down to my hand. "I think Crowded House is pretty cool too, though," he added, the corner of his mouth lifting slightly, and I smiled.

November 23, 1995

I entered the Great Hall for dinner, and Harry and Ron were standing up and waving me over, eager to tell me something. Probably to ask me to do something else for them. More homework, I supposed. I curled my fists, and my eyes flicked over to the Slytherin table, where my other friends were. Friends who didn't demand things from me.

I didn't have much control over my body when I walked over and sat next to Blaise at the end of the bench, across from Draco. A sentence came to a stop on his lips, and his eyes were wide with astonishment.

Blaise could not contain his surprise as he onced me over. "Looks like Granger decided to be bold today."

I shrugged casually, popping a green grape in my mouth and chewing. "'You're my friends, what's wrong with sitting with you at dinner?'"

Pansy smiled delicately, her eyes flicking to Theo for a moment, an unspoken communication passing between them. "Nothing, I'm not complaining."

Theo's eyes suddenly lit up, and he leaned across the table with enthusiasm. "Oh, guys, have you

listened to Tiny Dancer by Elton John?" Pansy beamed, and he continued, "It's so-"

"What. The. *Hell*. Are you doing."

I flinched and looked up, and Ron was towering over me, his face almost as red as his hair and trembling with rage.

I gulped. "Ron, it's fine-"

"No, it's not fine," Ron sneered, panting heavily. "You chose to sit here with these *arseholes*?"

"Watch it, carrot." Theo snapped behind me, anger rising in his tone.

Ron shifted his glare to Theo, growing even redder. "You watch it, Nott."

"Ron," I urged, shaking my head. "That's enough."

His eyes flipped back to mine, the whites bulging out of his head. "I don't think it is. How dare you abandon us?" He looked shocked, furious. "How dare you pick our enemies?"

"They're not my enemies," I protested. "They're my *friends*."

He took a small step back, as if stunned that those words even left my mouth. "Do you hear yourself? It's like they brainwashed you."

"We did nothing of the sort," Pansy cut in, her eyes dark and her lips stretched into a scowl. "Granger *is* our friend, and I would appreciate it if you stopped harassing her."

Ron completely ignored her, and a low hiss loosed from her throat. "You're so bloody selfish, you know that? Don't you know how much Harry needs you?"

Hot tears started to run down my cheeks. Selfish. After doing everything for him, all he sees me as is selfish. From the corner of my eye I saw Draco's fists balled on the table, his expression pained, like he was restraining himself. Ron shook his head, stalking closer to me and getting right in my face. There was no trace of the Ron I had grown to love when he growled, "I don't even recognize you. All you care about is yourself. You're such a goddamn *bitch*."

And then Ron tumbled onto the floor, Draco on top of him.

The fight was quickly noticed and everyone rushed forward, creating a circle around them, and I could only vaguely see what was happening through the crowded bodies. Ron was lying flat on the floor, and Draco's legs were straddled across his waist. I shot up out of my seat and pushed through, trying to move through the sea of students as I watched Draco pound Ron's face with his fists over and over, unrelenting as blood splurged.

Ron's hands closed around Draco's lower arm, and a guttural scream tore out of me when Ron brought his knee up and snapped Draco's arm, the crack echoing throughout the hall.

When I finally broke free from the crowd and burst into the center, Fred and Harry were holding Ron by the arms on one side, his face completely covered in blood. Blaise and Theo were holding Draco on the other side, but by the shoulders so as to avoid his broken arm. His arm was bent at an unnatural angle, both his and Ron's blood dripping down his arm and off his knuckles. The terrifying glare Theo was hurling at Ron sent a shiver down my spine. Harry was trying to meet my eyes, but I refused and focused on Draco, his face twisted in a mixture of agony and wrath.

"That is enough!" screamed Professor McGonagall. I hadn't even seen her, but now she was standing in between Ron and Draco, looking back and forth between them in disbelief. "You're lucky Professor Umbridge isn't here, or she would put you both in detention! Just go to the infirmary, both of you."

Professor McGonagall rushed over to Ron, assessing his bloody face. Draco's eyes locked onto mine, and he started to stumble toward me, reaching out his other arm, his eyes full of concern. As if I was the one bleeding out.

But I was suddenly very aware of all the eyes that glued on me, of all the confused and judgmental stares and the whispers passing from mouth to ear as Draco lurched toward me with an outreached arm. "Slytherin sympathizer," someone whispered behind me. "Think she's a You-Know-Who supporter?" another person mumbled.

Just as Draco's hand brushed my arm, I cringed and staggered back.

His storming eyes flashed, and the worried gaze turned stunned, then pained. His hand dropped to his side, and he fell to his knees, his eyes still on mine, scanning. The whispers behind me stopped abruptly.

I'm sorry, I screamed internally. I'm sorry. I'm sorry.

The noises filtering through my ears sounded muffled, like I was underwater. Draco's arms were slung across Theo and Blaise's shoulders by Pansy, who was muttering things to Draco. "Clear the way!" She screamed.

The crowd parted, and they dragged Draco through the opening, his head hanging. "Well, I think you won," Theo said in Draco's ear, and he groaned in answer. Pansy sent me a caring look, so brief that only I could see it, then they were gone.

My vision was swirling, and my breaths were coming up shallow and incomplete. Ron's gaze found mine, and I wouldn't recognize him if not for his red hair. His cheeks were swollen and purple, and blood painted his entire face an ugly crimson. His mouth opened, and I couldn't take it. I turned and ran, pumping my legs as fast as I could despite the high ringing in my ears and my blurred eyesight.

I sank to my knees at the edge of the Black Lake and darkness overcame me.

"Granger."

The freezing temperature of the hard ground under me radiated into my bones and a shudder racked my body. I forced my eyes open and Draco's face was hovering over mine, his head silhouetted by the luminous moon. His face was almost as pale as his hair, and his brow was furrowed in concern.

I sat up slowly, stars dancing across my vision, and I shook my head to adjust my eyes. I was sitting four feet from the still waters of the Black Lake, and Draco kneeling was beside me. His lower right arm was in a white cast, and the events of dinner in the Great Hall came crashing down on me, and a pathetic groan left my lips. "Everything is such a mess."

His eyes were far away across the waters. "I know."

I shook my head, still unable to comprehend everything that took place. "I can't believe that

happened."

He turned to me, his mouth a firm line. His voice was deep when he said, "I'm not sorry for putting Weaselbee in his place."

"I didn't know he had it in him." My voice was thick with unshed tears. "To hurt me like that."

Draco's eyes clouded over, his expression becoming incredibly intense. "The way he was talking to you... all I could think about was how much I wanted to hurt him." His voice was rocks scraping against one another. "I had never felt that before, that irresistible urge. But it came then."

And it came for me.

I grabbed his hand, clasping our fingers together. "Thank you," I said firmly. "For defending me."

He nodded once, his jaw clenched. "And I'd do it again."

I shot him a grateful look before sighing, "I just don't want anyone to get hurt."

Draco smirked and held his cast up, a curl shifting across his forehead. "Too late for that, Carrot broke three bones in my arm."

I didn't think twice before I leaned in and threw my arms around his neck, his arms instantly wrapping around my back. His hands clutched at my messy curls, tugging softly. His warmth sent an indescribable sense of comfort flowing through me.

Suddenly, his entire body tensed and he was pushing me off of him, betrayal clear in his face.

"What's wrong?"

"Why?" he whispered.

"Why what?"

"I forgot for a moment at first, because I was so worried that when I found you here unconscious." His eyes were burning into mine, scorching and white hot. "Why hug me now, need me now? You didn't want to touch me."

Oh. That.

I began to argue, "That's not true-"

"Oh, so only when we're alone, then?" he snarled, gesturing around us.

My shoulders slumped. "No, I was just caught up in everything."

Draco laughed, but there was no trace of humor in it. "That's a lie and you know it. You don't want people to see you with me." He inched closer to my face, sweat shining on his temples. "The Shining Gryffindor Princess and the Damned Slytherin Prince, right? It's too damaging to your image, isn't it?"

I groaned in frustration, partly because there was truth in those words. "Malfoy..."

He flinched, jerking away from me. "So we're back to that? No more Draco?"

I shook my head furiously. Merlin, I was messing everything up. "I'm sorry. I panicked and I was

flustered and I just..." I shifted my eyes to the floor, unable to look at his wild expression. "Backed away from you."

Draco made an inexplicable noise, and when I looked up he was burning with passion. A burning sun. "You can't just do that," he said roughly, his gaze digging into mine. "You can't make me want to protect you to the point where it's eating me *alive* and then make me look like I'm crazy." He pursed his lips and looked away. "Like *I'm* the one who hurt you."

"Well what do you expect me to do?" I snapped in frustration. "Show everyone that we're friends? How would I explain how everything changed so fast?"

Draco's head whirled and his crazed eyes clicked onto mine, and his uninjured hand shot up and gripped my shoulder. "You're a goddamn catalyst, you know that?" He said slowly, the wind picking up and blowing his hair into his eyes. "Every single emotion I feel, they become whole damn *explosions* because of you."

I sat there frozen, my breath caught in my throat.

I make him feel explosions.

I think of quicksilver eyes and pinkies brushing against one another and shared earbuds.

You make me feel how I imagine touching the stars would be.

Say it. Say it. Say it.

Nothing comes out.

Draco's expression shuttered closed, his spine going rigid. He stood up quickly, towering over me, and he held his broken arm out. "I know we bleed the same, Granger. I bled for *you*."

He turned and began to walk away, but paused. "And clearly you wouldn't bleed for me."

A sob escaped my lips, but he was already gone.

Chapter 15

November 24, 1995

"Angelina Johnson scores ten points for Gryffindor!"

The crowd roared with enthusiasm, and I resisted the urge to cover my ears. I pulled my white sweater tighter around my arms, shivering against the winter cold. A light layer of snow softly cascaded on us, a warm up for the blizzard that would rage at night. Delicate snowflakes landed on the open pages of *To Kill A Mockingbird*.

"Look here! Looks like both Draco Malfoy and Harry Potter are in pursuit of the Snitch!"

My eyes snapped to the field, scanning. And then I saw Draco, his good arm outstretched just inches away from the Golden Snitch, with Harry close behind him. I found myself internally conflicted on who to cheer for.

Draco's finger closed around the golden ball, and he waved it in the air above his head, a small smile curling across his lips, his hair sticking up in all directions.

"Slytherin wins!" Lee Jordan screams, albeit with a slightly disappointed undertone.

I stood up and hollered, my book falling to the ground. Heads turned to me, confused as to why I was cheering for the other team, but I didn't care. The Slytherin side erupted in cheers, and I could see Pansy in the front row jumping up and down and screaming happily. The players descended to the ground, the snow crunching beneath their feet. I saw Ron tear his helmet off, disdain clear in his expression.

Now. Do it now.

I left my book on the floor and hurried down the stairs to the quidditch pitch. The loud music and cheering fans buzzed around me as I crossed the field to where all the players were. Ginny saw the direction I was heading and gave a discreet thumbs up, winking.

Theo and Blaise were patting Draco on the back supportively, all three of them looking incredibly handsome in their green quidditch uniforms. Theo noticed me approaching first, and his eyes lit up. "Ay, Granger! What are you doing here-"

I walked right past him and threw my arms around Draco, pulling him close.

His body was stiff against mine at first, but when I squeezed his waist tighter his arms came up around me, sighing into my ear as his fingers tangled with my curls.

I heard the music come to a halt, and the loud chattering went down to a dull murmur. I pulled away gripping Draco's arms and found that all eyes were on me. Confused. Angry. I looked back at Draco, and his expression was open, asking me. I pulled my wand out of my pocket and muttered the spell to magnify my voice. I raised the tip of my wand to hover below my lips. Never leaving his gaze, I announced, "I am friends with Draco Malfoy, as well as Pansy Parkinson, Theo Nott, and Blaise Zabini. If you have a problem with that, too bad."

Draco's eyes brightened, and he nodded once, a grin tugging at the corners of his mouth.

Complete silence.

Then, a loud whoop from Blaise.

"The Golden Girl is my friend, everyone!" yelled Theo, pumping his fist into the air.

"And mine!" Pansy's voice from the stands.

The student sections exploded with shouts, some of approval some not, and the music resumed. Draco's eyes were shining, and he was fully grinning at me as he pulled my arm and enclosed me in another hug.

My declaration of my friendship with the Slytherins was all anyone was talking about, but I really didn't care, not anymore. No one knew who they really were, and I was fine knowing the truth.

As I headed down to dinner, everyone looked at me but no one said a word. Ginny passed me, giving me a look over her shoulder that said 'talk later'.

Suddenly I was yanked back into an alcove. I shut my eyes and tried to scream but a hand clasped over my mouth. I opened my eyes to see Harry, his green eyes flashing.

"It's just me," he said softly, taking his hand off of my lips.

"And me."

I peeked behind Harry and saw Ron, shifting uncomfortably on his feet. Multiple purple and green bruises were scattered across his face, and his right eye was still slightly swollen. Good. Well deserved.

I turned on my heel to leave but Harry grabbed my wrist and dragged me back. "Alright, this has gotten totally out of hand," he said, shaking his head.

I wrenched my arm from his grasp and crossed my arms over my chest. "I agree."

Harry tugged at Ron's arm, pulling him forward so they were side by side. Harry looked at him expectantly, jerking his head at me. "Ron?"

Ron looked at me, his expression wary. "Hermione, I'm sorry I said those things to you yesterday, I lost control and I didn't know what I was saying."

"So you didn't have control when you called me selfish, brainwashed, traitorous bitch?" I said calmly, keeping my composure.

He blew air out of his nose, his mouth turned down in a frown. "I'm sorry, okay? When I looked over and saw you sitting with the people I hate the most..." Ron shook his head, running a hand through his hair and looking at the floor. "I lost myself."

I stared at my best friend who had hurt me so deeply only the day before. "I get it, I do. I used to hate them too." He lifted his eyes back to mine, and I didn't break eye contact. I needed him to see my side. "But I don't anymore." His mouth opened, but I continued, "And you don't have to be friends with them, but my relationship with them has nothing to do with you."

His jaw tightened, but he nodded. "Fair enough. As long as..." Ron cast a brief look around to make sure no one was within hearing distance. "As long as you tell us what their plans with You-Know-Who are."

My mouth was hanging agape. "Are you actually being serious right now?"

Ron glanced sideways at Harry, and Harry widened his eyes, as if warning him to take it back. Ron looked back at me and shook his head repeatedly. "No, no, no, not at all."

I thought of the sweet boy who fought off the troll for me in first year, and I thought of the hateful boy who insulted me so profoundly. They were not one and the same. "You really hurt me, Ronald," I said quietly, my fingers twitching and pulling at one another.

His expression softened, and he stepped forward and pulled me into his arms before I could do anything. "I'm so so sorry, Hermione," Ron whispered in my ear. "I'll make it up to you, I promise."

Or will you just hurt me again?

I pulled back and looked into his apologetic face, and there was no way I could refuse him. "Okay." Ron's shoulders slumped in relief, and he released me and stepped back.

Harry sighed loudly. "Finally." He turned to me, his eyes bursting with excitement. "Hermione, what we wanted to tell you was that Ron thought that I should start teaching a Defense Against the Dark Arts class since Umbridge completely butchered the course and we never learn anything. What do you think?"

I beamed. "That's an amazing idea!"

Harry chuckled. "I'm glad you think so. We're going to meet everyone at the Hog's Head tomorrow to discuss it."

I nodded, making a mental note. "Sounds great. I'll be there."

We walked to the Great Hall together, talking like we hadn't in a long time. And things were okay. Something inside me tugged at my heart, urging me to go sit with the Slytherins. They sent me friendly waves, save for Draco, who wasn't there. But I sat with Harry and Ron. Things were fragile between the three of us, and I needed to focus on repairing it.

Ron was particularly gentle with me, never speaking over me and always agreeing with my points. All the while, his brutal words echoed boisterously throughout my brain.

But it's done. Resolved. We moved on.

And yet I couldn't help but think that a certain group of four people would never say things like that to me.

Draco was early, already sitting in our usual spot in the corner of the library when I arrived, a cigarette at home between his lips. I smiled at him, sinking down to the floor across from him and beginning to pull out my things.

"Thank you." I looked up at him, and his eyes were kind. "For what you did today."

I shrugged casually, as if it was no big deal. "I wanted to show you that I'm not ashamed of you," I said simply.

His eyebrow quirked up and he blew out a puff of smoke. "Noted."

I suppressed a smile and added, "I haven't bled for you yet per se, but I figure the opportunity will present itself eventually."

Draco chuckled loudly, coughing on the fumes.

Madam Pince appeared in front of us, her hands on her hips and her glasses askew on her nose. "You two need to be quiet. There are other people in this library, you know."

I clamped my mouth shut to hold in my laugh. "Sorry, Madam Pince." She huffed and disappeared behind the bookshelves.

"Are you going to Hogsmeade tomorrow?" He asked, rolling out his parchment on his lap.

"Yes, are you?"

"No, I have to-"

Madam Pince's head poked out from behind the bookshelf. "One more time and you're kicked out of the library," she hissed.

Draco sketched a mock bow. "My sincerest apologies, Madam Pince." The librarian glared before disappearing again.

Draco leaned forward. "We should have a way to communicate," he said under his breath. "You know, without being loud and risking the wrath of Madam Pincher Bug."

I snickered. "That's a good idea," I whispered. "What should we do?"

He held his finger up, removing his finished cigarette and putting it aside. He lifted his wand and waved it in the air, mumbling a spell under his breath.

Can you hear me?

I flinched, and Draco was staring at me anticipatngly, doing that thing where he tilts his head and his hair falls over his eyes.

Draco?

He smiled. *Yes.*

My mouth was parted in awe. *How did you do that?*

He smirked, as if smug that he knew something I didn't. *It's a spell that connects two minds for a short period of time. My father has used it with me often.*

Why does he use it with you?

He shrugged casually, but his teeth clenched and unclenched. *To scold me in public without anyone else hearing.*

I pursed my lips, looking at him with sad eyes. *I'm sorry.*

Draco shook his head slowly. *Don't be.*

I realized tonight that I almost never see you at dinner.

His tongue flicked over his lips, and his eyes darted to the floor and back up again. *I just don't get hungry.*

No, I insisted. *Don't lie to me. You're a fifteen year old boy, of course you get hungry.*

You really wanna know? I nodded.

His posture was rigid, his face set in stone. *My father makes me skip dinner. He says I need to eat less and exercise more.*

I couldn't hide my disgust. *Are you serious? You're already thin, and you're growing.*

His analysis of my... Draco shifted awkwardly, his eyes fluttering shut for a moment. *Stomach.... concluded that I eat too much at dinner before I sleep, and that I need to focus on shaving that off and building more muscle in my arms.*

I scoffed. *You need to eat, Draco.*

He gave me a hard look. *I'm fine, really. I'm used to it now.*

You're gonna start eating dinner, I said firmly.

No, I can't.

I'm going to make you.

His eyes widened, and he shook his head over and over. *My father has a way of knowing things. If he finds out-*

He won't, I interrupted. *And if he does, you can blame it on me. Okay?*

No. His face was set with determination. *I won't do that to you.*

Yes. You will. I pulled the container out of my bag and threw it onto his lap. *Now eat.*

Draco's eyebrow rose and his eyes raised to mine. *Green grapes?*

I mirrored his raised brow and said nonchalantly, *I know they're your favorite. Just eat.*

Draco hummed in appreciation, but he didn't open the carton. I rolled my eyes, reaching over and removing the lid. I grabbed a grape between two fingers, and his eyes widened when I placed the grape into his mouth, my fingers resting lightly on his lips. I smirked a little, removing my fingers and placing them under his chin to close his mouth. *Chew.* He sent me a close-lipped grin, bringing his hand up to his forehead to salute me.

What were you saying earlier? I asked as he chewed, satisfaction clear on his face. *Why aren't you coming to Hogsmeade?*

Theo, Pansy, Blaise and I have to stay behind, He answered, swallowing. *We are joining the Inquisitorial Squad that Umbridge is forming.*

Oh. That doesn't sound great. I grabbed another grape and threw it at his face, and he caught it in his mouth. I smiled. *No offense.*

He nodded, chewing again. *You're right, it's not.*

Then why are you all doing it?

His jaw stilled, and his tongue ran over his teeth. His eyes glued to the floor, and even though his voice was in my head, it sounded distant. *We all got owls from our parents saying we have to.*

I winced. *Do they do that often?* I asked as gently as I could. *Force you guys to do things?*

Draco's grey eyes met mine. *All the time.*

Something clicked inside my brain. Hopeless, clueless kids. That's all we are.

Except we were thrown on opposite sides of the war.

Chapter 16

December 11, 1996

Hey now, hey now.

More fire demolishes my skin. Keep singing.

Don't dream it's over.

White-hot agony. I forgot how to scream.

Hey now, hey now.

December 23, 1995

December was absolutely chaotic.

We formed Dumbledore's Army, a secret club where Harry taught us real Defense Against the Dark Arts. I had created coins that burned when we were to have a meeting. My dedicated involvement with Dumbledore's Army seemed to satisfy Harry and Ron, and by Christmas time it felt as if a slim layer of trust was restored.

We met almost every night after curfew in the Room of Requirement, which meant I was spending less time with the Slytherins. I only saw them for an hour or two after dinner, then once curfew was in place I snuck out for meetings. And as much as I wanted to tell them everything, the spell I placed on the parchment we all signed prevented me from doing so.

They were kind about it. Helpful. Fourth year me would never think to ever call them kind, but that's what they were. When we spent time together, they did not ask questions or pry, save for one time around two weeks ago.

"Umbridge is set on busting you guys on whatever you're doing," Blaise grumbled, ripping the purple Squad pin off of his robes and tossing it on the coffee table.

I sighed, curling my knees tighter to my chest. "I know."

"Please don't tell us anything," Draco groaned, catching the grape in his mouth that I tossed into the air. "She might yank it out of us." He was eating more now, snacking on fruits or cookies or chocolate after dinner, and to my amusement, he ate the most when I threw grapes at him.

I shook my head. "Don't worry, I won't."

Theo cocked his head at me and squinted his eyes. "In fact, tell us something... not truthful... so we can't bust you."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "You could just say 'lie'."

He scoffed, "Yeah, well I didn't wanna say that, that's a little much--"

"Theo, that's literally what quote on quote 'not truthful' means--"

"I really don't understand what the point of this argument is since lying and not being truthful is the same damn thing--"

“Merlin, just let Granger tell her ‘untruth’,” Blaise chuckled using air quotes, and I smiled immediately. Blaise is often a rather uptight person, so I have grown to really appreciate it when he laughs or smiles.

Hm... I thought of the Room of Requirement after curfew and replied, “We meet in the Quidditch Pitch at sunrise.”

Theo slapped the table with his palm, his eyes wide. “What are you doing, are you trying to torture me? Can’t you say like nighttime or something instead? I don’t want to wake up early.”

Pansy laughed, an incandescent sound that filled the room. “Do you have to be so high maintenance?”

He turned to her, wiggling his eyebrows. “Says the one who spends two whole hours getting ready in the morning.”

“That is so not true,” Pansy dismissed, shooing at Theo with her hand.

Theo beamed triumphantly. “Oh yes, it is. I know that your alarm is set for 5 AM and I timed how long it took for you to come out of the dorm. It was two hours and eight minutes.”

She laughed in disbelief, shaking her head and saying, “You timed me? Do you realize how weird that sounds?”

He shrugged. “I’m simply backing my point with statistics.” Theo turned back to me. “So, can you officially retell your lie and say nighttime?”

“Sure,” I complied, smiling. “We meet in the Quidditch Pitch sometime at night.”

Draco nodded. “Excellent. That should keep us occupied for a while.”

Essentially, my friends were the reason we still hadn’t been caught.

At meetings, I had occasionally tried to mention this, to make the others understand that they were actually on our side. But they wouldn’t listen. It was as if they couldn’t hear me.

“My friends steer Umbridge away from us,” I told Harry and Ron one night. “I give them false information, and they know it’s all a lie. But they pursue it anyway, so we don’t get caught.”

“Come on, they don’t realize it’s a lie, that’s why they’re pursuing it,” Ron said, his eyes full of restraint and tension clear in his shoulders. “They think you’re on their side, helping them catch us.”

I sighed. “You don’t understand. They asked me to lie to them.”

Ron laughed bitterly. “They’re probably saying that for the sake of anyone who might overhear, but really they want the truth and take your word as that.”

My fists curled at my sides, but I said nothing. As much as I want to defend my friends, I am already on dangerously thin ice with Ron and Harry, and can’t afford for that to crack right now.

Harry added carefully, “Ron’s not wrong, you know.” My gaze snapped to his face, and it was brimming with a visible battle of emotions. “I trust you, but I don’t trust them. Since you physically can’t tell them the truth, there’s no way to know for sure that they purposely haven’t found us.”

I played nice for the remainder of the night and went straight to bed.

They don't realize how hypocritical their bias is. They shame Slytherins for their pureblood views, yet refuse to see them as anything else but monsters.

My mind is flooded with a tilted head and gentle hands carefully bandaging my palm.

A nice pink smile and a teacup with a daisy on it.

Green robes covered in flour and bright eyes.

A genuine laugh bursting from an overly serious boy.

They don't know, but I know. I see.

—

The students were slowly filing out of the school and making their way to the train station to go home for Christmas. I was to spend Christmas with Harry, Sirius, and the Weasley's at Grimmauld Place, including Mr. Weasley, who was recovering well after Nagini's attack.

Harry and Ron had gone ahead to find seats on the train while I finished packing. The winter winds spirited through the halls, and I shivered and blew hot air into my hands as I walked among the sea of students. A sudden warmth spread through my shoulder, and I looked up in alarm. Draco was standing over me wearing a black trenchcoat, his face pink with the cold and his hand resting on my shoulder. "I want to show you something," he said softly, and the loud chatter of students made it barely audible.

My eyes darted to the door and back to him. "Now?"

He nodded once. "Yes."

"Okay."

He clasped my hand in his and tugged, pulling me out of the crowd and into the hall. Walking quickly, he spun us around in so many twists and turns that I had absolutely no idea where we were. Finally, he held open a rusted wooden door for me, and I stepped in.

The room was dark and congested, the walls completely covered in cobwebs, with a dim green light cast over everything by wrinkled green curtains covering the windows. In the corner, an acoustic guitar was propped against the wall. Faded music sheets were scattered across the floor. In the center of the room was a magnificent black grand piano, and although the room was swarmed with shadows I swear it was immersed in a faint glow.

"I've never been in here before," I said, turning slowly as I took in the room.

Draco followed my gaze, his hands in his pockets. "I found it while wandering the school one day in first year. I figure it must be an abandoned music classroom."

I walked over to the piano, trailing my fingers over the keys and pressing a few lightly. "This is so beautiful."

I looked up and he was standing beside me, watching my fingers stumble. "What did you want to show me?" I asked.

The corner of his mouth tugged upward, and Draco sat down on the bench, the furniture creaking

under him. He placed his hands on the piano, his black painted nails a stark contrast to the ebony keys. "This."

A breathtaking melody filled my ears.

It only took me a moment to realize what song it was.

I watched in complete awe as Draco Malfoy played the most beautiful rendition of the song I had ever heard. His skillful fingers danced across the keys, twirling and creating pure magic. His face was masked with serenity and peace, looking more at home than I had ever seen him.

When he sounded the last note, he left his hands hovering over the instrument, as if dreading parting from it.

I sniffed and wiped the wet off my cheeks, not even realizing I had been silently crying. My voice came out barely a whisper. "'You learned my favorite song?'"

He laughed lightly, his shoulders shaking and his chin falling against his chest. "Crowded House isn't bad."

Another tear fell and I quickly rubbed it away. Draco turned to me, his harmonious expression still in place. "That was stunning."

He smiled, so raw and true my heart skipped a beat. "I've been coming here early in the mornings, replaying the song on my M3P over and over to learn how to play it."

I snickered at his mispronunciation, my curls bouncing around my face. "It's called an MP3, not M3P, Draco."

He rolled his eyes. "Same thing."

My eyes flitted to his long and slender fingers. "You're such a gifted musician," I remarked softly. "I didn't even know you played."

An affectionate look glazed over Draco's eyes for a moment. "My mum taught me."

"She sounds wonderful."

When he grinned at me, I saw a happy five-year-old boy describing his hero. "She's the best person in the entire world."

I smiled. "I'd like to properly meet her one day."

His grin grew wider, and his eyes were on mine yet far away, looking at his mum. "I think she'd like that."

The faint ring of a horn filtered in through the windows, and my eyes bulged. "The train leaves soon."

He stood up sharply, walking past me and grabbing my elbow, tugging me towards the door. "Off with you, then."

Wait. "Draco?"

He kept pulling me. "Mmm?"

I dug my heels into the floor, and I grabbed his arm and spun him around to face me. His eyes filled with curiosity when I turned his hand up. Reaching into my bag, I pulled out a small black box the size of a tennis ball and placed it into his open palm. “Merry Christmas.”

Draco shifted on his feet, his eyes darting across mine. “Granger, why did you-”

“It’s really not a big deal,” I hushed, closing his warm fingers over the gift. “It’s small. Just open it.”

His eyebrow crept up his forehead. “Now?” I nodded encouragingly, ushering him to open it.

Draco shook his head, but he took the lid off anyways and looked inside. Eyes flickering, he took the thick silver ring out of the box and examined it.

“Look on the inside of it,” I explained. He brought the simple band up to his eyes.

The inside of the ring said in an eloquent script: *for the boy who bled for me.*

He looked at me, but I couldn’t tell what he was feeling. His eyes were broad and intense as they burrowed into mine, and nerves started to rise. “Is it too much? I think I can ask the jeweler to change the inscription-”

But his arms were suddenly around my waist, reaching up and fisting in my hair like he always does. I sank into him, letting out a small sigh as Draco clung to me like the moon yearns to touch the stars.

When he drew back, his face was conflicted, as if he felt undeserving of such a small present. “It’s perfect.”

Draco slipped the ring onto his middle finger, right beside his Slytherin ring he always wore. He held up his hand to show me, wiggling his fingers. I giggled, “Well, perfect.”

The train horn sounded again, this time longer and louder. He jumped and grabbed my hand again, tugging me. “Let’s go!”

We sprinted through the hallways, cracking up when he almost led me straight into a pillar. When we burst onto the train with one minute to spare, Ron immediately found me and hauled me into a compartment, and so my hand left his.

—

I flopped onto the dusty bed, exhausted from the long train ride. Rather than sleep, I shuffled through my bag to find my MP3 Player, and a square silver box fell onto the blankets.

Curiously, I picked it up and turned it over in my hands. Taking the lid off, my breath caught in my throat.

Inside was a delicate golden charm bracelet, with three gold charms attached: A star, a cloud, and an earbud. A note fluttered out, scrawled in familiar handwriting:

for the girl who never dreams it’s over.

Chapter 17

January 21, 1996

“What’s that?” We were sitting cross-legged on Pansy’s bed as she held up a small mirror and applied some makeup, and she was side-eyeing my bracelet curiously.

I blushed faintly, the charms clinking as I held out the bracelet for her to see. “Draco got it for me for Christmas.” I remember how Ginny let out an enormous squeal when I had shown her. When she had screamed at me that he loves me, I corrected her by telling her about his ill-defined relationship with Pansy.

Her eyebrows rose and she clicked her tongue. “Very pretty.”

I think of Pansy marching up to Draco and crashing their lips together after class in October. I think of Draco telling me that he rejected a Ravenclaw girl because of me and our project, but also because of Pansy.

And then I think of the beautiful girl sitting across from me who let me sleep in her bed when I was drunk. The girl who gave me a hangover potion and earl grey tea in a pretty teacup. The girl who has shown me immense kindness. The girl who defended me in front of Ron.

And I can’t bear to hurt her.

So I said assuringly, “Don’t worry, Pansy, we’re just friends.”

Yet touching the stars cannot compare to how I feel when I am with Draco.

Pansy winked, picking up a small brush and dipping it in pink powder. “I’m not worried.”

I suddenly realize that their relationship must be perfect if she’s not worried at all, and my stomach dropped.

I watched as Pansy dabbed the tip of the brush across her cheekbones, leaving a light pink shading in its place. “How did you learn to do all of that?”

I saw her eyes glaze over in the mirror. “My mum. And years of practice.”

“Ginny usually does that for me, I have no idea how to do it.”

Pansy snapped the mirror shut, her eyes wide. “Oh! I have a book all about cosmetics.” She dove across the mattress and fumbled through her nightstand, pulling out a thin book with black leather binding. She crawled back over and placed it in my hands. “Here. You might learn something.”

I held in my laugh as I slipped the book in my bag. I know I won’t use it, cosmetics don’t interest me in the slightest. “Thanks.”

She fetched a tube of pink gloss from her bag and took off the lid. “Make sure to read it,” she added, winking. “Maybe it’ll impress a special someone.”

I felt heat rush to my cheeks. “Like who?”

Pansy shrugged, smearing the liquid across her sensuous mouth. “Anyone you fancy, Granger?”

Blonde curls over quicksilver eyes. A cigarette between two pink lips.

I shook my head. “No.”

—

“I found it!” I exclaimed, circling the word over and over with my quill.

We were sitting on the edge of the Astronomy Tower again, looking out into the horizon as the sun quickly approached it’s slumber. We had been coming here more often than the library. The night air and the natural light of the moon and stars had become my favorite workspace.

Draco looked up from his parchment. “Found what?”

I couldn’t get the words out fast enough. “Mallowsweet. How could we have missed it? It’s perfect. The prediction properties are exactly what we need to complete the potion. This mixed with two stems of shrivelfig and five leaves of nettle-”

His eyes lit up. “Will make the projected words clear and add more simple phrases-”

“And reorder it into an understandable analysis!” I finished for him, beaming from ear to ear.

His smile was otherworldly in its beauty and he nudged my shoulder gently. “Always knew you could do it, Granger.”

I grinned, nudging him back. “Couldn’t have done it without you.”

Draco turned to the rising stars, his expression thoughtful. “The moon is beautiful, isn’t it?”

I followed his gaze to the dull crescent, not yet at it’s full radiance. “Oh, yes. It really is.”

His jaw clenched, his eyes flitting down to his lap. I cocked my head, my brow furrowing. “You okay?”

His eyes flicked to mine, and they were hard, neutral. “Yeah.”

Wondering why his mood changed so drastically, my plan suddenly resurfaced in my mind. “Alright, enough project work for today.” I stood up and extended my arm down to him. “Come on.”

Doubt clear on his face, he took my hand and I pulled him up onto his feet. I spun and began walking, hurrying down the stairs. “Where are we going?” His voice from right behind me.

“You’ll see.”

I led us to the edge of the Forbidden Forest, where the property line ended and where the Apparition wards are cut off. I unbuttoned my robes and shook it off my shoulders, left in my denims and a navy blue sweater. “Take off your robes,” I ordered.

Draco smirked, pulling the buttons apart slowly with one hand. “That’s not very subtle.”

Merlin. I blushed furiously and said, “No, I mean take it off so you’re in your regular clothes underneath.”

“Ah.”

He threw his robes in a pile on the floor, looking at me expectantly. He was wearing a dark green long sleeve and a black jumper, the same shade as his black nail polish.

I stood beside him and held my forearm out facedown between us, and he stared at me in disbelief. “We’re going to Apparate?”

“Yes.”

A short laugh burst out of Draco and he shook his head. “It’s illegal under seventeen.”

I shrugged. “I learned last year from a book. Very easy.”

The shock was still written across his face, now coupled with a hint of jealousy. “I don’t know how to.”

I grabbed Draco’s arm and placed it on top of mine. “You can Side-Along with me.”

Before he could protest anymore, I imagined the image of our destination in my mind and turned on my heel. When I opened my eyes, we were in the back alley.

Draco looked like he was going to be sick. His skin was paler than usual, his eyes bulging out of his head. I laughed, lightly tugging his arm through the door.

His complexion seemed to improve once we were under the fluorescent lights. “What is this place?” He asked, looking around at the green decor.

I brought him to stand behind an elderly lady in pink. “It’s called Starbucks,” I explained. “It’s a popular Muggle coffee shop. My parents took me here on vacation in the summer after third year.”

He nodded slowly, his eyes still scanning our surroundings. “Well that explains why we couldn’t wear our robes. And where exactly is ‘here’?”

I smiled. “New York City.”

Draco whirled to me, his mouth hanging open and his face completely dumbstruck. “You Apparated us to another *country*?”

“Well, yes.”

He blinked once before a loud laugh burst from him. His eyes sparkled when they met mine. “Merlin, Granger, you really are something.”

I grinned. “I know how much you like coffee, so I thought I could bring you here.”

Draco hummed, tapping his pointer finger on his chin as he read the menu displayed on the far wall. “Why are there so many drink options?”

I giggled, “Just pick one.”

The lady ahead of us finished ordering and we stepped up to the cash register. The cashier was a young girl, maybe 17, with curly black hair, dark brown eyes, and a nose piercing. Her nametag read: Kelli. “Hi! What can I get for you today?”

Draco’s bit his lip as he continued to read the menu. “What is a caramel frappuccino?”

Kelli’s expression brightened. “Oh, you’re from Britain? Welcome! A frappuccino is a caramel

blended ice coffee.”

He looked for a few more moments, then grunted, “I guess I’ll have that.”

“Perfect!” Kelli typed away, and Draco watched with fascination. “What size would you like, tall, grande, or venti?”

“Large.”

Kelli chuckled. “So a Venti?”

Draco’s brow scrunched together. “What the hell is a Venti?”

“Draco, it just means large,” I whispered, forcing my laugh down.

He turned to me, his expression full of discontent. “No it doesn’t.”

Kelli’s eyes darted to the sides quickly. “I’m sorry?”

He ignored her and continued, “Didn’t she say the other sizes are tall and grande?”

I nodded, “Yes, but here a tall is a small and a grande is a medium.”

Draco shook his head furiously, crossing his arms over his chest. “No no.” He turned back to Kelli, who was starting to shift uncomfortably on her feet. “Tall is another word for large, and grande means large in Spanish. Venti is actually the only word that *doesn’t* mean large, because it translates to twenty in Italian. How the hell does that make sense?”

Kelli’s mouth was parted in surprise, her eyes frantic. I stepped up beside Draco and said gently, “Just a Venti, please.”

—

“How do you like it?”

We were sitting at a small black table outside, watching as taxis zoomed by under the haze of city lights.

Draco took another deep sip of his drink before replying, “It doesn’t taste like coffee, more like a milkshake.”

I gulped down another sip of my mocha. “Wanna try mine?”

He nodded, and I slid my drink across the table and into his hands. He took one big swallow, then another, then another. When he placed it back on the table, his mouth was painted brown. “I should’ve gotten that,” was all he said.

I laughed. “You can order it next time.”

Draco looked at me sideways, resting his temple on his knuckles. “We can come back?”

“Of course.”

He shoots me the grin that I can only describe as a flame. “Excellent.”

—

Flashback

December 3, 1994

“This is so stupid.”

Pansy shook her head, reaching up to adjust his green and silver tie. “No it’s not, it’s sweet.”

“I’m going to look like an idiot,” Draco grumbled, clenching his teeth.

“Nonsense,” Pansy assured, ruffling his hair with her fingers, and he scowled. “You’re a catch, she’d be stupid to say no.”

But I’ve always been so...” Draco hesitated. “Unkind to her, to put it lightly.”

Pansy pulled back, raising her eyebrow and placing her hands on her hips. “And who’s fault is that?”

“Is that a real question? Because I’m at fault, yes, but also my father.”

“It was a rhetorical question.”

Draco snorted. “I’m surprised you even know what that is.”

Pansy glanced down. “Why didn’t you get her flowers again?”

Draco gulped. He was holding the green stems of roses, but attached at the tops where the flower petals should be were strawberries, carefully cut and designed to look like roses. “Strawberries are her favorite.”

“Ah.” Pansy’s eyes were brimming with anticipation, and she shoved him forward. “Well, go get some.”

Draco shuffled his feet, his eyes darting around nervously as he walked past bookshelf after bookshelf peering into each section, looking for her.

“Herminny?”

Draco stopped short. She was in there, in the section just inches ahead to the right, but he was covered by the side of the bookshelf.

“Yes, Viktor?”

Draco shook his head, trying to will the nerves to leave his brain. After Viktor asked his question, Draco would do it. Draco would ask Hermione Granger to the Yule Ball.

He had always noticed her, noticed her incredible intelligence and her glittering laugh. When he had mentioned her at dinner, his father scolded him severely for speaking a mudblood’s name, for saying anything positive about her. So naturally, Draco concealed his liking with taunting, his friends following suit. But at the beginning of fourth year, her hair had seemed to bounce as she walked, and her skin was a golden brown after a summer under the American sun. And he had forgotten how or why he had taunted her in the first place.

Draco cracked his neck, bringing the bouquet of fruits up to lay against his chest. He could do this. He was Draco Malfoy, for Merlin’s sake. Just another moment-

“Will you go to the Yule Ball with me?”

Draco forgot how to breathe.

“Yes, Viktor, that would be lovely.”

Draco stumbled back, away from the voice of an angel, and staggered back to Pansy at the door of the library. He threw the strawberry bouquet in the bin. “Looks like you’re my date, Pans.”

Pansy masked her surprise quickly, shaking her head. “Hell no.” She hesitated, the words stuck in her throat. “What if...Theo asks me?”

Draco thought of his stubborn friend, then looked his equally stubborn friend in the eye. “He won’t. Too much of a scaredy cat.”

Pansy rolled her eyes. “Well, he needs to grow some balls.”

“If you go with me, it might make him jealous.”

She perked up, stepping closer. “You think?”

Draco was sincere when he replied, “Definitely.”

So Pansy straightened her spine, sketching a mock curtsy. “It would be an honor to go to the ball with you, Draco Malfoy.”

And Draco, his mind occupied with a curly-haired Gryffindor across the library, plastered on his signature smirk. “Likewise, Pansy Parkinson.”

Chapter 18

February 2, 1996

"I'm bored," Theo complained, his legs in the air and his head hanging upside down over the edge of the couch.

Pansy snorted. "When are you not?"

"No, seriously, I'm *really* bored."

"Don't you still have to do your Charms homework?" Draco asked from beside me, popping a piece of chocolate into his mouth, and I repressed my smile. He was eating without me telling him to now.

"Yeah, but I don't want to," Theo smacked his lips together. "I refuse to belittle myself with such an appalling assignment."

"By appalling you mean it takes more than ten minutes of your time," Pansy muttered, flicking him on the nose affectionately.

Theo smirked, scrunching his nose. "Exactly."

"I'm gonna have to agree with Theo on this one," Blaise piped in, puffing another breath from his cigarette, a habit I noticed all three boys had picked up. "This assignment is pretty rough. Took me three hours."

Pansy groaned, her head falling back. "That's just great. I don't want to do that."

"That's gonna be a hell no from me," Theo mumbled.

"That's true," I added reluctantly, "I did it a few days ago, and it took a while."

Pansy's head snapped up, her eyes gleaming. "Or..."

Theo turned to her, still upside down. "Yes?"

She wiggled her eyebrows at him, and his eyes widened in an understanding. He quickly threw his legs over the couch and sat upright, excitement clear on his face. "Yes, Pans. Yes."

I was completely lost. "What is it?"

Everyone else seemed to understand, because they all stood and headed to the door, talking eagerly under their breaths. Draco grabbed my arm and pulled me off the couch, his grey eyes glinting. "Let's go."

I walked alongside him, a few feet behind the others. "Where are we going?"

Draco grinned, sharp toothed, his tongue running across the inside of his lower lip. "We're gonna show you some real fun."

We ran through the halls, Theo and Blaise releasing loud whoops that ricocheted off the castle walls, not bothering to be quiet even though it was past curfew.

Pansy burst through the door, giggling, and we were all standing in the center. I recognized the room immediately. “The Charms classroom?”

“We did something similar to this in second year, when we all had detention in here,” Theo explained, pulling his ash-colored wand out of his pocket and twirling it around in his fingers. “Now, we figure that if the class is... let’s say...” He threw his wand up in the air and caught it balancing on his middle finger. “An unfit workplace, he’ll be so wound up that he won’t collect our homework and we can have a free extension.”

I raised my brow, fully curious now. “And how exactly will it be ‘unfit’?”

Pansy’s lips curved. “Just follow our lead.”

Blaise walked over to the first row of desks on the right and muttered something under his breath, flicking his wand. After a few moments, the row of desks had been transfigured into small white feathers.

Theo went to the other side of the classroom and started doing the same. Pansy, however, conjured a feather out of thin air and began multiplying them rapidly.

I laughed out loud, placing a hand on my stomach. “Merlin! He won’t know which feathers are real and which ones are the furniture!”

Draco chuckled, then gestured around the room. “You gonna help, Golden Girl?”

I nodded, taking out my wand and practicing the motion. But then a warm hand encompassed mine, and Draco was standing behind me, his hands clasped onto mine and his head lowered onto my shoulder.

“Swish and flick, Granger,” he murmured in my ear, moving my hand in the correct motion. My heart pounding in my ears, I did as he said and mumbled the incantation, easily creating a feather, then multiplying it into two, then four. “Atta girl,” Draco said, the words rumbling through his chest, and the vibrations skated across my skin and left goosebumps in its place.

Draco’s hand let go of mine and he stepped away, coming around to face me. Draco smirked, his arms crossed over his chest as he watched me. I kept my eyes on my work but parroted his earlier words and chided, “You gonna help?” Draco shook his head, laughing to himself, and went over with Theo to help him with the transfigurations.

Soon, the entire classroom was filled with feathers, save for one desk we all managed to squeeze onto and sit on. I doubled over, cackling as Theo cannonballed into the humongous pile of feathers, Blaise and Draco following right behind. When they didn’t come up, Pansy and I stood on the desk, searching for the boys. Suddenly, Draco and Theo emerged out of nowhere, seizing me and Pansy respectively, and I screamed as we tumbled into the sea of fluff. I burst up, taking shaky breaths, tears of laughter streaming down my face. “You little-” Pansy was smacking Theo’s arm, her eyes glowing and he was laughing hysterically. I turned to Draco, who looked quite satisfied with himself, and raised my eyebrows in challenge and tackled him, taking us underneath the thousands of feathers.

We finished off the remaining spells standing outside the door, still catching our breaths as we filled the classroom to the very brim and shut the door. I picked a feather or two out of my hair, giggling.

“Hey! What are you doing out of bed?” Filch’s voice echoed throughout the hallway, indicating

that he was close by.

Theo bounced on his toes, clearly ready for a chase, and screamed, "Run!"

We sprinted through the halls, stumbling over our own feet, laughing ever harder now, rounding corner after corner. "Get back here!" screeched Filch from not far behind.

Draco and I were a little behind the rest of them, and they turned the left corner and were gone. His fingers closed around my wrist, tugging me around the right corner instead. "Granger, this way."

We pinned our backs to the wall, breathing heavily and snickering softly. Footsteps sounded close by, and Draco's fingers clamped around my mouth, hot to the touch. His eyes were brimming with fire as he lifted his pointer finger to his mouth. I nodded against his palm, and I heard Filch's feet and Mrs. Norris's paws take a left and run that way.

He took his hand off my lips, and they didn't feel right without him, without that warmth. Laughing silently, Draco clasped his fingers with mine and pulled me farther down the hallway. "Come on, over here."

He pulled us into through a small wooden door, ducking into a tiny broom closet, so small that there was only two feet of space between us. I grinned. "This reminds me of Theo and Blaise."

Draco smirked, sticking his hands in the pockets of his black jumper and leaning back against the wall. "Ah, yes, their secret meetings."

A lightbulb turned on in my head. "Oh! I have something for you." I reached into the pocket of my white jumper, pulling out a red vine.

He cocked his head, his face smothered in a fake apology. "Sorry, Granger, but I have no need for red rope right now."

I shook my head. "It's called a red vine. It's a muggle candy."

His nose wrinkled. "They eat that?"

"Well, we eat jumping chocolate frogs."

"Touché."

I held it out between us. "Here, try it."

His hand came out of his pocket and seized the candy, immediately bringing it to his mouth and biting off a chunk. "What do you think?" I asked as he chewed.

He swallowed. Then: "Do you have more?"

I smiled, pulling out the rest of the pack and placing it in his waiting hands, his eyes hungry for more. He pulled one out and stuck it in my mouth, and I snickered in surprise. Taking a bite, I leaned against the wall, propping my foot up. "Will it always be like this? The five of us, having fun all the time?"

Draco paused, his expression thoughtful. It was quite dark in here, and his silver eyes seemed to give a light of their own. "I don't know, but I would really like that."

"Me too."

He pulled the MP3 player out of his pocket, offering me the left earbud. “Here. We need to wait Filch out.”

I placed it in my ear, and I was flooded with the beautiful music of Elton John. ‘Your Song’, specifically.

So there we stood, feet touching, eating red vines and listening to Draco’s favorite Muggle song.

—

When we made our way to Charms first thing in the morning, Professor Flitwick opened the door only to be swept away in a wave of white feathers, carrying him all the way down the hallway.

My classmates burst into laughter, asking each other who they think did this. Ron told Harry someone must have killed a bunch of birds for this, and I stifled my laugh. Draco, Pansy, Theo, and Blaise stood across from me, and I noticed the faint smug looks on their faces. Draco met my gaze, smirking, and mouthed, “Swish and flick, Granger.”

—

May 25, 1996

That’s how it was for the next few months: Dumbledore’s Army meetings and spending my free time with my friends in Slytherin.

My favorite part was the latter.

In another meeting, the walls of the Room of Requirement began to shake, the glass chandeliers rattling. “What’s that rumbling?” Harry said, turning and looking up in confusion.

The far wall was blasted open and I staggered back, coughing and throwing my forearms over my head to shield myself from the flying debris. When the smoke cleared, that toad-looking villain Umbridge was standing there, her wand pointed, her lips upturned in a satisfied curve.

And standing there were my friends with the rest of the Inquisitorial Squad, their faces clearly conflicted, all of their eyes on me. Pansy’s lips trembled, Theo’s jaw was clenched, and Blaise’s hands twitched at his sides.

I skated my gaze over them quickly, sending them each a look that I hope conveyed what I wanted to say: *It’s okay*. Because I know their parents, and I don’t want to imagine what they will do to my friends if they rebel. My eyes landed on Draco, who was holding Marietta Edgecombe against him, pimples spelling ‘*Snitch*’ on her face. His expression was cold. To another person, he would look like he was enjoying this, like he loved these menacing tasks. But I knew to look at his eyes: that’s where you could see what was really going on.

And his irises were shifting, swirling, a grey sea in a hurricane of tossing waters. He shook his head at me briefly, once.

“Oh, Merlin,” Ron hissed low beside me.

Umbridge smiled widely, and I wanted to smack it off her face. “Get them.”

Draco let go of Marietta, stalking over and seizing me by the arms, looking rough, but his hands were gentle. Pansy grabbed Harry, Theo grabbed Ron, and Blaise grabbed Ginny. Crabbe and Goyle grabbed Luna and Neville respectively.

We were navigated through the halls, ending up in Umbridge's office. Draco's breath was hot and heavy against my neck. He led us to stand in the corner, his arm snaking across my stomach and around my waist.

Umbridge faced us, tapping her foot. "I always knew you were up to something, and I finally caught you."

His mouth was by my ear, and I heard a familiar stream of words quiet in his mouth.

Granger.

I flinched, and his arm tightened around me. *Draco?*

His voice broke in my head. *I'm sorry.*

I shook my head subtly. *I know. It's not your fault.*

"The Cruciatus Curse should get you all talking," Umbridge continued, pulling her wand out of her hideous pink robes.

I heard his breath hitch, and he pulled me closer to his chest. *No.*

Draco-

I won't let anyone hurt you.

"What the Minister doesn't know won't hurt him," Umbridge stated, facing the picture of the Minister face down on her desk.

Granger. I could feel his heart beating rapidly against my back. *That giant you told me about in the forest. Is it still there?*

Yes? Draco, what-

This might feel weird, okay? Just play along.

Umbridge raised her wand at Harry. "Cruci-"

"Just tell her, Harry!" It burst out of my mouth, but those were not my words.

What is happening?

Umbridge turned to me, her lips pursed. "Tell me what?"

I've got you. Even though it was only in my head, the words sent a wave of relief through me. *This spell also lets you speak from the other's mouth. Stay calm.*

More words that were not mine forced themselves out of my lips. "About the secret weapon in the Forbidden Forest."

I glanced quickly at Theo, his mouth in a thin line and his eyes on the floor. Blaise, his gaze focused on the ceiling. And Pansy, a smirk playing across her lips. I know that look. It's when she's in on something.

They had planned this.

Oh. I finally understood. The giant can take care of her.

Yes.

Umbridge stepped closer to me, her eyes wild. “Where? Show me.”

I clenched my teeth, pushing down my whimper. *I don’t want to leave you.*

Go, Draco insisted. We’ll let them go once you’re in the forest with her and we’re in the clear.

His arm pulled away from me, but his fingers came to a stop in mine, just behind my back. When I spoke, it was me talking. “Okay. Harry, come with me.”

I headed for the door, and my fingers lingered with his, if only for one second, savoring that warmth I had come to crave. Draco’s voice was a faint brush in the back of my mind. *Be safe, Granger.*

I took one last look at his blazing quicksilver eyes, my favorite color, and I think of a burning sun. *You too, Draco.*

Chapter 19

May 25, 1996

I could no longer hear Umbridge's screams as we burst out of the Forbidden Forest, panting. I placed my hands on my knees, heaving deep breaths. Sweat and dirt covered Harry's face, and his glasses were smudged. We stood there for a moment, gulping down air. I was still gasping when Harry began pulling me and we started walking across the bridge. "That was brilliant, Hermione, truly. To trap Umbridge like that? You're a genius."

I shook my head and started, "Harry, it wasn't my idea. It was Draco's-"

"There you are!"

I looked up startled to find Ron, Ginny, Luna, and Neville standing in front of us. Ginny winked, and I gave her a half smile.

"How did you guys get away?" I asked, a sly grin creeping onto my face. This was it. They were *finally* going to acknowledge my friends as the good people I know them to be-

"I gave them some of Fred and George's sweets that make you really sick." Ron looked absolutely ecstatic. "They were wheezing and throwing up all over the place!"

It felt as if my grin had been slapped off my face, something I wanted to do to Ron. "You idiot! They were going to help you, they were going to *let you go*!" I shook my head, my thoughts drifting to my friends inside the school, sick and vomiting. "They were just waiting until Umbridge was in the forest and you were in the clear!"

Ron's expression didn't change, but he burst into laughter like I had just said the world's funniest joke. "As if."

I stepped closer, not breaking eye contact, and said firmly, "They told me so. And you went ahead and made them *sick*."

Ron opened his mouth, his brow furrowed, but Harry's voice came from right behind me. "We can talk about this later. We have to go to the Ministry. I have to save Sirius."

And the thought of spending another second with Ron, who still didn't take my word after everything we've been through, made my blood boil. Ginny understood, because she gave me a short nod, turned to Harry and stated, "We're coming with you."

May 26, 1996

I trudged slowly through the halls, the scuffing noise ringing in the air, unable to pick my feet all the way off the ground. I rolled up the left sleeve of my grey striped sweater, wincing slightly at the sight of the long and bloody gash running up my forearm. I had to stop, bracing my right arm on the door to take a shuddering breath, before grunting as I pulled the heavy door to the infirmary open.

And the first thing I see is Pansy, Theo, and Blaise talking amongst themselves, all sitting up in their separate cots, looking a little pale but otherwise okay. No Draco. But I immediately rushed to

Pansy's side, and when she turned to me her eyes lit up. I pushed a stray piece of hair behind her ear, fretting and glancing between the three of them as I asked, "Are you guys okay?"

Theo's hair was slightly matted to his head with sweat, and he sent me the signature Theo grin that I absolutely love. "Carrot may have tried to take me down, but it's nothing I can't handle."

"We should be asking you the same question. You look pretty messed up," Blaise added. He crossed his ankles at the foot of the bed and raised his eyebrows at me, and I knew he was taking in my bruises. "So did you really fight in a battle at the Ministry? We heard Pomfrey talking to Dumbledore outside."

"Yes," I replied, my voice coming out small. I had fought against their own parents, and yet they were not asking about them.

Pansy looked at me very seriously, her mouth set in a firm line. "Did you give my dad hell?"

He hurts me, Pansy had told me one day in April.

Your dad?

She nodded. My heart ached for her, and I placed a hand on her shoulder. *He gets very angry very easily, and I'm always the one who he takes it out on.* Her eyes were on her lap, fiddling with the seams of her shirt. *And my mum turns the other way, which I guess is worse.*

I blink, and behind my eyelids I see Mr. Parkinson in the Department of Mysteries, glowing spheres surrounding us. He had taken his mask off and I had known who he was immediately: his hair was the same rich black and his lips curved in the same manner. He was reaching for me, closer and closer, before I blasted him away with a Reducto spell. I had not hesitated to make him suffer, hoping he felt at least a sliver of the pain he had put Pansy through.

I locked my eyes with hers and said, "Sure did."

Clear relief washed over Pansy's face, her eyes shining with unshed tears, and she nodded in thanks. Theo looked serious for once, his eyes on her, always on her. His hands fisted in the sheets when he said lowly, "One day I'm gonna get him, Pans. You'll see."

She turned to him, a single tear escaping her eye. She just looked at him, and a million words passed between them.

"I'm so sorry about the sweets," I said softly, ashamed, and they all turned to me. "I told Ron how stupid he was to do that, and I told him you were trying to help us."

Theo blinked and he was back to his easy going self, puckering his lips. "Don't stress it, princess. Besides, I got a good laugh out of seeing Pans hurl her guts out."

Pansy buried her face in her hands, her shoulders shaking with a small laugh. Her voice was muffled when she moaned, "I'm too tired to make a comeback."

"Where's Draco?" I blurted, finally voicing the thought that had been running through my head ever since I walked in.

Blaise cringed a bit and pointed to the far wall at the door on the left, the private room. "Through that door. You might wanna prepare yourself."

I gulped, fearing the worst. "Is he okay?"

Pansy shook her head once, dismissing me with her hand, her face almost pitiful. "Just... go."

Even Theo looked a little worried when I walked over, placing my hand on the doorknob.

"Where is she?"

I froze.

"Please settle down." Madam Pomfrey. "Let me treat you."

"She hasn't come back from the forest!" Draco was yelling, and I heard grunting and rattling noises.

"I'm sure she's fine, and you can find her when you're well enough."

"I'm fine! I need to find her." His voice lowered, and when he spoke again it was cracking glass. "I told her I wouldn't let anyone hurt her, don't you understand that? Let. Me. Go."

I couldn't do it anymore. I turned the handle and stepped through. "Draco?" The rattling stopped and his eyes snapped to mine, wide and chaotic. Draco's hair was wet and curling at his temples, sweat dripping down his face. He was still wearing his robes from earlier sitting up in his cot, but his wrists were secured to the bed frame on the sides with magical binding. I turned my attention to Madam Pomfrey, confusion clear in my voice when I asked, "Why is he bound to the table?"

She cleared her throat, clasping her hands on her stomach. "Hello, Miss Granger. Mr. Malfoy was refusing treatment of his wounds, so I needed to tie him down in order to keep him from leaving so I could heal him properly."

I came to his side, analyzing his face. He was so, so pale, with dark purple circles under his eyes. His mouth was blue, slightly parted. "Is he going to be alright?"

"Yes. I was able to help him stop throwing up, but now we're trying to give him medicine for his nausea and lungs, since he's not getting enough oxygen."

Draco's eyes were still on mine, hard and set. I backed up, leaning into the corner and said, "Let her heal you. I won't leave, okay?"

He jerked his head once, his jaw clenched, and Madam Pomfrey released a sigh. She held a white cup to his mouth and made him down the contents, his body tensing when the liquid hit his lips. When she took the cup away, his lips were slowly returning to their normal pink color. After she muttered a few spells, she stepped back looking satisfied.

My gaze darted to his hands and I said tentatively, "Can you untie him now?"

She seemed to realize herself, because she jumped a little and waved her wand, and his arms fell limp on the mattress.

Madam Pomfrey looked at me, and her eyes suddenly bulged, the whites popping out. "Oh goodness, you're injured as well!" She stepped toward me. "Come here, dear."

I hesitated, wringing my fingers. "Can I have a moment with Draco first?"

Her expression faltered, her eyes darting between Draco and I for a moment. "Alright," she said slowly, approaching the door. "I'll give you a few minutes while I go check up on the others."

As soon as the door shut, Draco was out of bed and in front of me, his hands cupping my cheeks as

he looked over my entire body, focusing in on the scattered bruises and the long cut on my forearm. "Look at me, Granger." His grey eyes were just as I left them, a raging storm.

I leaned into his touch, sighing. "Don't worry, I'm fine, just a little bruised."

His tongue flicked across his lips, his eyes darting between mine. "Who did this to you?"

Eyes so similar to the ones I were looking into now flashed behind my eyelids, glinting like steel as he slashed my arm, a scream ripping from my throat. "We went to the Ministry, and there was a big fight with the Death Eaters."

Draco's irises guttered, like a flame was extinguished. He stilled, his hands dropping to his sides, and my skin ached in their absence. "My father." His voice was gravel.

No. "It's okay-"

"No, it's not." He staggered a step back, humiliation clear on his face. "My own *father* is the reason you look like this."

"It's not your fault," I insisted, my voice thick. I grasped his hand, refusing to let him back up any further, and he cringed. He did not need to blame himself for the actions of his father, the man who I know treats his son like a show dog.

Draco's gaze was on the cut on my forearm, the storm in his eyes was terrifying. He glared, clenching his teeth. His voice came out deep and scratchy. "He will never lay a goddamn finger on you again."

"Hey. Look at me." He brought his eyes to mine, full of rage and anguish. "I'm okay."

He pursed his lips. "If you weren't-"

"But I am."

He loosed a breath, his shoulders sinking. He grabbed my other hand, stepping closer. "I meant what I said," Draco murmured, his face grave. "I won't let anyone hurt you." His hand rose, brushing a frizzy curl behind my ear. "That's a promise."

I smiled weakly, squeezing his fingers. "Thank you, Draco."

Suddenly he was pulling me towards the bed, releasing my hands. "Sit down."

"Why?"

"Just sit."

I sat on the edge of the cot. Draco walked over to the cupboards and began rummaging through them, turning around with bandages. "I don't trust Madam Pomfrey to heal you," he explained, sitting next to me and grabbing my arm gently. He unrolled the bandage, sticking his wand in his mouth and tilting his head to the side, a few curls falling across his brow. "She gave me the wrong potion earlier and I went cross-eyed."

I laughed, a little surprised there was still one in me after everything that had happened. I joked, "Hey, at least this time I didn't cut myself to show you my blood."

He snorted, taking his wand and waving it over my arm. Clicked his tongue. "You're insufferable."

He was so focused, his bottom lip between his teeth as he slowly sealed my cut. "Thank you," I said softly. "For what you did for me, and for my friends. You didn't owe us anything, and yet you helped us."

Draco put his wand aside, tilting his head again as his gentle fingers wrapped my arm in a bandage. "I did it for you, Granger." His voice was rough. "It's always for you."

When he looked at me, the world faded to black around us and it was just him, a gentle boy with eyes rivaling the silver of the moon.

The door creaked open, and reality clicked back into place. Madam Pomfrey was standing there, looking slightly taken aback, her eyes darting between Draco and I and my bandaged hand. "Oh, it seems my services are no longer needed."

We stood up simultaneously, and I brushed the dust off my denims. She turned on her heel, and Draco and I trailed behind her awkwardly. Pansy, Theo, and Blaise were all up and out of bed, standing by the door. "Are we free to go?" I asked, walking to stand next to Pansy.

Madam Pomfrey nodded, shoos us out the door quickly. "Yes, just take it easy, all of you."

The door slammed behind us, and they began walking to the left, heading to the Slytherin dorms, the place that had slowly become home.

But I stayed put, my feet planted on the ground. They noticed after a few seconds, turning around curiously.

"Harry's godfather died," I said quietly, shifting on my feet a little. "He needs me."

They understood immediately, casting quick glances at one another, full of guilt, thinking of their parents in steel masks. Blaise gave me a nod, and only someone close to him would see the empathy flashing across his face before he started walking. Theo smiled a little. "See you later, princess."

Pansy blew a kiss and I caught it with my hand, winking at her before she turned and skipped away to catch up with Theo and Blaise. Draco was still standing there, looking at me, always looking at me.

One last smirk and he turned, glancing over his shoulder. "Don't be a stranger."

"I won't."

Chapter 20

June 5, 1996

I cracked the door open, tiptoeing through. Clamping my lips shut, I waved my hand, and Pansy crept in, swaying on her feet as she carried a tray full of french toast, eggs, coffee, and green grapes. Blaise and Theo were already here standing over Draco, Blaise's hands clamped over Theo's mouth to keep him quiet. He was snoring softly with his mouth open. I pushed down my giggle when I saw his silk green pajamas. He *so* would.

Pansy set the tray down on the bedside table, giving a thumbs up to Blaise, who rolled his eyes and took his hands off of Theo's lips.

Theo did not hesitate to jump onto the bed beside Draco and scream, "Happy birthday ice queen!"

Draco's eyes shot open, slightly bloodshot, and he sat up groggily, shoving Theo's shoulder weakly.

Blaise and I walked over to the other side of the bed and plopped down while Pansy sat beside Theo. "It's the group albino's sixteenth birthday!" Pansy said in a singsong voice. She reached forward, ruffling Draco's hair affectionately, and he chuckled. I swallowed.

Blaise's voice rumbled, and I glanced over in surprise when I heard he could decently carry a tune. "Happy birthday to you, happy birthday to you, happy birthday dear cotton swab"

Theo howled, and Draco shook his head, rubbing his eyes with his palms. "Oh, jeez."

"Happy birthday to you!" Blaise finished with jazz hands, and I giggled.

"Thanks guys." His gaze flicked to mine, and I sent him an encouraging grin, one that he returned broadly. "Nothing like being woken up early with delightful names on my birthday."

Pansy puckered her lips, interlacing her fingers with his. "You know you love it."

The world sounded filtered, like I was swimming underwater, and the only thing I could see clearly was their interlocked fingers laying on the sheets.

"Gift time!" Theo's voice broke through the water, pulling me back to shore. He set a small green box on Draco's lap, looking slightly offset for some reason. "Open mine first!"

Draco pulled the lid off and pulled out a keychain, dangling it in the air. "A snowflake keychain?"

Theo looked quite proud of himself. "Yeah, cause you're the ice queen, get it?"

Draco laughed, a luminous sound. "Got it. Thanks, Theo."

"Here's mine," Pansy said, picking up the tray full of food and placing it on Draco's lap.

"Breakfast in bed."

His eyes darted across the wonderful meal before looking at Pansy. Beaming. "Awesome, Pansy. Thank you."

She hummed, leaning forward and pressing a kiss to his lips, a light blush forming across her cheekbones. Draco grinned, looking a little flushed himself.

I screamed.

Well, no I didn't. Not out loud, at least.

Inside? I was collapsing.

It's his birthday. I shouldn't be... thinking about this right now.

I look again. He seems happy. Happy with *her*.

Yet there's something missing, a spark. Passion. What I see burning in his eyes when he looks at me.

I'm selfish. I know that. I really hope he's happy with her. He deserves that.

But I don't want him to be happier with her than he is with me. I don't think I could bear to see that. I don't think I could bear to see his grey eyes looking at her the same way he looks at me.

I looked up, and Theo was staring at me.

Blaise cleared his throat, jolting me out of my thoughts. He placed a white gift bag in front of Draco. "Open my gift, birthday boy."

Draco opened the bag, smiling immediately. He pulled out two small bottles, one dark green and one grey. Nail polish. Blaise shrugged. "Figured you could try colors other than black."

"Thanks, mate."

Suddenly all eyes were on me, on the orange envelope in my hand. "Oh, it's nothing much," I said, handing it to Draco.

He wiggled his brows at me playfully before opening the envelope and taking out two thin strips of white paper. "Tickets?"

I nodded. "They're for Elton John's concert in October."

Every single person's eyes bulged. Theo shot me a disappointed stare and complained, "What? That's completely unfair, Granger. You know how much I love Elton John."

I cocked my head at him. "I thought you like Queen."

Theo grinned. "Someone I know got me hooked on Elton." His eyes darted to Pansy briefly, and half a smile rose onto her lips.

I pulled out the other tickets from my pocket, fanning them out in my hand. "I was able to get three others, but they're separate seats so we're going to have to split up."

Pansy cheered ecstatically. "Good enough for me!"

Draco's eyes were soft, my favorite. "Thank you, Granger."

The corner of my mouth turned up a little, and I sent him the Malfoy smirk. "Of course."

We sat there, staring at each other. Theo made a small noise, standing up and backing towards the door, Blaise doing the same. Theo remarked slyly, "I'm gonna leave now because you could cut the sexual tension in here with a knife."

Pansy paled a little, pecking Draco's cheek quickly before following Theo, shaking her head. "So crass, Mr. Nott."

"As always, Miss Parkinson."

—

"Okay, the moment of truth."

Draco and I were in one of the Potion labs, bringing our final project to life just in time for the due date. Tomorrow was already the last day of the school year, the strangest and most eventful year yet.

I quickly scribbled a simple riddle onto a scrap of parchment: *What weighs more, a ton of bricks or a ton of feathers?* and tossed it into the cauldron.

The red potion bubbled, and the bubbles that formed rose into the air, creating a series of words suspended in the air like holograms. *They weigh the same.*

I clapped my hands excitedly, jumping up and down. "It works!"

Draco grinned, cocking his head at me as I did my little happy dance. "Never doubted you for a second, Granger."

"Do you think... Do you think it will work with the prophecy?"

"Only one way to find out."

I placed the rolled parchment in Draco's hand, crinkled from the dozens of times I rolled and unrolled it, and he stuck it into our potion. The bubbles rose and words formed.

In fall of 1996,

the stars will align

followed by a meteor shower

as a Death Eater lies to their master.

The war between Lord Voldemort

and Harry Potter

the outcome will be affected

and the path leading to it.

Hermione Granger

and Draco Malfoy

an explosion brings them together

and changes everything.

I immediately scribbled the words down. Draco raked a hand through his hair, eyes blown wide. "It's us."

A shudder coursed through me. “That’s why seeing us together triggered Trelawney to recite the prophecy.”

“So...” He stepped closer to the projected words, resting his chin on his knuckles. “We’re the big change in the war?” He let out a short laugh. “Guess our friendship is pretty impactful, Granger, eh?”

I rolled my eyes, staring up at the words and furrowing my brow. “How am I a ‘young bush’ person?”

Draco scanned me up and down, making a show of looking contemplative. His eyes lit up. “That crazy hair of yours explains it.”

I giggled, punching him lightly on the shoulder. “Oh, go to hell.”

Draco smirked, running his tongue across the inside of his mouth. “Gladly.”

Looking up at him, something else clicked. “I understand now why you’re a raging storm.” I hesitated, feeling heat rise to my cheeks. “That’s how I’ve described your eyes.”

“Described to who, exactly?”

“My diary.”

He put a hand on his chest, looking flattered. “I’m quite honored.”

I shrugged with fake nonchalance, turning back to the analysis and squinting at the last few lines. “The potion left this line a little murky,” I remarked, pointing at the specific line. “‘An explosion brings us together?’ Is that in a literal or metaphorical sense?”

Draco pressed his lips together, sliding his hands in the pockets of his black jumper. “For both our sakes, let’s hope metaphorically.”

I groaned, rubbing my face with hands. “I don’t know how Harry and Ron will react to this.”

“Then don’t tell them.”

I looked up. “What?”

His jaw twitched, and he stepped toward me, and I craned my neck to keep eye contact. “It’ll probably just make them angry,” He explained. “Plus, it only concerns you and me.”

My eyes flicked to the floating words: Hermione Granger and Draco Malfoy. “You’re right,” I agreed. His eyes were warm, and my heart sped up a little. “Thank you. For helping me with all of this.”

Draco nodded, his face solemn. “I told you, you don’t have to do everything alone.”

“It’s a nice change.”

“Plus, it’s also our Potions Project, and I think it’s safe to say we aced it.”

I smiled, going over to the counter and slipping my notes back into my bag, Draco doing the same. My eyes caught on his nimble fingers, packing swiftly. “Your nail polish is chipped,” I observed.

“I’m aware.”

“Do you have the new colors Blaise gave you?”

His eyebrow crept up his forehead. “Yes.” He reached into his pocket and set the small bottles on the counter.

I grinned cheekily. “Sit down, birthday boy.”

Draco gave me a weird look but didn’t object. I sat across from him, gently placing his hands on the table palms down. I waved my wand over his nails, the chipped black paint vanishing. After carefully examining each bottle, I decided the dark green was the way to go. And I couldn’t hold in my smile when it registered on Draco Malfoy’s face that I was painting his nails.

The parchment where I wrote the analyzed prophecy must have blown out of the open window while I was painting his nails. No big deal, it was already locked into my brain like everything else.

***added on January 12, 1997** Except it would be a big deal. The biggest mistake I could’ve made.*

June 10, 1996

I was on time for the train this time. I had told Harry and Ron I needed to use the loo so I could say goodbye to my friends in peace.

Standing in the doorway of the section of the train where all the Slytherins tend to sit, Theo pulled me into a tight hug, wrapping his strong arms around my waist and resting his chin on my forehead. “Adieu, princess.”

I pulled back, smiling widely up into my friend’s affectionate brown irises. “Auf wiedersehen, Theo.”

He winked before whisking away. Pansy appeared, twirling my curls on her fingers and resting them gracefully on my shoulders. “Work on doing your makeup on your own,” she ordered.

I laughed a little, throwing my arms around her neck and hugging her close. She sighed, her arms coming up to hug me back. When she pulled away, her eyes were shining. “See you in a few months, babe.”

I truly meant it when I replied, “Can’t wait.”

Blaise was next, and he simply grasped my hand and gave me a formal handshake, his spine straight. “It’s been a pleasure.”

I pressed my lips together, a little surprised by his formality. “Likewise, Zabini.”

But he winked and came forward, hugging me swiftly and pressing a quick kiss onto my temple before pulling back. “I’m only joking, Granger. See you next year.”

A giggle burst from my lips. “See you next year, Blaise.” He saluted me before going to sit with Pansy and Theo.

And then it was Draco.

I did not hesitate to throw my arms around him, breathing in his familiar scent of mint and

parchment. He instantly wrapped his arms around me, gripping my waist. I pulled back, keeping my hands on the back of his neck. I wasn't ready to say goodbye, yet here it was. His eyes made it harder: they were that soft grey of clouds that I love so much. My voice wavered when I said, "Promise me you'll write this summer."

"Every day."

Chapter 21

Every night, I wrote a letter to Draco, telling him about my day and some Muggle things he might enjoy.

Every morning, I woke up early and checked the post.

Not a single letter came from him.

Chapter 22

September 1, 1996

At Platform 9 ¾, I hugged my mum and dad goodbye, hopping onto the train. Smiling, I turned to go to find Harry and Ron.

A flash of blonde.

I whirled, my breathing growing rapidly, and I called out to him. "Draco!"

Gone.

In the Great Hall, I waved to my friends at the Slytherin table across the room, expecting a wink from Pansy, or a grin from Theo, or a cocked head from Blaise.

They all looked down at the table.

Ron had a smug look as he ate, but he said nothing.

While Dumbledore was talking to all of us, my gaze wandered to Draco. He was staring off into nowhere, his hand propping up his head. Even from afar, I saw how extremely pale he was. Pale and thin. So, so thin, with purple and green circles under his eyes. And all the anger, all the resentment I had been carrying all summer is washed away. All I care about is him.

At the end of dinner, I stood up to approach him, but all of them were already gone.

There's not much else to say except that I cried that night, muffling my sobs with my pillow.

September 2, 1996

Our Potions class was smaller this year, with only students who qualified with high enough OWLs. Pansy, Theo, Blaise and Draco were all in there, but they were silent. They barely even talked to each other. At the beginning of class, Theo sent me a brief half-smile, but nothing else.

"Who can tell me what this potion is over here?" Professor Slughorn asked, gesturing to the bubbling cauldron.

I spoke immediately. "Amortentia. The most powerful love potion in the world."

Professor Slughorn nodded, looking impressed. "How did you recognize it?"

"The distinctive mother-of-pearl sheen and the steam rising in characteristic spirals," I answered. "It's supposed to smell differently to each person according to what attracts us."

"What do you smell, Miss Granger?" I took a deep breath.

Mint. Library books. Smoke. Coffee. Honey. Green grapes. So many scents, yet all one. Him.

When I look at him, I look for Draco. The soft eyes, the gentle boy.

I only see Malfoy, the cold statue I worked with in the beginning of fifth year. Cold and unyielding.

I lied, "Chocolate."

"Very good, very good."

At the end of class, my hair was absolutely out of control, frizzed to the point where it almost made a complete circle around my face. I grumbled, muttering to myself about humidity and frizz reduction spells as I packed my things. When I looked up, the classroom was empty save for Theo and I. He was on his knees, fingers fumbling as he gathered his spilled materials.

I slang my bag over my shoulder, taking a step towards him. "Theo."

He continued as if he didn't hear me, standing up and walking towards the door. I told myself to stay collected, but my voice came out shaky. "*Theo*."

Theo slowed, stopping in the doorway. When he looked back at me, I wanted to cry at the sight of his familiar warm eyes. But he shook his head, reaching back and rubbing his neck. "I'm sorry, princess." His expression was dejected, resigned. "It's for your own good."

And then he was gone, and I was alone again.

Chapter 23

September 3, 1996

I needed air. I needed to see the stars, to be comforted by their otherworldliness, to remind myself how small and insignificant I am in proportion to the universe. To remind myself that all these little things don't matter in the big scheme of the galaxy, even though I feel as if my emotions could tear down the world.

When I opened the door at the top of the Astronomy Tower, he was there, sitting with his back towards me, head tilted as he gazed out across the horizon.

He said nothing when I sat next to him, swinging my legs over the edge. The sun was melting, a broken yolk running across the edge of the world. "You pushed me away," I said, keeping my eyes on the sky. "You all did. Why."

"I just... I can't."

I turned to him. "You can't what?"

Draco made a small noise, still not meeting my eyes. "I can't tell you any of it."

A bitter laugh burst out of me, and I shook my head, turning back to the view. "It's funny, all four of you pushed me away, and yet you're the person I care the most about doing it."

"You'll hate me."

I stared at the boy who bled for me. "I could never hate you."

He scoffed. "You hated me before, when we were kids. What's to stop you from doing so again?"

"I didn't hate you, Draco. I just didn't know you."

His knuckles were white, gripping the edge of the tower. Still, he wouldn't look at me. "You still don't know me."

I rotated to face him completely, my eyes stinging. "Do you know how absolutely *pathetic* I felt this summer? I wrote to you every single day, and every single day I fumbled through all the mail, looking for letters from you that never came, even though you *promised me*—"

"Eighty three."

"What?"

Draco finally looked at me, grey and piercing. "Eighty three days in the summer." His voice was low and scraping. "Eighty three letters you sent me. Eighty three letters I wrote to you."

My lungs stopped working, and I just stared and stared. "I kept my promise, Granger." He grabbed my chin, lifting it slightly to level my eyes with his. "I did write to you. Every day."

A shiver shot through me. His cheekbones were more prominent than before, making his face sharper. "I read all of your letters," He continued, throat bobbing. "Each one."

When still no words surfaced, he released a sigh, pulling his bag toward him. After a moment, he

took out a bundle of letters, all tied together with a string. Draco placed the stack on my lap. The top one was addressed: *Hermione Jean Granger*. I don't remember ever telling him my middle name.

I ran my fingers across the envelopes, counting quickly. Eighty three. My voice finally started working. "Why didn't you send these?"

"I didn't want to worry you." Crushed.

"With what?"

His eyes were on the sky now, on the fading oranges and rising blacks.

My tone was firm. "*Draco*."

He shook his head adamantly, hanging his head. "Granger, I *can't*."

"Yes, you can." I tugged at his shoulder, pleading. "I promise I will not hate you. I could never. I..." I bit the inside of my cheek. "I care about you too much."

His eyelashes fluttered against his cheeks. Then he spoke, slow and deliberate. "The day I came home for summer, my father told me he had a surprise for me. He took me to the drawing room, and there he was. Voldemort. In the flesh." I tensed, my fingers tightening on his shoulder. "He asked me if I wanted to be his servant, and I guess my father had used the mind communication spell when I wasn't paying attention. So he spoke from my mouth, and all I could do was stand there while my allegiance was pledged to Voldemort against my will." Draco's face was full of anguish. "As for the others, they can tell you their stories, it's not for me to tell. I just remember going to the first meeting after being initiated, and all three of them were sitting there." You could almost hear my heart break at that moment, imagining my friends in that situation. I could see Pansy's defiant look, her chin held high. Theo's knee bouncing, his giveaway to his nerves. Blaise's stone cold expression, his hands curled into fists under the table. "And now... Voldemort is not too happy about the stunt at the Ministry, and he blames my father. But instead of punishing him, he decided it would be a good idea to put it all on me." Draco finally raised his eyes to mine, his hair shifting across his brow. "Granger, he gave me a mission..." His voice broke, only for a moment. "To kill Dumbledore."

A low sob came out, and I gripped his shoulders, bringing my face closer to his. "Why do you think I would hate you for this?" Hot tears streamed down my cheeks. "It's okay, we can figure it out. You don't have to do it—"

"Yes I do!" Draco yelled, the ground rumbling beneath us. The moon was awakening, stretching its arms and yawning. "I have to do this. I have to kill him." His face was flushed pink, veins popping out at his temples. But his eyes were blown big, bottomless and black. Wet. "Or he's gonna kill my mum. Then me."

Tears fell, fanning across his cheekbones. His shoulders began to shake. Once. Twice. Then rapidly. His lips trembled, and his hands shot up to cover his face. Ashamed. But he had absolutely nothing to be embarrassed of, not with me. Never with me. So as Draco Malfoy exposed his most vulnerable self and broke down, I pulled him forward into my arms, resting his head on my shoulder, his sobs racking my body.

My nails scraped across his back, wanting him closer, closer, closer, cries escaping my throat. "Who says you have to do this alone? Figure it out by yourself?" I managed to say.

I felt him take a shuddering breath. "I can't put you in any danger—"

"Don't do this alone," I whispered, pulling back and holding his shoulders. His cheeks were glistening, the starlight catching in his tears. "Let me help you."

Draco shook his head once more, hair falling, his mouth tight. "That wouldn't be protecting you, and I promised I would. I keep my promises."

"I won't get hurt." It was my turn to make a promise. "The only thing that will hurt me is if you keep pushing me away." My tone was final.

A fraction of a laugh. Wary eyes. "You're impossible, you know that?"

I reached up, wiping the wetness off of his cheeks. "Why, thank you."

He opened his mouth, but hesitated, faltered for a moment. "That's why they're avoiding you too, you know," He admitted after a moment. "I asked them to keep their distance from you too, to make sure you stayed away from... all of this."

My hands dropped to my sides, a spark of anger rising. "You really shouldn't have. You of *all* people know that I'm capable of taking care of myself."

Draco scratched his jaw, his nails bitten down and the green polish completely chipped, and I realized it was still the same coat of paint that I did for him on his birthday. His silver rings glinted, two of them. He was still wearing the ring I gave him. I had never seen him without it since Christmas. "I know." He sounded guilt-ridden. "But I told you, I keep my promises, and that overshadowed it."

I understood, knowing his intentions. To protect me. Always to protect me. I turned back to the night sky, the stars twinkling in and out of existence, sniffing a little. "I missed you."

"Eh, I didn't miss you that much."

"Shut up."

He hummed, and I almost whimpered at the return of that beautiful and familiar sound. "Is there really a movie about a club where they get together and eat breakfast?" He asked, drumming his fingers on his knee.

My head snapped toward him. "You really *did* read my letters." He smiled, small and gentle. "And the movie is amazing. I'll show it to you."

Another hum, melodic. "The moon is beautiful, isn't it?"

Hadn't he said that before? He must truly admire it.

"Always," I agreed.

—

I walked hesitantly, craning my neck at the figures by the fire. "Guys?"

A shadow jumped to its feet, rushing toward me, and the green fluorescent lights illuminated Pansy's face. "Granger?"

Theo appeared beside her, hesitant. "Draco, what—"

"It's okay." Draco's voice over my shoulder, his body radiating heat. "I told her everything."

Pansy's arms were already around my neck, and my nose was filled with her familiar scent of daisies and blueberries. "Thank Merlin, that was killing me."

Blaise came up, whistling. "Hope you didn't feel too hurt, darling."

Pansy let go and stood beside me, and I looped my arm with hers. "It doesn't matter. I'm just glad I have you guys back."

Theo laughed, reaching forward and messing my curls. "Couldn't function three days without us, eh, Granger?"

"Oh, be quiet."

Pansy ran her hazel irises across my facial features. "Did you at least work on cosmetics?"

Nope. "Definitely."

She huffed, clicking her tongue in disappointment. "So no, then."

Theo rolled his eyes. "Literally no one cares about cosmetics except for you."

Pansy retorted, "At least I make an effort to look good, unlike *you*—"

"That's because I'm effortlessly handsome, almost to a fault—"

"Oh, please—"

I smiled. I was home.

Chapter 24

September 26, 1996

"What if..."

Draco and I were laying side by side in the middle of a clearing in the Forbidden Forest, watching the pinks and reds mix with approaching purples.

"What?" I asked.

"Hear me out." Draco cleared his throat. "What if, when things start amping up with the Death Eaters and everything, you go and stay in a safe house—"

"No."

"It's Malfoy property, down in Switzerland—"

I propped myself up on my elbows, turning my head to stare down at him. "Draco, I said no."

He sat up, bending his knees and resting his elbows there. "Why the hell not?"

"I'm not leaving you," I vowed. "You don't get to push me away, to do this alone."

Draco threw his head back, groaning in frustration. "For Christ's sake, I'm just trying to protect you."

"You can do that just fine with me by your side," I snapped. He wasn't going to do this.

His eyes flickered, rage and caution and unease fighting across his expression. "No! you're safer away from everything—"

"I'm not going!" I hissed, grinding my teeth.

"Like hell you aren't!" Draco bellowed right in my face, baring his teeth.

I glared at him. "You can't make me."

He huffed, standing abruptly and striding off towards the trees, towards the school. "I'm done."

I stumbled to my feet and stalked forward to catch up with him, working to match his stride. "No. You don't get to do that. You don't get to walk away from me. Not after everything."

Draco abruptly stopped and whirled to face me, his face flushed with anger. "Walk away from you? I can't, Granger. Don't you see that?"

He was panting, raving. I furrowed my brow. What is he talking about? "No, I don't."

He stumbled back from me, raking a hand through his hair. His eyes were up in flames. "I tried to stay away from you. I really did. I called you Mudblood and then I was ignoring you, remember? I was pushing you away. And then a couple weeks ago, too, I kept trying to stay away from you, for *your* sake. Because I'm me and you're... you're you. Damn, our Halloween costumes even showed it. An angel and a demon. My world, the way I grew up, the Death Eaters... I didn't realize until later that it's hell. It's literal hell." He laughed bitterly. "Angels like you, they can't fly down here

with me. They just can't. They shouldn't. Don't you see?"

His voice was starting to shake. I whimpered and reached for him, but he groaned and took a step back. Like he couldn't control himself if he came closer.

"But I couldn't stay away from you, not for long," he continued hoarsely. "I came back. And I let you in because I needed you. I need you. I need you to be in my life. And I'm so sorry, Granger. I'm sorry that I'm selfish. Because I'm so, so selfish with you."

The moonlight framed his figure. He was glowing. I sucked in a breath. How do I tell him how much he means to me, how I can't... I can't function without him? That I don't care if he's selfish?

I took a step forward, and he winced. "You think I'm not selfish with you too?" It was my turn to laugh humorlessly. "My old friendships are ruined. Harry is so careful around me, like he doesn't want to let anything slip around a friend of the Slytherins. Ron has never looked at me the same, and neither has any of the Gryffindors. I gave up everything for you. Everything I have ever known." My voice wavered. "So don't apologize for being selfish with me, because I'm selfish with you, too. I need you too."

Draco shook his head roughly, eyes dark and distant, a few stray locks tumbling into his eyes. "No. Not the way I need you. Not as friends, Granger. As more. I've *always* wanted more."

More.

What I have dreamed of.

What I have longed for, for so, so long-

No. I bit my lip. "But... you and Pansy—"

"Dammit, for the brightest witch of our age, you can be so dense sometimes," he hissed, hands curling into fists at his sides.

Now I was really confused. Is this some kind of cruel joke? "What are you talking about? You two are together! Since last year! You snog and you flirt and-"

"It was for *YOU!* TO MAKE YOU *JEALOUS!*" Draco screamed, breathing hard and glaring at me.

What? "It... It was?"

He moaned and rolled his eyes in exasperation. "Yes! God, it's never been real!"

"But why would Pansy..."

He was shaking his head furiously. "For Theo, Granger. Merlin. She's loved him for years."

Theo. Pansy's glare at my hand after Theo kissed it on Halloween. Pansy's white fingers around the shot glass when he flirted with me. Pansy's purple face when he kissed Daphne. Pansy's smile when she looks at him.

Draco winced at my expression of realization. "And I've even told you. I've told you how I felt. So many times."

Okay, now this is a lie. "You definitely haven't. Don't you think I would've said something-"

"The moon is beautiful, isn't it?" He cut in, searching my eyes.

"W-what?"

"The moon is beautiful, isn't it?" Draco repeated, louder this time.

"Why the hell do you keep saying that-"

"I'm telling you right now, Granger. That book Pansy gave you, didn't you read it?"

Read this. It will teach you how to put makeup on properly. Like me. "...The cosmetics book? No-"

"Goddamnit, Pansy," He grunted, kicking the dirt. He looked back up at me, grimacing. "You were supposed to read it. It's not a book about makeup. She was supposed to tell you it was about something interesting to get you to read it. Obviously she failed."

"What is it?" Why would he make her give me a book?

He finally took a step toward me, a small one, hesitation clouding his features. "It's a Japanese poetry book. 'The moon is beautiful, isn't it' is an old saying inside of it."

Okay... "What does it mean?"

"It..." Draco sighed and shut his eyes tightly. "It's a poetic way of saying 'I love you'," he said softly. Gently. Eyes screwed shut.

There was no air in my lungs. I blinked.

He loves me.

A whole year of desperately wanting him, a whole year of shoving my feelings down to avoid inevitable heartbreak.

And he loves me.

My words came out as a croak. "You... You love me?"

His eyes snapped open, and he stepped forward and cupped my face, eyes pleading. "More. I'm consumed by you, Granger. I crave you, insatiably. Every part of you. It's like you're in me. You're in my very bones." I could hear his heart pounding, faster and faster and faster. "Every cell, every goddamn fiber of me burns for you."

A sob shook my chest, and I leaned forward so our noses were touching, and all I could see were his quicksilver eyes, wide and begging. "What's the response? The poetic Japanese response?" Please. He needs to know. He needs to know.

His eyelashes fluttered against his cheeks, and his lips parted in a murmur. "It's 'I can die happy'."

"Draco. Look at me. Please." His eyes opened, and they were full of pain. Defeat. A terrible, raging storm. I brought my hands up to hold his cheeks and whispered, "I can die happy, Draco."

A moan full of agony tore from his throat, and his hands were trembling on my face. He came forward ever so slightly, until his lips were only a breath away from mine.

"Can I kiss you?" Draco whispered, his breath fanning over my skin. I nodded slightly, almost imperceptibly. But it doesn't matter, because it's for him. Only for him. Always for him.

And as stars fell from heaven down to earth, so our lips collided in a supernova.

Chapter 25

Stars tumbled toward the ground, streaming balls of fire and light. But there was only him. There was only Draco.

It was as if someone had set off an explosion, my eyes squeezing tight as soon as our lips clashed.

He tasted the way it feels to laugh.

Bright, incandescent.

His lips were soft, yet firm, pushing hard against mine, pouring a thousand feelings and thoughts into our kiss. It felt as if I was melting, my body molding to fit into his. I brought my hands to his neck, locking my arms around him. One of his hands left my face, and he wrapped his arm around my waist, pulling me tighter against him.

It was everything, yet it was nothing. It was the final destination, yet it was home.

Home. Draco was home.

"It's you," he whispered onto my lips between kisses. "It's you. It's always been you. Everything I do is for you."

I cried out and dragged my feet, wanting more, more of the amazing boy I had fallen so deeply in love with. His back slammed against a thick tree trunk, and he chuckled under his breath. I finally brought my eyes to his wonderful grey ones, the grey of the sharpest blade. And then I was twirled and my back was pressed against the bark, Draco smirking before claiming my mouth with his once more.

He nudged his tongue gently, asking me. I answered by kissing him fiercely, running my hands across his shoulders and pushing my tongue into his mouth. Draco gasped, softly running his hands through my curls and down my sides.

I drew back suddenly, a blush forming on my cheeks. "I... I don't—"

He shook his head, tucking my hair behind my ear. "I don't want to either, Granger. I want..." Draco hesitated, eyes faltering. "I want to wait. Until marriage." A low laugh, another shake of his head. "That sounds completely mental—"

I pressed my lips into his, only pulling away after a few moments, his face flushed. "It's lovely," I promised. "And I feel the same way."

His resulting smile was the embodiment of dreams.

I giggled when he pecked my lips, tugging me forward to lay down on the grass again. I nestled in the crook of his shoulder, unable to wipe the smile off of my face. Gazing up, the stars shot across the night sky, as luminous as the sun.

That's when it clicked.

I gasped aloud, finally piecing it together. "The prophecy."

I felt him nod. "It's now."

Lightning brings them together, and changes the norm. Then later, the analysis: an explosion brings them together and changes everything. "Oh."

Draco sat up, laying my head gently on the ground, hovering over me. "What's going on in that big brain of yours, Granger?"

"The lightning," I explained. "The explosion. I think it's just... Us. And the way we feel for each other."

He grinned, brighter than the falling stars above. "Quite dramatic."

I grinned back, and his faded slightly. "But I understand."

"Understand what?"

"Why this," He gestured between us. "Us, changes the war."

I inclined my head, waiting for him to continue. Draco's voice came out firm, but strained, as if it was a struggle to keep it from breaking. "If you hadn't felt the same way, I would've let him do anything to me, make me do anything for him. I would've shut out the world and folded in on myself." He brought his fingers to intertwine with mine, and it was like we matched. Like his hand was made to hold mine. "I don't think I would have cared what happened to anyone," He continued, looking guilty at the thought. "Not if the girl I so desperately loved truly despised me."

I took my time looking at him, at every inch of his face, the features that concealed such a gentle soul that perhaps nobody would ever get the privilege to see but me.

"Beautiful," I whispered.

Draco went still, save for his eyes, searching mine.

"My beautiful boy," I murmured, stroking the strong plane of his jaw once with my fingers.

He swallowed, his eyes shining, blinking once. A small smile. He tilted his head, hair falling across his brow. This time, I didn't hesitate to push it back, my hand lingering behind his ear, on his neck. His face was filled with humor when he finally replied, "My young bush of a girl."

I laughed, and when he bent down and kissed me again, it was more magical than anything else this world can offer.

"It's odd to think that there are so many things that pushed us together," I remarked, my voice bouncing off the castle walls.

Our pinkies were interlocked, like an ongoing promise of something, swinging between us subtly. "Like what?"

I smiled a little, overcome with flooding memories. "Snape partnering us for Potions--"

"Me."

My head snapped to him, gaping. Draco was trying so, so hard not to laugh.

"You?"

He shrugged, eyes glinting. "Called in the one favor he owed me." After a beat, he added, "Well, the one he owed my father, but I told him it counted."

I clicked my tongue, my eyes still wide. "You sneaky little snake."

Draco winked. "Comes with the Slytherin syllabus."

Another memory surfaced, one from the night we heard the prophecy. "Well, there was also Dumbledore reassigning you to my patrol route—"

"A convincing forgery on my end." He was smirking, lips pursed, clearly very proud of himself.

I was gaping again, blinking once. Twice. "All this just to see me?"

Draco shrugged casually, but his lips curved a bit. "Any way to get some time with the Gryffindor princess."

Walking into the Slytherin dorms, we approached the three familiar figures around the fire. One of them, with wiry brown curls, cocked his head. "Nice of you two to join us..." Theo trailed off, his eyes finding our pinkies. "What did I miss?" He asked carefully, slowly.

It only occurred to me then that Draco and I hadn't exactly defined things between us. We had said we loved each other, albeit not in those exact words, but we hadn't talked about the labels on our relationships. "Oh, we haven't really, talked about—"

"Girlfriend, Theo," Draco said, and I blushed furiously, his grip on my pinky tightening slightly. "She's my girlfriend."

Theo shot up, looking completely shocked, his mouth hanging wide open. "What..."

Then Pansy was standing, her hands on her hips, her face pinched, glaring quite menacingly at Draco. "You let the cat out of the bag, naughty boy, didn't you?"

He did not balk, did not wilt under the sheer will in Pansy's gaze. "The jig is up."

Theo was looking between the two of them frantically, eyes blown wide. "What the *hell* is going on? What *jig*? Aren't you two..."

Draco turned to his friend. "No."

Theo shifted his eyes to me, blinking. "So you and...?"

"Yes."

Theo just stood there, his brow drawn together, looking like he was questioning everything in his life. Pansy rolled her eyes. "Screw it," she announced, right before marching up to a shocked Theo and pulling his lips down to meet hers.

His eyes widened further, briefly, before fluttering shut, his arms encasing her waist. He bent and lifted her off the ground, and Pansy gasped in surprise. Theo spun her around, her robes flitting gracefully behind her, their lips never parting.

He set her down, smirking, his eyes blazing with triumph. "I win."

He opened his mouth to say something else, but she shut him up by tiptoeing to kiss him again.

Draco sat on the couch, gently pulling me to sit beside him. Looking at my friends together, my smile was so wide it almost hurt, and Draco extended his palm to Blaise. Blaise, who had sat there quietly in his chair this entire time, simply watching. Draco curled his fingers expectantly, raising his brow. "Pay up, Zabini."

Blaise scoffed, shaking his head in disappointment and reaching into his pocket. "Damn, I was *so* sure Theo would give in first."

Chapter 26

October 4, 1996

The five of us were sitting by the Black Lake, watching the sun's rays melt into the still waters. Draco had suggested a change of scenery, and Theo had brought a large quilt big enough for all of us to sit on, just a few feet from the edge of the water.

We were officially submersed in autumn, and the oranges and reds of the leaves were of the same vibrancy as the sunset. The wind had been harsh, so we sat in pants and sweaters and coats. My sweater was a deep blue, a similar shade to the depths of the Black Lake I liked to gaze at through the windows in the Slytherin common room.

I had offered to get Draco a red sweater, to which he had chuckled and kissed my forehead, saying I alone was enough Gryffindor essence. Draco was wearing khaki pants and a cream turtleneck, along with a black trenchcoat. He had let me paint his nails purple, the only vibrant color on him. He was laying perpendicular to me, his head in my lap. His eyes were closed as he listened to the story, his lips full and set in a resting smile, and I stroked his silky hair gently.

"And then Teddy swung on a rope, across the boat to the other side, desperate to save Captain Pam from her deadly battle with Captain Mold."

Pansy cut in, her fingers dancing across Theo's palm. "I think Captain Pam is just fine on her own, *Teddy*."

I smiled at my friends, who both had been so much happier than I had ever seen them before. They truly needed each other, and I hadn't seen them apart since that night.

Theo shook his head, his eyes on her fingers. "No, no, she cannot win this battle without him by her side."

"Captain Pam can handle things on her own and would rather have Teddy be safe," she sighed, clicking her tongue.

Theo scoffed. "Teddy isn't a *coward* and won't let his woman suffer alone, Pans—"

"Can you just continue the story please?" Blaise groaned, rubbing his face.

"Later." Theo jerked his head at his girlfriend. "Captain Pam over here made me lose my groove."

"Excuse me for correcting your description of Miss damsel in distress, which is certainly not me."

Blaise snorted, his usual unimpressed expression in place.

Theo glanced over at his friend, giving him a once-over. "Blaise, you need a girlfriend."

Blaise quirked his brow. "Hold your tongue, Theo."

"I'm serious. I feel bad for you, third wheeling two couples." Theo exhaled dramatically, resting his head on Pansy's shoulder. "Must be such a pain to see us all so happy and in love."

Draco's voice reverberated through me when he spoke, his eyes still closed. "What a nice way to put it."

“You know what I mean.”

“Just snog someone,” I offered.

Draco’s eyes fluttered open and he smirked up at me. His hands shot up and out, softly pulling my shoulders down and pecking me quickly on the lips, leaving me flushed. A week of being together, and his lips on mine still sent butterflies racing in my stomach. “I think you of all people know it’s about way more than just snogging, Granger.” He was grinning stupidly.

“What have you done to him?” Theo asked me, gesturing to my boyfriend with a mild look of discontent on his face. “He’s so sentimental now. Shame.”

Draco shrugged, still grinning. “I’m simply stating the fact that emotions play a very significant role.”

“You know what also plays a very significant role?” Theo turned to Pansy, a challenge in his eyes. “When the person you love is seemingly *in a relationship*.”

Pansy groaned, “Gods, not this *again*, Theo—”

“I would have made a move if it weren’t for you snogging Draco in my face whenever you got the chance,” he said, wincing slightly at the thought.

“You wouldn’t have,” she insisted, looking exasperated. “And I’ll tell you again. It was to make you jealous and *push you to actually do something*.”

“Well how was I supposed to know you loved me?”

“I could say the same about you.”

Theo humphed. “Fine.” He turned to face Pansy completely, his gaze determined. “It was the start of second year. You got on the train, and you were rambling enthusiastically, explaining how the newest edition of *Witch Weekly* was incredible and revolutionary.” His eyes glazed over, transported back into the fond memory. “Your eyes were sparkling and your cheeks were flushed from running onto the train right before it left.” Theo gave her a small smile, and it felt as if I was intruding as I watched them, because that smile was solely for her. “That’s when I knew.”

Pansy exhaled softly, her eyes sparkling as they were in that moment Theo had just recounted, full of promise and awe. He cocked his head subtly, asking her for the same.

Pansy’s voice was quiet, deep in her thoughts. “First year. That day in Charms about two weeks into school when I forgot my homework, and you changed the name on your paper and gave me yours to turn in.” His eyes shifted with recognition. “You got in so much trouble, you had to go to detention. I felt so bad, but you came back with that big smile on your face, showing off your still crooked teeth. When I apologized, you said it was worth it.” She leaned forward, planting a kiss on Theo’s cheek. “That’s when I knew.”

They were silent, lost in each other’s eyes. Blaise moaned, “One of you couldn’t just admit your feelings?”

The couple turned to their friend and said in unison, “No.”

He rolled his eyes, a laugh dancing across his lips. “I can’t tell who’s more stubborn.”

Theo: “She is.”

Pansy: "He is."

They continued to argue, and I laughed a little, turning back to the beautiful star approaching slumber. Draco was sitting up now, right beside me, our fingers lightly intertwined. "She fell first," I observed, to no one in particular.

Draco heard me, humming. He murmured, "He fell harder."

I smiled to myself, knowing from the way he said it that he wasn't only talking about Theo.

The sun had completely set, and the moon gained luminescence with every passing second. Theo, Pansy, and Blaise were already walking back to school. Pansy's arm was looped through her boyfriend's, and Blaise grumbled to himself as he dragged the large and heavy quilt.

Draco spun to face me, taking my hands in his. "Where to, darling?" Almost every night, we had Apparated together somewhere. So far, we had only gone to Hogsmeade or London, keeping it simple.

But tonight I wanted somewhere a little more adventurous. I pivoted to stand beside him, lifting my arm between us. "I was thinking of the Empire State Building?"

He raised his eyebrows, then nodded with a smile. "Excellent."

I turned on my heel, picturing the top balcony of the building, and we vanished into wind and darkness.

I had never really gotten used to that part, the in between, the feeling that the world was spinning rapidly around me and I was at a standstill. But I felt Draco's fingers around my wrist, and it was an anchor. A tether.

When I opened my eyes we were exactly where I had wanted to take us, overlooking the wondrous layout of the city, dozens and dozens of towers reaching towards the night sky.

The stars winked in and out of existence above us, the lights of the skyscrapers doing the same. The stars of the heavens and the cities blended together almost seamlessly. I gripped the railing and leaned forward a bit, almost wanting to jump just to see if I could fly up amongst the world of lights. "You can see the whole world from up here."

Draco agreed from beside me, but he wasn't looking at the beautiful view stretching before us. His eyes were on me. "Yeah, you can."

I glanced sideways at him. When, precisely, had he become my best friend?

A sudden wave of guilt hit me. "I'm not ashamed of you, Draco," I said suddenly, clenching my jaw and looking down at the bustling streets below.

His voice was gentle. "I know that, Granger."

"No, I just—" I turned my head to him, bracing my forearms on the bar. "I don't want you thinking that I am since I haven't told anyone about us yet."

Draco brought his eyes to mine. Warm. "I understand. Truly."

I don't deserve him. I turned back to the view, sighing. "I just need to figure out how to tell them."

Harry and Ron, especially.”

His shoulder was a comforting heat against mine. “I think the best way would be to sit down with them and be honest.”

I nodded, knowing he spoke true. “You’re right. I’ll do it. Tomorrow.”

We stood in a comforting stillness, the only sound the faint honking horns in traffic. “When did you know?” Draco asked.

I knew what he meant. “That I loved you or that I liked you?”

“Both.”

My fingers began pulling at each other. “Don’t be nervous,” Draco whispered, covering my hands with his.

“I’m not.”

“You always do that with your fingers when you are.” I blushed at the fact that he noticed that, and he squeezed my fingers reassuringly. “It’s okay. You have nothing to be afraid of.”

“For just liking you, I think it was the beginning of fifth year, that day when we bickered on the stairwell.” I remembered how he knew exactly how to irk me, how he climbed painfully slowly up the stairs toward me, and how I let him. “I just... felt drawn to you.”

Draco nodded. “One of my many talents.”

I rolled my eyes, but gulped when I realized what the next part was. He squeezed my fingers again, and my heart surged, because he always knew. “For... love, I think it was the first time you hugged me, after I had cut my hand.” That night had been engraved in my brain. His arms around my waist, clutching me close to him, his head dropping onto my shoulder. Mint, green grapes, and old books. My bloody fingers in his hair. “I didn’t admit it to myself, but I knew deep down.”

Draco was quiet for a moment before letting out a low chuckle, tilting his head at me the way I love, his hair drifting across his lashes. “Beat you by a long shot, Granger.”

I couldn’t keep the surprise off my face. “Really?”

He nodded, puckering his lips and looking up at the sky. “For a mere liking, first year.”

“No way.”

He shrugged, his lips tugging upward ever so subtly. “You knew all the answers on our first day. How could I not like you?”

I shook my head, laughing a little. “You certainly had a funny way of showing it.”

Draco’s eyes flickered briefly, an ember eddying. “My father immediately discouraged my admiration of you.”

I inhaled sharply, gaping. “You told him about me?”

“In hindsight, that was a bad idea. I got a pretty heavy lecture for speaking highly of a...” He hesitated, his tongue flicking out across his lips. “You know...”

“Mudblood?”

His throat bobbed. “Mhm.”

I took a moment to admire him, to be proud of how much he had changed so quickly. “So that’s why you teased me so much?”

The humor had returned to his expression, and his face inched a bit closer, frowning artificially. “Do you dare reject my means of affection?”

I pursed my lips to keep from smiling too wide. “And... When did you know you loved me?”

Draco’s eyes softened, never leaving mine. When he spoke, his voice was barely more than a whisper. “Fourth year. You had just come back from vacation here in New York, though I didn’t know that at the time.” His thumb brushed my cheek, as light as a breeze. “Your skin was golden, your freckles flecked across your cheekbones.” He tucked my hair behind my ear. “I saw you smile at Harry, a bright smile showing all of your teeth, and I knew.”

I flashed him that same smile, squinting and showing all my teeth. “Who knew you were such a romantic?” I asked teasingly, ruffling his hair a bit.

He ducked under my arm, scrunching his nose. “Shut up, Granger. Only for you.”

“You should’ve done something about it,” I thought aloud. “You should have asked me to go to Hogsmeade with you, or go to the Yule Ball, or take a walk on the grounds, I don’t know.” I paused. “I would have said yes,” I said, and I meant it. “I didn’t know you, but I would have given you a chance.”

“Mmm. Yeah.” He was looking out at the city again, but his jaw was hard and his shoulders looked stiff.

“What’s that look for?”

“What look?”

“You’re hiding something.”

“No I’m not.”

“Yes you are, Draco Malfoy. Spit it out.”

He faced me, his eyes cautious, the words coming in a rush. “I tried to ask you to the Yule Ball.”

I gasped, almost stumbling backward. “You *what*?”

He looked almost pained, eyes flashing. “Krum beat me to it.”

Things that were murky beforehand clicked into place, my shoulders sinking with realization. “And you took Pansy.”

Draco nodded, his lips pressed in a sad half smile. “And so the game began.”

I had been waiting for Ron to ask me. All the while, Draco had almost had that opportunity. I turned back to look at the twinkling stars, even brighter than before. “Tell me how you were gonna ask me,” I said, the wind picking up and blowing a few curls into my face. “Knowing you, you must’ve planned something.”

His tongue ran across his teeth as he laughed, shaking his head. "It was stupid."

"I'm sure it wasn't," I insisted. I tilted my head, giving him my puppy dog eyes.

Draco took one look at me and sighed in defeat, unable to say no to that. "I made you a bouquet of strawberries cut to look like roses." His tone was defensive, prepared for me to sneer or taunt.

My heart fluttered, and I was saddened that he would think so little of me, that I would make fun of his gesture. He didn't need to say it for me to know that he had been watching me, just as I had been watching him. He had always known strawberries were my favorite. "Show me."

He cocked his head, a smile growing. "Are you serious?"

I answered by placing his hand on top of mine and quickly Apparating back to Hogwarts, right into the kitchen to the spot where Theo made snickerdoodles. The elves had already left for the night. "Show me, Draco."

Draco only smirked before heading to the fridge, pulling out a large bowl of strawberries. He grabbed a knife and a cutting board. I watched in awe as he curved the blade precisely, creating thin slices in the exact shape of rose petals. He waved his wand and glued the slices together perfectly, growing the size of the strawberry leaves and twisting them together to make stems. When he attached the strawberry roses to the makeshift stems with another flick of his wand, my breath was taken away by the sheer beauty of his creation, and I smiled as I imagined fourth year Draco cutting fruits into floral shapes. He wrapped them in some string to bind them together.

Draco, ever the gentleman, dropped into a deep bow before standing straight and holding out the bouquet of strawberry roses, grinning widely. "Hermione Granger, will you go to the Yule Ball with me?"

I giggled, nodding and throwing my arms around his neck. "Better late than never."

His lips crashed down on mine, still smiling.

Chapter 27

I don't think I'll ever get used to kissing Draco. The way it feels like fireworks inside me. The way he tastes of mint and wind.

I took a deep breath, savoring the feel of his lips on mine. The way he kissed me, slow and thorough, made me sigh against his mouth.

It was as if his lips were made just for mine.

He immediately placed the bouquet of strawberry roses on the counter, bringing his hands to my hips and hoisting me onto the counter swiftly. I giggled, pulling back for a moment to look at him. His eyes were shining, brighter than the stars and the city lights we had gazed at. I leaned in, gently pushing my tongue into his mouth, and he gasped, wrapping his arms around my waist and pulling me tighter against him.

Crash. The ringing sound of glass shattering jerked us apart.

Ron and Harry were standing in the doorway, Ron's outstretched fingers holding onto nothing, broken shards of glass and water scattered across the floor. His mouth was hanging wide open, his eyes bulging out of his skull. Harry wore a similar expression, his face extremely pale.

Harry blinked once, twice. "We were just... coming down to get a snack..."

I was completely frozen, my cheek against Draco's, my arms around his neck and his arms around my waist. Ron's mouth snapped shut, his wide gaze darting between us. "Hermione?" His voice came out as a croak.

I pulled back, hopping down from the counter. I started wringing my hands, and Draco placed his hand on the small of my back. A hidden, silent comfort. I started, "I'm so sorry you had to find out this way—"

"You and Malfoy?" Harry's eyes were big and green, so green, a lush forest staring at me.

I shifted on my feet, biting my lip. "I was going to tell you both, I promise."

Harry shook his head, disappointment clouding his eyes. "When?"

I remembered what Draco said earlier, that it was best to tell the truth. So that's what I did. "Tomorrow," I said firmly. "I was going to tell you tomorrow."

A low whimper escaped Ron's throat, and I put my hand out slightly, reaching for him. His face was defeated, crumpled. "How... how could you?"

The words hit me like a blade and I inhaled sharply, tears rising to my eyes. Draco's thumb began to rub circles on my back. "She's done nothing wrong." I heard the anger swiftly rising in his tone.

"Please leave, Malfoy." Ron was pleading, begging, his knees wobbling. "I can't..." I had never seen him so... so broken. and it was because of me. "Just leave."

Draco looked to me, his stormy eyes churning, asking me what I wanted. I nodded once. I needed to speak to them alone. "Go. It's okay. I'll see you tomorrow."

He looked hesitant to leave me alone with them, but he jerked his head and pressed a quick kiss to

my temple before turning to leave through the door in the wall, the one that led back to the Slytherin dorms. He paused in the doorway, glancing back at me. He sent me a small, encouraging smile before he was gone.

Harry stumbled a few steps before collapsing in a chair around the round table in the corner, his jaw clenching. "*Please* talk to us, Hermione."

Ron sat beside Harry, completely silent. I walked forward and sat across from them. Nerves rose and threatened to overwhelm me, but I imagined his quicksilver eyes. My anchor. My tether. My breathing evened out. "Okay. Just—" I faltered. Would they finally believe me now? "Just promise to listen. Really listen. And I can't force you to believe me, but if you don't, you're not the people I thought you were."

Harry opened his mouth, but his eyes darted between mine and he decided against it, shutting his mouth and nodding. Ron stayed still beside him, unmoving, staring at the table.

I swallowed once, took a deep breath, and began.

I held nothing back. I revealed the full truth, pouring out every detail of the past year. Grapes and potions and angels and demons and books and cookies and blood and stars and music. I showed them *us*, Draco and me, as well as a bit of Pansy, Theo and Blaise.

I exhaled when I finished, glancing up at the clock and realizing I have been talking for almost two hours.

"I'm so sorry."

My eyes shifted to Harry, who's eyes held a void of sorrow, his face twisted and apologetic.

I shook my head, curls flying. "What? You have nothing to apologize for."

"Yes, I do," Harry insisted, hanging his head. "I haven't been a good best friend. If I was, you would have told me all of this sooner."

I sighed, beginning to pull at my fingers again. "I didn't want to upset you."

"It will take some getting used to," Harry admitted, giving me a grim close-lipped smile. "But he's good to you, Mione. That would never upset me."

My abundance of relief bubbled inside of me. I could only smile back in thanks, and I let him see that emotion in my eyes, to which he sank back in his chair in solace. I turned to Ron, wincing a bit at his vacant stare still focused on the table. "I know he's not your favorite person—"

"I don't care about that."

I stopped, scanning his rigid posture. "You don't?"

His eyes found mine. "How could I after everything you just told us?"

"Then what's wrong?"

"I... I thought..." Ron's face crumpled, and I felt something break inside me at his expression of utter despair. "I thought it was gonna be *us*, Hermione. You and me."

And Ron shattered, coming apart like the glass on the floor, his shoulders shaking with sobs. I didn't hesitate to get up and kneel on the floor, pulling him into my arms and resting his head on

my shoulder, his arms shaking as they held me. "I thought that we were taking our time to find each other." He said between cries that racked through my body, both his and mine. I don't remember when I started crying. "That down the line, it was gonna be us."

I drew back, holding his shoulders gently. I placed my fingers under his chin and brought his teary eyes to mine. He needed to look at me when I said this. "Ron... I love you. I do. And I know you love me too." I hesitated, fumbling for the right words. I closed my eyes for a brief second, imagining Draco's steady hand on my back. I imagined the true home I found that fateful night in the woods as stars showered down upon us. "But I don't think that's the type of love we have for each other," I said, as gently as I could. My mind brings forward the image of Parvati, a magazine spread across her lap, her eyebrow raised in question after a hug with Ron. "I know that people expect it, but that doesn't mean it's the truth. And I love you too much to... to only be with you because of that." Fireworks. Touching the stars. Ron deserved that feeling, and I couldn't give it to him. "You deserve someone who falls in love with you," I whispered, meaning every word. "Being in love and loving someone are two very different things."

"Are you?" Ron's eyes were wide, tears spilling down his cheeks. "In love with him?"

I nodded once, firmly, letting him see the truth in my eyes. He loosed a shuddering sigh, attempting to plaster on a weak smile for me. "I can see why. Who knew Malfoy was secretly such a softie?"

"I did," I said softly, thinking of all the times I begged them to see the good in Draco. "I tried to tell you both."

Harry laid a hand on my shoulder, his expression clear now. "We should have taken your word for it. We were stupid not to."

Ron sniffed his tears back, rubbing his eyes with his palms. "Malfoy really got us out of being tortured in Umbridge's office?" I nodded in answer, and he shook his head, looking dumbfounded. "Bloody hell, I never thought I'd say this, but I owe Malfoy a thank you."

I beamed, joy overcoming me. "I think he would really like that."

Ron pulled me back into his arms, squeezing me so tight I lost my breath. "I'm glad you're happy, I really am," Ron said against my hair, sincerity ringing clear in his low voice. "I guess I just never expected he would be the one to make you feel this way."

"If honesty is the theme here..." I withdrew and looked between my two best friends, knowing I needed to tell them my other feelings as well. "I wanted to express that it really bothers me when the two of you come to me to do your schoolwork." The phantom on Draco's thumb rubbing circles on my back felt utterly real and calmed me. "For a long time now it's felt... Constant. It's felt as if that's all you want me for."

I almost wept when Harry came forward and engulfed me in his arms, followed swiftly by Ron, until we were kneeling on the floor in a tangle of limbs. "I'm so sorry," Harry said thickly, his voice breaking.

"Me too." Ron sounded so disappointed. Disappointed in himself. "Bollocks, we really messed up."

"It's okay. I'm so glad I told you." I meant every word.

"For the record," Ron planted his hands on my shoulders and sealed eye contact, "We don't just want you for schoolwork, and we don't want you to feel that way. We want you in our lives

because you're our guardian angel."

"Plus, we're just idiots and we really need to stop procrastinating," Harry added sheepishly.

"I missed you both so much." I pulled them back into a group hug, relishing the feeling of being with them again. "Next time, I promise to talk to you both right away."

"Good, because that really sucked," Ron murmured, tightening his grip around us. "Missing you."

"It sucked for me too," I whispered.

I don't know how long I knelt there hugging my best friends. All I know is that small missing piece I had felt was filled.

October 5, 1996

"You told my brother before me?"

I glanced up from my diary, my furious writing slowing to a stop. Ginny stood at the foot of my bed, hands on her hips, brow furrowed.

I shut my diary, sighing and putting my hands up in surrender. "In my defense, I was going to tell you first, but they walked in on Draco and I snogging, so I had to tell them on the spot."

Ginny squealed, jumping onto my mattress in front of me and crossing her legs. "You and Draco! I called it, didn't I? I said he acted differently with you!"

"That's not exactly calling it," I laughed.

"Yes it is," Ginny scolded, rolling her eyes. She bounced in her seat, giggling incessantly. "Now, tell me everything. I can't *stand* that Ron knows more than me."

I told her every detail I told Harry and Ron, even a little more, telling her the things I can only tell a girl. How he hugs me, how he kisses me, how he touches me. Ginny looked like she was watching an incredible romantic movie, her hand on her heart.

"Is Draco a good snogger?" She asked when I finished, smirking mischievously. "He looks like he would be, his lips have the perfect shape for it."

"Ginny!"

"Well, is he?"

I couldn't suppress my smile, letting out an exhale in awe of the mere memory of the feel of Draco's lips. "He's incredible. I mean, the only experience I have to compare it to is Krum," I laughed nervously, blushing at the thought of a hesitant kiss and stubbly chin, "But that's not hard to beat. But Draco is... wow. Just wow."

Ginny hummed in approval, drumming her fingers on her knee. "How did Harry react when you told him?"

"Very well, actually. He's so supportive."

“Mmm.” Her eyes were unfocused. “And did he look, I don’t know, interested or intrigued by the whole relationship thing?” She continued, rambling.

Ginny, the most popular and confident girl, was babbling. One look at her nervous expression and I knew. “You like him again, don’t you?” I took her uncomfortable shifting as a yes. “What about Dean?”

“I moved on from him, our breakup was mutual,” Ginny stated matter-of-factly, lifting her chin. “And I don’t think the word ‘again’ is accurate, my feelings for Harry have never really gone away.”

My ever-so-helpful brain brings images to the front of my mind: Harry’s lingering eyes on Ginny on various occasions, from parties to Quidditch games. “I see the way he looks at you, Gin. He feels the same way.”

She visibly brightened, tilting her head. “You really think so?”

“I know so,” I assured her. Because it’s the same way Draco looks at me. “It’s just a matter of time.”

Ginny grinned. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I hope it turns out as good as you and Draco.”

October 6, 1996

I had decided to switch every day between sitting at the Gryffindor table and the Slytherin table during meals. This way, I was able to be with all of my friends equally. Oh, and my boyfriend.

At dinner, Draco smirked at me before getting up and standing on the table. I pressed my lips together to keep my laugh in, wondering what he was doing. The entire Great Hall quieted, instantly aware of Draco and glancing around curiously.

Before I could protest, Draco grasped my hand and pulled me up onto the table with him. Muttering a spell under his breath and bringing his wand to hover under his lips, his quicksilver eyes didn’t leave mine as his projected voice announced to the whole school, “Hermione Granger is my girlfriend, everyone. If you have a problem with that, too bad.”

My eyes widened in surprise, but I grinned happily.

Complete silence.

Then, the entire hall erupted with cheers.

I blushed, laughing, and threw my arms around my boyfriend’s neck and kissed him.

And the loudest voices rising above all others were none other than Harry and Ron, hollering and whooping with overwhelming enthusiasm.

Chapter 28

October 8, 1996

Draco and I's relationship was all anyone could talk about. Although there were a few wary stares, the majorital reaction was support, thanks to Harry and Ron. The school followed their lead, and I was so grateful for them.

"I'm so offended," Pansy scoffed, crossing her arms over her chest and sending me a secret smirk across the dining table.

"And why is that?" Theo inquired, turning to face his girlfriend.

"Where's my big romantic gesture declaring our love to the world, Theo?" She pouted, jutting out her bottom lip. "Draco put your boyfriend status to shame."

He huffed, putting an accusatory hand on his heart. "Is my everyday affection that unsatisfactory?"

Pansy shrugged, twirling her fork in her spaghetti. "I'm just saying, I'm disappointed that you haven't done anything grand."

Theo rolled his eyes, worrying his lip between his teeth.

—

October 12, 1996

The Slytherin and Hufflepuff quidditch teams filed onto the field. From afar, I could see Draco cracking his neck side to side, his brow furrowed in concentration, lips set in determination. His hair had grown a little longer, falling into his eyelashes. The dark green uniform hugged his body in all the right places, and even from here I could see the outline of his lean muscles. Damn, he's hot. As if he could hear my thoughts, he looked up across the field and smirked at me. Pansy let out a low whistle beside me, no doubt admiring Theo.

"Those uniforms..." Pansy murmured, smiling.

"I know," I agreed, unable to say more.

"Attention everyone!" Theo's voice suddenly rang throughout the stadium, and everyone came to hushed silence. He was standing in the dead center of the field, his left arm spread wide and his other arm holding his wand to his lips.

Pansy paled. "Merlin, what is he doing?" I didn't have an answer.

"This is dedicated to Pansy Parkinson," Theo declared, grinning widely and winking at Pansy, whose mouth dropped open. Draco and Blaise stood a few steps back on either side of him. Draco was bouncing on his feet, and Blaise cracked his knuckles. Theo pumped his fist into the air, a signal, and upbeat music filled the stadium.

Theo snapped his fingers to the beat, Draco and Blaise doing the same, along with the rest of the Slytherin quidditch team. The boys quickly dispersed into the shape of an arrowhead, with Theo in the center and Draco and Blaise right behind him, raising their wands to their lips. "Oh my *god*,"

Pansy gaped, frozen in place.

Theo took flouncing steps forward and back and forward again, in sync with the beat. When he opened his mouth, I gasped at the sound of his stunning voice:

“Did I mention that I'm in love with you?

And did I mention there's nothing I can do?

And did I happen to say,

I dream of you everyday?

But let me shout it out loud, if that's okay ay ay.

If that's okay. Hey!”

The group of boys crouched and jumped, spinning in perfect synchronization.

“I don't think he realized you were joking about that whole grand gesture thing,” I laughed, nudging Pansy playfully. Her gaze remained fixed on Theo, awe written across her face.

Draco and Blaise climbed onto their broomsticks and soared into the air, flying opposite of each other and swooping down and up at the same time. Blaise's voice could be heard faintly, singing the bass backups. Draco was singing backup as well, a melodic sound. The shape on the ground changed, and Theo stood high and rose on two boys shoulders.

“I met this girl that rocked my world like it's never been rocked,

And now I'm living just for her and I won't never stop!

I never thought that it could happen to a guy like me,”

Theo launched off his teammates shoulders, falling forward and flipping gracefully in the air before landing on his feet and dropping to his knees.

“But now look at what you've done, you got me down on my knees.

Because my love for you is ridiculous!

I never knew—”

“Who knew?” Draco and Blaise sang, swerving and flying right above Theo's head.

“That it could be like this?

My love for you is ridiculous

My love is R-I-D-I-C-U-L-O-U-S!”

“R-I-D-I-C-U-L-O-U-S!” The crowd cheered, and I screamed the letters gleefully.

Theo hollered, “It's?”

“Ridiculous!” Draco and Blaise answered.

“Just?”

“Ridiculous!”

Theo threw his head back dramatically. “And I would give my inheritance for just one kiss!”

“Yeah, he definitely didn’t get the joke,” Pansy giggled, jumping up and down.

“He’s kind of an idiot,” someone whispered behind us.

Pansy whirled around, her glare a terrifying blaze of heat, the blonde girl shrinking under her gaze. “That idiot happens to be my boyfriend, so unless you want to visit the infirmary, I suggest you shut your mouth.”

She whipped her head back to watch the show, leaving the girl stunned. “You call him an idiot all the time,” I remarked.

“Yes, but it’s only okay when I do it.”

“Touché.”

Theo jumped high into the air and landed on his feet on his broom, rising into the air on steady legs. “Because my love for you is ridiculous!

I never knew—”

“Who knew?” I laughed obnoxiously at Draco’s and Blaise’s enthusiastic backup vocals.

“That it could be like this!

My love for you is ridiculous!

My love is R-I-D-I-C-U-L-O-U-S!”

“R-I-D-I-C-U-L-O-U-S!” Pansy and I yelled.

Theo flew closer, expertly balancing on his feet as the broom shot through the air. “It’s?”

“Ridiculous!”

“Just?”

“Ridiculous!”

Theo came to a stop right in front of Pansy, grinning widely, resting his forearms on the rail. “And I would give my inheritance for just one kiss, c’mon now!”

The crowd erupted with cheers and applause. Theo quirked his eyebrow, lowering his wand and placing it in his pocket. “How’s that for a grand gesture, Pans?” he asked, tilting his head.

Pansy returned his grin and placed her hands on his cheeks, kissing him fiercely.

Theo pulled back, flushing, and properly straddled his broom and returned to the field. When he screamed to Draco and Blaise, I could hear it loud and clear: “Guys I think she liked it!”

“Okay, now read this next.”

I placed the book in Draco’s lap, careful to not drop it over the edge of the Astronomy Tower. The

stars were out and glittering, the perfect lighting so I could see his illuminated face. I had been introducing him to more and more Muggle literature.

“‘Lord of the Flies’?” Draco raised his eyebrow. “I hope this is a metaphor. I don’t want to read about the social hierarchy of bugs.”

“You’ll love it,” I assured him.

He scanned my eyes in contemplation. “Did you love it?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, then,” Draco decided, slipping the book in his bag. “I have no room to question you, since your taste is impeccable.”

I beamed, straightening my spine. “I do pride myself on selecting great literature.”

“As well as great, exceptionally handsome boyfriends,” he added.

I rolled my eyes. “Still an arrogant arse.”

“Always.”

“And who knew you could sing so well?” I said, remembering his soothing voice from earlier.

Draco shrugged with faked nonchalance, clearly enjoying the praise. “Another one of my many talents.”

“You should sing for me sometime,” I suggested, swinging my legs back and forth.

He snorted. “Doubtful.”

I turned to him, gasping playfully. “Why not?”

“No way,” he insisted, scrunching his nose. “I only did it for Theo because he owes me a favor now, as big of a favor as I’d like.”

I grinned mischievously, thinking of the different favors Draco could ask of me. “I’ll owe you a favor.”

“Not gonna happen.”

I groaned. “Just when I forget how stubborn you are, you remind me.”

He chuckled quickly before his face hardened, and he took my hands in his. “Granger, I know you have a will of iron and you refuse to go to a safe house if things get rough—“

“Absolutely not.”

“I know, I know. I have another proposal.”

I cocked my head. “Oh?”

Draco drew back for a moment, fumbling through his bag and pulling out a thick black leather book and opening to a bookmarked page, placing his finger under some highlighted words. “A tracking spell. It doesn’t reveal the exact location, that’s too dangerous and risks exposure if the

information is leaked somehow. So this spell will point us in the direction the other person is.”

“That’s a good idea,” I exclaimed. If he was so adamant about keeping me safe, this was a good way to do so. “How does it indicate direction?”

“The spell is meant to be placed on an object, a transportable one able to be kept on the body,” he explained. “It will create a faint burning sensation when you face the correct direction.”

A lightbulb went off in my head, and I pulled my sleeve up, revealing my gold charm bracelet, shining in the moonlight. “My charm bracelet and your ring?”

Draco’s eyes sparkled. “Clever as always, Granger.”

With a few waves of his wand, a brief burning shot through me before fading, and he did the same to his ring.

“Let’s try it,” I said once he was finished, gripping his hand and dragging him to his feet.

“I’m trusting you know what you’re doing?”

I nodded, pulling him down the winding stairs. “Go to the Herbology classroom and I’ll go to the Transfiguration classroom,” I instructed once we got to the bottom. “Then we can use our jewelry to find one another.”

Draco grunted, adjusting the sleeves of his white dress shirt. “My ring is a *men’s accessory*, Granger.”

I shook my head, pressing my lips together to keep from smiling. “Draco, it’s jewelry.”

I laughed when he flashed me the middle finger as he backed away. “Sayonara, young bush,” he chided.

I groaned. “Will you ever stop calling me that?”

He disappeared around the corner, and his voice floated back to me. “Not a chance.”

I ran through the corridors, facing each hallway before entering the one that sent a warm shock through my wrist. I had made sure we were across the school from each other, but it was only ten minutes before I saw Draco rounding the corner.

Draco’s eyes locked on mine, and lips stretched into a bright grin. “Found you.”

“I found you first.”

“You did not.”

“Did too,” I argued, stepping right in front of him. “I saw you before you saw me.”

He laughed, shoulders shaking. “It’s okay to lose sometimes, Granger.”

“I did not lose.”

Draco brought my hand up to his lips, pressing them there firmly. “I’ll always find you,” he said against my skin.

I puckered my lips. “I don’t plan on going anywhere.”

“Doesn’t matter.” He tucked a curl behind my ear. “I’m still promising you.”

Another roll of my eyes. “You and your promises.”

“I’m serious.”

“I know.” I placed my hands on his forearms, looking up at him. “I believe you. You tend to keep your promises.”

Draco hummed, smiling softly. “Well, we should seal the deal.”

Firm lips and fireworks.

a/n: the song is called “Did I Mention” from the Disney movie Descendants! it’s this chapter’s song on the Spotify playlist “the stars aligned” under @allieadajawr! (each song is in order and corresponds with each chapter)

Chapter 29

October 28, 1996

"I can't believe we still don't have a costume idea for Halloween," I complained, collapsing dramatically across our table in Potions.

Draco chuckled, gently nudging me aside to see our cauldron better. "I don't know what will top our unplanned angel and demon duo costume last year."

I perked up suddenly, an idea flashing through my mind. "Pansy, Theo!" I called across the classroom. Draco raised his eyebrow in question, but I waved him off.

"What's up, princess?"

"That's exactly it," I explained. "Princess. Why don't we all dress as Disney princes and princesses?" I had been showing my Slytherin friends Disney movies on some nights when we had nothing else to do. So far, we had watched Snow White, Cinderella, and Beauty and the Beast.

Pansy gasped and clapped her hands together. "Brilliant, Granger! Absolutely brilliant!"

"Nothing new," Draco commented, smiling at me as he stirred our potion counterclockwise.

"Pans, you can be Snow White and I can be Prince Florian, it's perfect," Theo said, draping his arm across her shoulder.

Pansy nodded, wincing a little. "We do bear the closest resemblance to them, but Snow White is a bit useless and weak, don't you agree? Where's the female strength?"

"Which is precisely why it's a *costume*," Theo assured, resting his cheek against her head. He added, "And you'll also be pretending to be the fairest in the land." Pansy growled, slapping his chest.

"Granger, we will be Beauty and the Beast of course, is that right?" Draco asked, cocking his head at me, his hair catching in his lashes. I had seen him in this position hundreds of times, and I was always awestruck by his beauty. "Beautiful bookish girl and misunderstood beast? How fitting."

I giggled, reaching out and brushing his hair out of his eyes. "Of course. But you're no beast, Draco. Just come as Prince Adam. Besides, a beast costume would be utterly hideous."

"Ah, yes, the transformation. Fitting, he definitely turned into a softie thanks to you," Theo chimed in, shaking his head in disappointment.

"You're one to talk, Mr. 'My love for you is ridiculous'," Pansy retorted, sticking her tongue out.

"I was just giving you what you wanted, and I totally beat Draco's lame announcement in the Great Hall," Theo defended, puffing his chest out.

"It's funny how after all this time, you still can't tell whether I'm being sarcastic or not."

"You're a little *too* good at it, Pans. Your sarcasm is so precise that at times it just sounds like you're in the midst of one of your mood swings, probably thanks to your cycle."

"You little—"

“Was I going to be included in this conversation?” Blaise sauntered over, smirking.

I cringed slightly. “I’m sorry, Blaise. We’re talking about our couple costumes for Halloween.” Blaise shrugged, forever the picture of indifference.

“Why don’t you come as a regular prince?” Draco suggested to his friend, stepping back from the cauldron and wiping his hands on his robes. “You never know who will show up and become your princess.”

Theo huffed, bulging his eyes at me and gesturing to Draco. “See that? Soft.”

“He’s right, though,” Pansy agreed, nodding at Blaise. “That’s a good costume. It can pass individually, and also sets you up for girls.”

Blaise grumbled a reluctant yes, and we agreed to Floo to Diagon Alley after school to shop for costumes.

October 31, 1996

“Pucker up,” Ginny ordered, lathering pink gloss onto my lips.

When I told Ginny about the Disney couple idea, she squealed in delight and immediately began planning her costume for a certain redhead mermaid princess. Ginny was wearing an elegant purple corset with ruffles, paired with a tight fitted sea green floor length skirt covered in iridescent scales and ended in flowing silk that diverged at her ankles. Her hair was curled to perfection, red ringlets cascading across her shoulders. Plus she made me suggest to Harry and Ron that ‘they dress as sailors with inspiration from *The Little Mermaid*’ . “Subtle,” I had laughed when she urged me to say this to them. Which I did, of course. They had no other ideas, so Harry and Ron had shrugged and agreed.

“Finished,” Ginny declared, hoisting me up onto my feet and bringing me in front of the full length mirror. I inhaled sharply at the sight of the girl before me. I hardly recognized myself. Ginny had straightened my hair out, then curled the very ends so they fell softly across my shoulders. Half of my hair was gracefully swept up, curled into a bun on the back of my head. A thin golden chain with a star rested on my chest, a gift from Pansy. My makeup was simple, and from hearing Pansy and Ginny talk I knew it was only blush and lip gloss and mascara, with a bit of shimmering gold eyeshadow. But the yellow and golden dress is what truly took my breath away. It had a simple square neckline, the fitted bodice glowing in the same shade as my eyeshadow. The skirt flitted around me, descending in subtle layers. The ends of the layers were covered in golden swirls, and peeking out from the bottom were my matching yellow heels.

I turned and hugged Ginny fiercely, getting a brief flashback of this exact moment last Halloween. “Thank you,” I said in her ear.

She shoved me off immediately, running her hands over my dress and smoothing it out. “Yes, yes, what would you do without me. But *no wrinkling the masterpiece*,” Ginny insisted, carefully tugging me out the door.

The professors had given us permission to throw the annual costume party in the Great Hall this year. Ginny gave my hand an infinitesimal squeeze before whisking down the stairs, no doubt to walk by Harry and stun him with her utter beauty.

Gulping, I turned the corner and began to descend the stairs, holding my skirts and walking slowly

so as to not trip in my heels. At the bottom, Draco was facing the other direction, bouncing on his heels as he waited for me. He turned and stopped frozen when he saw me, his eyes brightening. I smiled, taking in his costume. He was wearing a formal royal blue blazer with a white dress shirt unbuttoned at the neck, with loose black pants and brown dress shoes. His hair hung loose across his face, curling on his forehead. His mouth was slightly agape, and he climbed the steps to meet me, never taking his eyes off of me and stumbling a bit. We met in the middle, right where we had fought more than a year ago. Draco stood before me, eyes gleaming. "Granger..." He cleared his throat, clearly at a loss for words. I smirked, proud that I rendered Draco Malfoy speechless, and leaned forward and kissed his cheek.

Still standing stunned, I interlaced my fingers with his and giggled, pulling him down the rest of the stairs. "You look nice too, Draco."

"Saying you look *nice* would be the understatement of the century," Draco murmured behind me, his eyes raking down my body.

The Great Hall was still decorated from dinner earlier, with jack-o-lanterns floating in the air. The long tables had disappeared, and instead the floor had turned into a massive dance floor, neon lights flashing throughout the hall. Along the walls were small tables filled with firewhiskey and butter beer.

Draco leaned into my ear, his breath brushing across my neck. "I'll get you a drink," he whispered in my ear. I nodded, blushing, and he disappeared.

Pansy flounced over, taking my hands in hers. "You look beautiful," she gushed. "I knew that dress was perfect as soon as I saw it in the window."

"You look incredible, Pansy," I complimented, in awe of her effortless grace. She was stunning in her beautiful dress, a dark blue bodice and fluffed yellow skirt with puffed shoulders made of blue and red satin. A red ribbon was tied in her hair, her lips curved into her famous sensuous half smile.

Theo came up behind Pansy, handing her a red cup. "Looking good, princess," Theo grinned.

"You too, Theo." He was wearing a white long sleeve with a blue vest and red cape, paired with light blue pants and brown boots. On his head sat a marching blue beret with a feather. On anyone else, the costume would look awful, but Theo looked the part of the dashing prince.

Draco returned alongside Blaise, pressing a cup into my hands, the strong scent of firewhiskey wafting up my nose. "That's all you get," Draco warned, gesturing to my drink. "That's enough for you to have some fun without blacking out."

I laughed, nodding in agreement. "Wouldn't want Pansy to have to levitate me to the dorms again."

Pansy gasped, smacking Draco's arm. "You still haven't told her?"

Draco paled. "I forgot!"

"Forgot what?" I asked, looking back and forth between them.

"Remember last Halloween when you said you dreamed that Draco carried you to bed?" Pansy asked, beginning to smile. "That wasn't a dream, that actually happened. He made me say it was me so you wouldn't know."

I whirled to Draco, who looked a little uncomfortable as he shifted on his feet. He nodded in confirmation, red rising to his cheeks. I giggled, “Well, that’s comforting. Now I know that I wasn’t *that* drunk, and that Draco is totally smitten over me.” Draco scoffed, rolling his eyes, but didn’t disagree.

Blaise chuckled. I turned to him, taken aback by his charming white suit, a picture perfect prince.

Ginny breezed by me and said quietly, “Harry’s jaw was on the floor.” I grinned. Before leaving, she added, “Oh, and look out for Luna. She didn’t have a costume so I told her to come as a Disney princess, too, and I wanna see how it came out.”

I nodded and turned back to my friends, and Blaise was standing completely still in front of me, his eyes glued behind me. I turned around, and it was my turn to have my jaw on the floor. Luna was standing in the doorway, wringing her hands in front of her and swaying side to side on her feet. She was wearing a silver ballgown, a simple yet breathtaking design, with matching silk gloves. Her hair was pulled back in a smooth bun atop her head. Cinderella had arrived at the ball. “Looks like your princess is here, Blaise,” Theo whispered.

Blaise didn’t answer, but he strode over to Luna, and it was the first time I saw him as anything less than confident. His steps were hesitant, and he rubbed the back of his neck as he introduced himself.

Fingers wrapped around mine, and I looked up to see Draco pulling me to the dance floor, smirking, setting our drinks on a table on the way there. Suddenly, I recognized the first few notes of the song that began to play. “They’re playing ‘Don’t Dream It’s Over,’” I whispered.

Draco gifted me a soft smile, the one he saves just for me, and pulled me into his arms, slipping his arms around my waist. “I gave Lee Jordan five galleons.”

I flung my arms around his neck and laughed, swaying to the symphony of dreams with the boy of starlight. We stayed like that, ascended into a heavenly state, amber irises glued to silver.

In the last few lines of the song, Draco leaned down and crashed his mouth onto mine, a million unsaid words passing between us, our lips moving in sync. Pure bliss.

The song concluded, and we floated back down from our own little world, the loud rock music shaking our bodies. I grinned up at him. “Wanna get wasted together?”

Draco smirked, looping his arm through mine and leading us to the table. “I never thought I would hear you say that, but yes, I’d be honored.”

Our bodies were slick with sweat, and my throat was sore from screaming the lyrics to countless songs. All of us were on the dance floor, dancing against each other and downing drink after drink. Harry and Ron were dancing, albeit awfully, and I noticed Harry’s gaze continuously seeking out Ginny. Luna had produced some odd dance moves, flailing her arms above her head, but Blaise only smiled and copied her movements. Theo and Pansy had been dancing together all night, switching between jumping up and down and fighting playfully to the beat, laughing and making sound effects and throwing fake punches and kicks.

I swayed heavily on my feet, dizzy from the heat and alcohol. “I’m gonna get some fresh air,” I yelled in Draco’s ear, who nodded with glazed eyes that were slightly crossed.

I burst out the front doors, heaving in deep breaths of the cold autumn air. I closed my eyes, tilting

my face up to the night sky.

An arm snaked against my waist, and my eyes shot open. A hand covered in a damp cloth clamped over my mouth, suppressing my scream. Sour. That's what it smelled like before I collapsed into nothingness.

Chapter 30

TW: graphic violence :/

November 1, 1996

“What do we do with her, Miss Lestrange?” The rasping voice shot through my consciousness.

Warily, I tore my eyes open slowly, only to be met with more darkness, a faint light filtering through the blackcloth covering my face. My head immediately began pounding, and I clenched my teeth to keep from gasping out loud in pain. I paused for a moment, feeling where my limbs were. My arms and legs were tied away from me, keeping me in a starfish position. The ground was hard against my back, and the faint creaking led me to believe it was an old wooden floor.

“Draco can't know she's here, he must focus on his mission from the Dark Lord,” Bellatrix hissed, a voice that had haunted my dreams since the fight at the Ministry. “Foolish girl, to lose an analyzed prophecy and leave it flitting about the streets of Hogsmeade. But we need to find out what she did to my little nephew to change the war and do some damage control.” I almost gasped aloud. That day the parchment had been swept away out the window... she had found it. Bellatrix released a low laugh, void of amusement. “The Dark Lord will unleash his wrath if he discovers there are unknown variables in play, which is why I must find them out and eliminate them.”

“How do we figure out how she manipulated him, Miss?” The gruff voice asked.

“Whatever means of torture it takes. I left a list on the counter of some particularly effective, newly-created spells that have gotten captives talking in my experience.”

“Excellent.” Excitement coated his deep voice, and panic bubbled within me. What is he going to do to me? “I will be paid handsomely, correct?”

“Yes, yes, when you get answers out of her there will be twenty thousand galleons transferred straight from my vault.” I heard the clicking of high heeled boots. “I do not care how long it takes, do you hear me? Just get the information.”

“Why don't you use Legilimency?”

“I tried,” Bellatrix growled, disdain thick in her tone. “It's a steel cage. Even unconscious, I can't penetrate her mind.” Pride shot through me at this, and my mind brought me a memory from December last year to correlate with it:

“What book is that?”

“It explains the most complex and effective Occlumency methods,” Draco said.

“You're a skilled Occlumens, right?”

“Yeah, I've been practicing since I was a kid. I just...” He hesitated. “I don't want anyone invading my thoughts.”

I nodded, and his eyes widened. He shut the book and placed it in my lap. “You should learn it.”

“Really?”

“Definitely. With your photographic memory, it'll be a lot faster for you. You can never be too

careful.”

“Alright, but only because it’d be embarrassing to see how close of friends we are.”

“Ha ha, so funny, Granger.”

Every night since then, after writing in my diary I would lie in bed and build the steel fortress in my mind until it was impenetrable. No one except for me could access any of my memories.

“Then torture should get her talking,” the low voice remarked.

Sobs threatened to burst from my chest, but I shoved them down desperately. A popping sound let me know that Bellatrix had Apparated away.

“Should we wake her now?” A different scraping voice asked.

I shut my eyes and evened my breathing right before the cloth was yanked off of my face, my curls frizzing against my cheeks. A sharp sting burst across my cheek and I gasped, my eyes bulging open. We were in a small wooden cabin, with nothing but a table in the corner and a tub in the center of the room. My dress was crumpled on the floor, so I was left exposed in my bra and underwear. A lean man with black eyes and long, slick black hair was crouching before me, with heavy stubble across his jaw. “Time to talk, bitch.” He slapped me again, my ears ringing.

I clamped my mouth shut, prepared to endure the worst. Draco had always protected me, and it was my turn to do the same. I would never tell them the truth, the truth that Draco and I both knew but had left unspoken between us: while he was a Death Eater, it was crystal clear that his allegiance lay with me and the Order. And that naked truth would give the both of us a death sentence.

“I’m looking forward to this spell,” A portly man with cropped sandy hair said, hungrily dragging his eyes across the parchment. He looked up at me, his eyes ocean blue. “We get to peel each layer of your skin, and a counter spell reverses the damage so we can do it all over again.”

I whimpered, unable to wrap my head around how much pain that would be. The thin man grinned maliciously. “Another spell I’m particularly excited for is liquid fire.” I flinched, and he cocked his head, bringing his fingers to my cheek and pinching so hard I felt blood bud. “We immerse you in salt water, and it will feel like fire. It’s not, of course, but it’ll mimic the exact burning sensation of fire slipping over your skin.” He raised his brow, bringing his bloody fingers to his lips, sucking. “Which one should we start with?”

“Let’s peel her skin first, please, please, Ryle!” The blonde exclaimed, licking his grey lips.

I blinked, and suddenly it felt as if someone was taking a knife down my entire body, peeling a layer of skin like someone would carelessly peel a potato. Agonizing. Screams shattered through my throat, my back arching towards the rotted ceiling, my vision blurring with tears. I writhed on the floor, and when I faced my right side for a second, my charm bracelet warmed against my skin. *Draco*. I cried out at the thought of him. I screwed my eyes shut, gasping. Air, I need air, I can’t breathe—

The pain dulled slightly, and I felt rolls of my skin curling at my wrists and ankles. The mere sensation of it caused another cry to burst out of me.

The slender man, Ryle, hovered over me, pure glee etched across his features. “Let’s make this easy, brat. You tell us what little scheme you concocted to change the war, and you won’t have to go through any more pain and we get paid deliciously. It’s a win for everyone.”

I lifted my trembling chin, shaking my head once. He sighed, clicking his tongue. “Do another layer, Ren.”

The round man, Ren, raised his wand. I held my breath, trying to prepare, but the pain struck me just as hard as the first time.

Nothing prepared me for that amount of complete agony. I thought it would get better, that I would get used to it. But it crashed into me with the same force the third, fourth, tenth, twentieth, fiftieth time.

I would never be the same.

Chapter 31

December 6, 1996

Torture. That is how Draco Malfoy would describe the days since October thirty-first.

Halloween night, Hermione Granger had disappeared without a trace. Despite his drunken state, Draco had searched the grounds desperately for her, only to collapse on the couch in the Slytherin common room at sunrise in exhaustion.

The school had broken into a frenzy the next morning, searching for the Gryffindor princess, with no luck. By the end of November first, Hermione Granger had been declared a missing person. Her friends, Slytherin and Gryffindor alike, were united by a collective worry for their friend. No matter how many search parties they organized, it wasn't enough.

Now, Draco Malfoy had a few things to consider. The Dark Lord Himself expected him to devise a plan to kill Dumbledore. So the young boy took a weak, desperate shot in his mission in order to prove to the dark wizard that he was truly trying. A cursed necklace, one that landed Katie Bell in the hospital, something that sparked so much guilt that it acted as a tipping point in his remaining sanity.

Regardless of his missing girlfriend, he was required to attend his classes. To his credit, he did. He even was the best in his class at Apparition by far, no doubt from experience. He had opted to take his Apparition test early and passed it with ease. But he was a shell of a person, a body with no soul.

He smoked frequently, in between classes and at mealtimes. He liked filling his body with smoke. It was empty, anyways.

The sole reason his body was still functioning was his friends, forcing him to eat at every meal. Without them, he would have rotted away to nothing.

Draco attended his classes every day. However, when the sun set, it was a different story.

Every night, Draco would follow the burning feeling in his ring, leading him south, blindly following the one connection he had to the girl he loves. He would do so all night, running and running and running, only slowing to a walk when his legs gave out. *Hold on, Granger, Draco pleaded to her in his mind. I'm coming. I'll always find you. I promised.*

When the sun began to wake, he would mark his stopping point and Apparate to right in front of the school. The next night, he would Apparate to where he left off and continue searching. Draco was lucky to get an hour or two of sleep. His friends had stopped asking where he went every night, because he never bothered to answer, and every morning he would wake with more purple under his eyes. He survived off of coffee and sheer will.

Draco was no fool. He knew it was likely that the girl was hurt, hurting, if not dead. That thought alone threatened to destroy him. He was supposed to keep his promises. He was supposed to protect her. *I won't let anyone hurt you*, he had vowed to her. It was quite a battle within him. He didn't know who he hated more, whoever took Hermione or himself.

He had been searching every night for over a month. Nothing prepared him for that amount of complete agony.

It was exceptionally lonely, being Draco Malfoy without Hermione Granger.

"I know what you did, Malfoy. You hexed her, didn't you?"

Draco's eyes shot open to find Harry in the reflection of the mirror, glaring, wand pointed. Draco's eyes were sunken in, his skin deathly pale and splotched with purple. Draco took one look at Harry's pointed wand and descended into a place of darkness, a place of pure nothingness, a place where Draco went in his mind to feel numb.

A duel began. Sinks exploded, bathroom stalls were shattered. Water quickly flooded the bathroom, swishing and swirling.

Draco landed hard on the wet floor, sliding and slipping, pulling him out of his trance. Things began to register, and he realized he was fighting the best friend of the girl he loves. Harry shot another hex from around the bend, and he barely dodged it.

"Please, Potter," Draco begged, trying to talk over the running water. "I... I can't *do* this without Granger. And in order to find her, it's cruci—"

"Sectumsemptra!"

Draco was knocked back, landing flat on his back in the churning water and hitting his head, stars twinkling across vision. White hot pain burst through him, but he stared at the ceiling, too tired to scream. Thousands upon thousands of cuts appeared along his body, and the water turned red around him. Draco was surprised at that, that his blood colored the water so profusely. His life had lacked color since Halloween night. She took all the bright ones with her.

"Why would you do this?" Snape hissed, muttering incantations under his breath. The cuts began to close, but the scars would remain. *I'll look like a shattered ceramic poorly glued back together*, Draco thought emotionlessly.

"He.... he was going to use the Cruciatus Curse on me," came Harry's stunned voice.

Crucial, Draco thought wryly. *I was trying to say it's crucial for us to work together*. He opened his mouth to say it out loud but shut it again.

He was just so, so tired.

November 21, 1996

"Care for another bath in fire, girl?"

No.

"Talk."

Never.

But I was just so, so tired.

December 1, 1996

I thrashed in their arms as they carried me kicking and screaming towards the tub full of salt water. I did what I always did, using all my strength to turn to my right. A sob escaped my lips at the brief burning at my wrist, a reminder of him, my one moment of solace.

I love you, Draco. I'm such an idiot kid, for never saying those three stupid words.

What do we say? Something about the moon and dying happily. I should have said it straight up to you, at least once.

I love you, I love you, I love you. For infinity.

There's no one else. You're the only one. If not it's you, it's not anyone.

You're it for me. Always.

If only you could hear me.

December 4, 1996

Hold on.

I am holding on. For him.

Only for him.

December 11, 1996

Music in my head distracts me, I discovered.

Hey now, hey now.

More fire demolishes my skin. Keep singing.

Don't dream it's over.

Piano keys and soft hands. Draco played it for me on the piano once, I believe.

White hot agony. I forgot how to scream.

Hey now, hey now.

December 12, 1996

Everything is numb.

I'm drowning. The waves are tossing my body around. The salt water fills my lungs.

But I have an anchor, a tether. An image of a raging storm. His eyes. Quicksilver.

I don't let go. My hands are raw and blistering, but I hold on.

December 14, 1996

I'm burning.

The flames licking my skin leave a wasteland behind.

"Talk, bitch, it's been long enough. We want our money."

Kill me. Please just kill me. Please.

Just tell him I'm sorry.

Tell him that I'm sorry that we didn't have more time. I thought we had the rest of our lives. But that month we spent together, that month that I was his, I'm grateful for it. I don't regret it, not one second of it.

They can't hear you, you stupid girl. It's all in your head.

He's coming. He'll always find me. He promised.

Chapter 32

December 16, 1996

“This can’t go on anymore, Draco.”

It was early in the morning before breakfast. Draco looked up from where he’s sitting on the edge of his bed buttoning his shirt. Pansy was standing over him. “What?”

Pansy sighed, sitting next to him and reaching for his shirt to finish buttoning it for him. “I know what you do every night. You follow the burning feeling in your ring, right?” She left the last three unbuttoned, knowing that’s how he likes to wear it. “Granger told me about that.”

Draco said nothing, but Pansy didn’t need confirmation to know it was the truth. She had known since that first night of November, when she had seen Draco return covered in mud and leaves. Pansy caught her friend’s hands in hers and pulled him up to his feet. He finally looked up at her with startled, bruised eyes. “Go,” Pansy said firmly. “*Find her.*”

Draco stared down at her, registering her words. “Don’t you think I try every damn night, Pans? But I have to go to class—”

“I’ll tell them you’re sick, okay?” Pansy interrupted. “So sick, in fact, that you have to go home for a week or two and you caught a train this morning.”

Draco continued to look down at her in bewilderment. Pansy exhaled, pulling her wand out of her robes and breathing out a rhythmic string of words. She placed her wand on the inside of her wrist. Draco started, “What are you doing?”

Pansy twirled the tip of her wand on her wrist and withdrew, wincing, pulling out a glowing golden thread. Her shoulders instantly sagged, her eyes fogging over. “Giving you all of my strength.” Draco opened his mouth in surprise, and she placed her wand on Draco’s wrist, the gold substance sinking into his skin. His eyes cleared, and the purple circles under his eyes faded. “You’re so tired, no wonder you haven’t found her yet. You need all the energy you can get.”

Draco gripped her fingers, staring into her hazel eyes. “Thank you,” he whispered.

Pansy nodded, grabbing his black trenchcoat and slipping it over his shoulders. “Just....” Her voice wavered, but she kept it together. Pansy Parkinson would not break. “Bring her *home*, Draco.”

Draco shot his best friend one more grateful look before sweeping out the door and shutting it behind him, only to find Theo standing before him, head tilted. His eyes were droopy and his face was pale. And in his hand his wand, a similar translucent golden thread flowing from it. Theo stepped forward, setting the thread on Draco’s forearm where it seeped into his veins. Draco felt immense power buzz through him, crackling in his blood. “Find our lost princess, will you, mate?”

Draco rolled his shoulders back, feeling more awake than he had in a long time. He took one look at Theo, slouching under the weight of exhaustion, and pulled him into his arms. Theo let out a surprised yelp, but hugged him back fiercely.

Draco released him and jerked his head at the door, telling Theo to go get his girl. He nodded in understanding, slipping through the door.

Draco took the spiral stairs three at a time, determination coursing through him. He stopped abruptly at the base of the steps, where Blaise was leaning against the railing with a golden thread of his own, dark smudges under his eyes. Blaise was silent as he gave Draco all of his energy. Electricity crackled within Draco, his eyes going wide. Blaise looked at him, telling him everything in one stare. They had always been able to do that, to understand each other without saying anything. Blaise clapped him on the back, a final farewell, before Draco shot like a bullet through the hallways, all the way to outside of the school wards. He immediately Apparated to his last stopping point.

With the energy of a thousand suns, he ran like hell to find Hermione Granger.

December 17, 1996

“I think we should go back to the skin peeling. Watching her writhe in liquid fire is so boring, in my opinion,” Ren suggested, taking a step toward me. “Not as satisfying. I can’t even hear her screams.”

Or you can just kill me. I’d prefer that.

Ryle shrugged, crossing his arms. “Whatever. I don’t care. She better start talking soon, though. This has gone on long enough.”

I did not flinch, I did not cower when Ren came closer. I just hope that when he raises his wand, it’s to kill me.

“Reducto!”

The door of the cabin exploded open, knocking Ren and Ryle off of their feet. I shut my eyes as dust and debris rained down on me. I squinted to see through the destruction. There was a figure standing in the doorway, wand outstretched, coat flowing behind them in the winter winds. My eyes adjusted as snowflakes tumbled in and turned about the room. The faint sunlight filtered in, revealing mussed blonde hair curling over raging quicksilver eyes, staring right at me. My bracelet burned against my skin, pulsing over and over like a siren.

My heart stuttered, almost stopping at the sight of Draco. I blinked, once, twice, expecting him to disappear. But he stayed where he was, staring at me across the room.

He found me. Just like he promised.

His eyes darted around the room, focusing in on my tied arms and legs and finally landing on Ren and Ryle, groaning on the floor. I swear that the air trembled around Draco as he stalked over, the fury of a million storms churning in his eyes. Teeth bared, it was a Draco I didn’t recognize when he raised his wand and did not hesitate, growling, *“Avada Kedavra.”*

I squeezed my eyes shut, green light bursting across my eyelids. I heard grunting. Ryle’s voice. Draco roared, and a slicing sound filled the room, something wet and warm splattering across my face. From the scraping of nails and the gurgling sound that followed, I knew that Draco had slit his throat.

The ropes around my wrists and ankles loosened, my limbs thumping to the ground. I whimpered, my teeth chattering. So, so cold. I curled into myself, coiling my legs into a fetal position.

Something warm was draped over me. Strong arms came under me and scooped me off the ground

easily, an abundance of warmth greeting me. Resting my cheek on his chest, I pried my eyes open. Draco was panting, mouth open, his burning gaze raking over me. He was wearing a white dress shirt, the first three buttons undone. I remember him always wearing it like that. His black coat was wrapped around me. “Granger?” His voice was a rasp.

A test slid down my cheek, and I clawed and scratched at his chest desperately, just to keep reminding myself that he was here. He was real. More tears silently streaked down my cheeks as I gripped him. Draco Draco Draco.

“I found you,” Draco whispered, his voice completely broken and raw. His rough hand cupped my cheek, trembling against my skin. “I’ll always find you.”

I closed my eyes, heaving breaths, burying my face in the fabric of his shirt, inhaling. Mint. Library books. Smoke, a lot more than I remembered. Coffee. Honey. Green grapes. Him.

I recognized the funny feeling of Apparition in my stomach. When I opened my eyes, Draco was laying me down. His face hovered over mine, his hands shaking as he adjusted his coat over me. “Sleep,” he whispered. I didn’t object.

December 18, 1996

It’s too hot in here.

That’s the first thing I thought when I woke up, prying my eyes open.

I’m staring straight at a fire.

The air rushed out of me and I staggered into a sitting position, dragging myself onto the floor into a corner and away, away from the fire, from the burning, the burning, oh, the *burning*—

Draco walked in with a glass of water, and I’m shocked to see him before I remember what happened. He found me. His eyes widened, and he quickly set the glass down on a brown coffee table and rushed over, kneeling before me. “It’s okay. It’s just me, Granger. It’s Draco.”

I continued to breathe heavily, gasping, my eyes darting to the fireplace. He followed my gaze, turning back to me. “The fire?”

Words refused to form in my throat, so I nodded. Draco ran and doused the fire. He returned, his arms outstretched. “There, I put it out, okay?”

My heart continued to race, but I nodded anyway. Gently, he picked me up and set me back down on the couch. “You’re safe now,” he said, sitting beside me.

I took this opportunity to finally take in my surroundings. The couch we were on was soft and cream colored with coral throw pillows. The walls were white, the floors a faded light brown. There was a matching wooden coffee table between the couch and the fire, where Draco’s glass of water sat. There were a few decorations, shells and beach themed items. On the mantle, what looked to be a picture of Draco as a boy was framed. “Where are we?”

“The safe house in Switzerland.”

I turned back to him, my mind flooding with the events that had occurred before I fell asleep. “You killed them,” I stated simply.

Draco swallowed, eyes trailing to the floor. “That indescribable urge to hurt, to kill... it came over me, consumed me. I never thought...” He hesitated. “That I would ever kill someone. I never wanted to. But I did. I’m sorry for having to do it in front of you.”

“I’m not,” I said honestly.

He smiled sadly at that. “Good. I don’t regret it one bit.” He cleared his throat, and I almost burst into tears at the sight of him tilting his head, his hair falling over his eyes, a sight that had only lived in my dreams for so long. “Do you wanna talk about it?”

Black eyes, rolled skin, peeling, fire. “No.”

“That’s alright.”

I looked at Draco, Draco, the boy who bled for me, the boy who killed for me. “Can you...”

He straightened, ready to help me with anything I needed. “Yes?”

“Can you just hold me?” I whispered.

Draco nodded, his mouth a tight line, scooching closer and wrapping his arms around me, laying my head to rest in the crook of his shoulder. “I’ve got you, Granger.”

Sleep took me once more.

December 20, 1996

I yawned, opening my eyes. Draco was looking down at me, my head in his lap. His expression shuttered before I could read it. “What time is it?” I grumbled.

“Seven thirty at night,” he answered quietly, stroking my hair.

“Okay.”

“Are you hungry?”

My stomach grumbled in answer, and he gave me a weak smile. “I’ll get you something.” He tenderly slipped out from under me and headed to the kitchen.

I sat up, bringing my knees up to my chest, pulling his coat tighter around me. I wasn’t cold, but I needed to be covered, needed to be concealed after being so exposed for so long.

Draco came back in with a bowl full of strawberries, setting it in between us. “Is this good?”

My mouth watered at the sight of them, and I shoved two in my mouth right away, moaning softly when the coveted flavors coated my tongue.

I kept chewing and chewing, and Draco said with overwhelming gentleness, “You don’t have to talk about anything unless you’re comfortable.”

“I used to love swimming,” I said abruptly. Draco blinked. I almost smiled at my memories. I didn’t. “My dad takes me to the pool or the beach almost every day in the summer. I’ve known how to swim for as long as I can remember.”

He cocked his head, waiting for me to continue.

“I liked the way the water slipped over my skin. How cold and smooth the water was.” I paused, taking a deep breath as tears ran down my cheeks. When did I start crying?

Draco grasped my hand, rubbing circles with his thumb, and my body jerked with memory. “Don’t push yourself.”

I finished my strawberries and slept again.

—

I stared at the fireplace, where fire blazes if someone lights one.

A billion. I think that’s how many things ran through my mind.

Black eyes, rolled skin, peeling, fire, burn, burn, burn.

I spent three days staring and thinking of the burning.

—

December 23, 1996

“Let me show you.”

Draco looked up from where he was sitting on the couch, starting. I hadn’t spoken in days, I had eaten what he gave me in silence. He crawled closer, studying me. “What?”

“I’ll show you my memories,” I said, fighting to keep my voice steady. “Use Legilimens.”

His eyes guttered. “Are you sure—”

“Please, Draco,” I begged, fighting harder to keep the tears at bay. I’m always fighting. “I can’t...”

He nodded, taking my hands in his. “Okay.” He took a deep breath, raising his wand and pointing it at me. “Legilimens!”

I opened the steel cage wide, letting him in. I held nothing back, shoving forward every single moment and feeling and thought. Salt water. Clicking heels. The tub. Peeling. Vomit. Raw rabbit shoved down my throat to keep me barely alive.

When he pulled out of my mind, he fell back on the couch, as if he took a physical blow. I watched as Draco stood up, kicking the coffee table over, the cups and plates shattering on the floor. He swept the contents on the mantle onto the floor, and I saw the framed picture of him break apart. He clawed his fingers down his face, and turned to face me, anguish and sorrow and so much guilt. “Damn it, Granger, I— I’m *sorry*, I’m so sorry—”

I shook my head over and over and over. “It’s not your fault.”

He rushed forward, cupping my face in his hands, holding me desperately, and I thought to myself that no one should be able to survive the amount of suffering etched on his expression. “I promised I wouldn’t let anyone hurt you, I failed you, I *failed* you, Granger—”

“Look at me,” I said, my voice thick. His eyes flashed, gluing onto mine. “You are the reason I am here. You have *nothing* to be sorry for, do you hear me?” He looked down in defeat, but I gripped

his chin and forced him to look at me. “You saved me,” I said, putting all my strength and force into my words. “I *always* knew you would.”

Draco brought his forehead to mine, his lips hovering, his breath fanning across my cheeks. His eyes held a question, and I nodded. He surged forward and engulfed my lips, wrapping his arms around me. A sob broke out of me, and I clutched at his hair, pulling the strands between my fingers. Draco. *Draco*. “I heard your thoughts.” He kissed my collarbone. “Goddamn, I love you too, Granger. Infinitely.” A kiss on my neck. “I love you.” Another on my cheek. “I love you.” He brought his lips to each corner of my mouth before finally devouring me again. “I’ve been wanting to say it for years. I should’ve told you.”

“I love you, Draco,” I cried against his lips, hugging him as tight to my body as I could.

He pulled back, wiping my tears with a few brushes of his thumbs, smiling gently. “You must feel dirty, yeah?” I blinked, looking down at myself and realizing how foul I must smell. I sniffed, recoiling at my sour scent. “Do you want to take a bath?”

Struggling against their grip as they carried me to the tub, salt water, burning... Air left me again, and I can’t breathe, and black eyes, and I can’t breathe—

“Shhh, it’s okay,” Draco assured, wiping my tears again as his expression filled with understanding. “Is a shower alright?”

I nodded, and he helped me to my feet and walked me over to a white door, which he opened for me. Inside was a sink, a mirror, a toilet, a shower and a tub, decorated in the same beach theme.

He helped me ease his black coat off of my shoulders and it crumpled on the floor, leaving me in my bra and underwear. My whole body was covered in dirt. I winced, embarrassed that Draco was seeing me in this disgusting state. And then I noticed his stare, his expression pained, focused on the lines running down the sides of my body.

Oh.

I glanced over at the mirror, sucking in a breath at the girl before me. She was thin, really thin, barely more than skin clinging to bones. Her rib cage protruded starkly. A thin, red line ran down the side of her arm, her torso and her leg, seemingly all connecting to form one. There was a matching one along the other side of her body. Where they peeled her.

I gulped, but I looked back at Draco and managed a grim smile. “I’m okay.”

Draco took a shuddering breath, gently taking my hands in his and leading me over into the shower. He turned it on, and some water sprayed onto him. I smiled, really smiled at that, and he chuckled, stepping into the shower with me and reaching down to slip his soaked shirt off so he was just in his black pants.

My smile vanished immediately at the sight of him, and I had to brace my hand on the shower wall to keep myself upright. Thousands of purple slices smothered his body, each no bigger than an inch, covering his entire torso.

“Oh, Draco,” I whispered, running my fingers over his stomach muscles. “What happened to you?”

“I’m okay,” Draco assured me, parroting my earlier words. He covered my hand with his. “I’ll tell you later.”

“You need to fill me in on everything that happened while I was gone.”

He eased me under the stream of warm water. Warm, not hot. Not burning. Good. He made sure of that. “I don’t want to overwhelm you.”

“I’ve spent three days in my thoughts. I want to know.”

“One thing at a time, Granger.” Draco ran his fingers through my curls, tilting my head back tenderly. “Let’s get you clean.”

Chapter 33

After Draco thoroughly washed my hair and tenderly washed my body with soap, he dried me with a wave of his wand and gave me a green sweatshirt of his to wear. It was too big, hanging halfway down my thighs, but I liked it like that. And it smelled like him. I liked that, too.

Draco left my hair wet, because he said he remembers how nicely it dries after I shower. “In perfect bushy curls” were his exact words.

“So, to recap: I’ve been gone for over a month, and you found me on December seventeenth and it’s now the twenty third.”

I was sitting on the couch wrapped in his sweatshirt, my curls still clinging to droplets of water. Draco sat beside me, and he had changed into a simple black jumper.

“You told the professors about your ring pointing you south, and they told you they would search south and take care of it. But you didn’t feel right trusting them to find me, so you looked for me every night anyways.” Draco nodded, and I continued. “My friends, from Slytherin and Gryffindor alike, organized search parties south as well, but they never got very far. All the while, Blaise and Luna started dating, and Harry and Ginny, too, right?”

He nodded again. “Called that in second year, you know. In Flourish and Blotts. I knew it’d happen eventually.”

I smiled at his attempt to lighten the mood, and swallowed when I resumed. “You had to show some effort in your mission, so you cursed a necklace and wrapped it and gave it to Katie Bell to give to Dumbledore. You didn’t know she would open it and touch it, and she’s in the hospital.” Draco winced ashamedly, but I reached forward and clasped his hand in mine.

“Harry... He confronted you about Katie. You were out of it, and you two had a duel in the bathroom. You tried to tell Harry it was *crucial* for you two to work together to find me, but all he heard over the running water was the first part of the word ‘crucial’, so he assumed you were trying to use the Cruciatus Curse. He struck you with *Sectumsempra*, which quite literally means ‘several cuts’.” My eyes lingered on his chest, the beautiful pale skin covered in purple slashes. I pursed my lips together, imagining him bleeding out in the water.

He squeezed my fingers, smirking a little. “Don’t cry on my behalf, Granger. I handled it. I mean, look at me. Handsome as ever.” I laughed, sniffing my tears back.

“Also, why do you smell so much more like smoke than I remember?” I inquired, taking another sniff of his sweatshirt. All the other scents were still there, but the presence of smoke was much more prominent.

Draco shrugged, though there was nothing casual in his expression. “Helped me pass the time without you.”

“I keep telling you that it’s an awful habit.”

“But a sexy one,” he smirked.

I laughed, unable to disagree with him. But my amusement quickly faded when I began to think about what happened between Harry and Draco.

“I know Harry,” I insisted quietly, but not weakly. “He wouldn’t have done that to you if he didn’t think—”

“I know.” Draco shook his head. “I call him Saint Potter for a reason. Just an unfortunate situation, that’s all.”

I looked him up and down, mustering a wry smile. “We both made it out with some pretty sick scars.”

Draco grinned, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. He glanced at the clock above the fireplace, standing up quickly and pulling me to my feet. “Are you feeling okay?” He asked me, scanning me up and down. “Any surges of panic? Can you breathe alright?”

I furrowed my brow in slight confusion. “I’m fine. A lot better, actually. Why?”

Relief flooded his features, and he extended his arm between us, the position for Side Along Apparition. I looked up at him curiously. “Trust me, Granger.”

I nodded, placing my arm over his, intertwining our fingers. “Always.”

My stomach tumbled, and I shut my eyes against the harsh winds rumbling through the cracks in this world. Peeking one eye open, I recognized the layout of the lobby of St. Mungo’s. Oh. I was here to get medical attention. Probably overdue, but it wasn’t what I was expecting. I was about to thank Draco for his concern, but stopped short when I took in who was standing twenty feet ahead of us. I inhaled sharply, my eyes flooding instantly as I beheld the woman with olive skin and the man with bushy brown hair. I staggered forward, stuck in a haze. Mum stumbled into me, encasing me in her strong arms. And when Dad hugged the both of us and we sank to the floor, I wept.

My mum did not ask what happened to me, did not overwhelm me with questions. She just held me, my head on her shoulder, stroking my hair, crying. My dad had not taken his eyes off of me this entire time. I gave him a small smile, one that he returned with trembling lips.

I looked around my dad at Draco, who was smiling at me, looking the happiest I had seen him in a long time. Probably since Halloween night. Dad followed my gaze, barreling Draco with an intense stare. I gulped, unsure what to expect, but then Dad reached out and gripped Draco’s wrist, pulling him down to the floor and into our group hug. Draco’s eyes widened briefly, but relaxed into our collective embrace when I grinned at him through my tears.

“Thank you for bringing her home, son,” Dad murmured, shooting Draco an approvingly fatherly stare and squeezing him tighter.

More sobs escaped my lips at the sight of Draco, looking at my father like he was the greatest man in the world. Draco nodded, his face full of awe.

Mum pulled back from me, keeping her hands on my elbows. She raised her brow at Draco before looking at me. “This is the same Draco you’ve always written to me about, yes? The ‘absolutely perfect and stunning boy’ and ‘dreamy boyfriend’?”

I blushed furiously. “*Mum!*”

Both Draco and Dad burst into laughter, throwing their heads back and howling.

—

Doctor Bennett took me into a private room, and I sat nervously on the cot. He mostly muttered to

himself, waving his wand for some scans. He asked me a few questions regarding my torture, and I explained my situation as best as I could. Mum started crying again, and Dad had to take her out of the room to compose herself. I would have cried, too, if not for Draco's comforting hand on the small of my back, rubbing circles with his thumb.

It helped the both of them knowing that Draco had killed my tormentors; he had told them discreetly in the corner. I was afraid of how they would react, finding out that my boyfriend murdered two people. But they felt just as I did, if not more so: grateful. They both hugged him firmly, to which Draco stood still in shock before sinking into their embrace. From the look in Dad's eyes, I knew he would have hunted them down and killed them himself if Draco hadn't.

"There are a few things we need to discuss," Doctor Bennett said after leaving for around twenty minutes to analyze the results. "First off, the spells you described, Miss Granger, were in fact the perfect spells for torture. They were carefully designed to inflict pain, but to not cause any lasting damage to the body. This way, the torture could stretch on for long periods of time. There is nothing wrong with your body physically, save for your scars and your weight. A healthy diet should get your weight right where it needs to be again.

"Now, as for the scans we did on your brain..." He hesitated, shifting on his feet. Draco continued to run circles on my back, and I braced myself, holding my breath.

"The severe pain caused by the spells sent magical cracks through your brain. As of now they are dormant and inconsequential, but over time they will grow more and more troublesome. These cracks will act similar to vacuums, sucking in your memories. Sadly, not even your photographic memory will be able to sustain this. The effects are similar to what Muggles call dementia. My projection is that by the time you're sixty, you will have no memories left."

A million years wouldn't have been enough time to brace me for that blow.

I felt a panic surging in waves, one after the other, and I kept shoving them down but more kept rising. The thought of not being able to remember my parents, my friends, Draco, *myself*...

Draco continued to rub circles, never faltering, but he was tense beside me, his jaw clenched, his eyes hard.

"There is nothing that can be done," Doctor Bennett finished, and his sympathetic features make me want to vomit. "My deepest condolences."

"There's really nothing we can do?" Mum asked, her voice shaking with more tears.

"I'm afraid not. Muggles and wizards alike have been working for years to find a cure, to no avail."

"She writes in her diary every day," Draco said quietly, his tone hard, raising his gaze to Doctor Bennett. "She writes every single detail. Could that help?"

"How do you mean?"

"What if I read her diary to her?" Draco turned to me, staring at me with his grey eyes so intensely that I think I might shatter. "Would it help her remember?"

Doctor Bennett shook his head. "It's never been done before, so I can't give you a concrete answer, but the probability is slim. The magical wounds within her brain are irreversible."

"I'll do it regardless." The smallest of smiles for me.

“You’re getting ahead of yourself,” I teased, trying to take my mind off of my prognosis. “How do you know we’ll still be together?”

“I have no doubts about you and I, Granger.”

Dad cleared his throat.

I almost cackled when all the color drained from Draco’s face and he said cautiously, “If that’s okay with you, Mr. Granger.”

“I’ll make you work for it,” he grunted.

“Oh, stop it,” Mum fussed, winking at Draco. This had the opposite effect of Dad’s words, because Draco flushed furiously. This time, I let myself release a giggle.

“I’ll give you some time to yourselves.” Doctor Bennett said as his parting words, exiting the room.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m so sorry,” Mum whispered, holding my hand in hers. Dad kissed me on the cheek, grief shining in his eyes.

“I thought that’s what I would always have, over everything else,” I murmured, to no one in particular but myself. I think of my endless diary entries, everything I see and hear and taste and smell and *feel*. “My memories.”

Mum kissed my forehead, lingering there. “We will be with you no matter what. Over everything else.”

Draco tucked a curl behind my ear, and I turned to face him. “Be honest with me, okay?”

“Of course I will.”

“Are you feeling alright?” His eyes darted between mine.

I rolled my eyes at his overprotectiveness. “Yes, Draco, I’m fine. A bit sad, but fine.”

“Okay.” His eyes sparkled. “I have one more thing.”

My parents stood up, both of them kissing me on the cheek before heading towards the door, apparently in on whatever was going on. Draco turned the knob and opened the door, and my mouth dropped open as seven people trickled in, gathering at the foot of my bed.

“Hey, princess,” Theo grinned, wrapping his arms around me firmly.

I gasped, hugging my friend ecstatically. “I can’t believe you’re all here!”

Theo kept grinning, eyes shining, as he stepped back. Ginny came forward next, embracing me “Hermione, we’ve been worried sick!” I gave her a look, one that I knew she would understand: I missed her, and that the two of us would talk later. Her answering smile let me know she got the message.

“Bloody hell, thank Merlin,” Ron cried out, joining the hug. “I would’ve died if you didn’t come back.” I pulled him closer, relaxing in the comfort he gave me.

Harry sat in front of me, tears clear in his green irises. “I’m so happy you’re okay, Mione.” Ron and Ginny had released me, so Harry hugged me, gripping my back. “I love you,” Harry whispered

in my ear, just for me. “So much.”

“I love you, too,” I whispered, clinging to him.

“Well, yes she’s okay, but she probably went through hell and back.”

Harry groaned, standing up and scoffing. “You know what I mean, Ron.”

And then Pansy was there, and I squealed in delight at the sight of her. She pulled me into her arms, sighing in my hair. I was getting a *lot* of hugs. But I loved each one. “I’ve missed you, Granger,” Pansy said, pulling back and clasping my hands in hers. She jerked her thumb behind her. “I’ve had to deal with the three of them *alone*.”

“Four, Pansy,” Luna corrected, tilting her head. I had noticed her when they all walked in, but this was the first time she spoke. “Are there Nargles swarming around your head? Is that why you cannot add your numbers properly?” She squinted. “I don’t see any Nargles. That must not be it, then.”

Blaise let out a loud snort from where he stood beside Luna, his arm snaked around her waist. Theo was less subtle with his reaction, howling obnoxiously, only stopping when Pansy sent him a withering glare.

“It’s wonderful to see you, Hermione,” Luna remarked, smiling softly.

I returned her smile. “Hello, Luna.”

“Yes, yes, Blaise found his princess in shining colorful glasses, blah blah,” Pansy moaned, waving her hand, but she was grinning. I knew she was stupidly happy for them.

Blaise left Luna’s side, coming forward and kissing my temple. “I missed you tons. Our group lacks much needed brain power without you.”

“I have high marks, Zabini, so I have no clue who you’re referring to,” Theo retorted. He pointed to his girlfriend and said smugly, “Must be that girl.”

“We’ve been together for what, almost three months now, and you still tease me at every chance you get.”

“Part of my irresistible charm, Pans.”

I shot a grateful look to my boyfriend standing in the corner of the room, who just smirked.

—

All my friends left after talking with me for an hour or so. It was Christmas Eve Eve, for Merlin's sake. They needed to get home. Harry, Ron and Ginny happily left for the Burrow.

My Slytherin friends, however, were not all enthused. They would much rather stay at Hogwarts for the holiday, they told me, but their parents made them come back. Big surprise, that their parents were forcing them into something they didn’t want to do.

Our goodbyes were short and sweet, knowing we would see each other after break. My parents were waiting downstairs for me. Then it was just Draco and I.

He was standing in front of me in the lobby, his grip light around my fingers. “Come with me,” I pleaded, looking up at him desperately.

His eyes were sad, his grip tightening slightly. “If only I could. But I have to keep my appearances up with... Him. He’ll likely drop by during break.”

I sighed, running my hands down his arms. “But I just got you back.”

Draco pressed his forehead against mine, unyielding steel. “And you won’t ever lose me again.”

I nodded against him, letting the weight of his words sink into me. “Promise me you’ll write.”

Draco pressed his lips on mine. “Every day.”

Chapter 34

December 25, 1996

“Waffles are ready!” Dad called from the kitchen.

“What do you say?” Mum asked. She snuggled up on the couch next to me and flipped the TV on, surfing through the channels, landing on a black and white screen. “‘It’s A Wonderful Life’?”

I smiled, resting my head on her shoulder. We watch the movie every year. “Sounds great, mum.”

An owl flew through the window, dropping a small package on my lap and exiting through the other window. My smile grew when I recognized the scrawled handwriting. Tearing the wrapping paper, I took the lid of the tiny white box.

A golden charm the size of a pea sat inside. It was a crescent moon. I picked it up, holding it in front of me. It seemed to glow all on its own. Still smiling, I clipped the charm onto my bracelet, right by the earbud charm.

I unfolded the tiny piece of paper in the lid, a short note in that familiar script:

To remind you how beautiful the moon is.

Happy Christmas, Granger.

Draco Malfoy sat at his black marble desk in his room, muttering to himself as he read *Lord of the Flies*. These Muggle books were getting disturbingly interesting. I mean, he had never heard of such a thing, a group of young boys stranded on an island together. If they’re anything like the stubborn boys he’s grown up with, chaos would surely take hold, he thought with amusement.

Narcissa Malfoy kissed her son on the cheek, sweeping towards the door. “I’ll meet you for some tea and Christmas cookies in the Library in an hour, dear?”

“Sounds great, mum,” Draco gave his mother a soft smile and continued to read, flipping the page with enthusiasm.

“Maybe you can play something for me on the piano,” Narcissa thought aloud, keeping her smile at bay. “Maybe that song Hermione loves?”

Draco’s lip twitched, knowing exactly what his mother was up to. “Alright.” Narcissa smiled to herself as she left the room.

An owl swooped in, dropping a large package in front of Draco on his desk. He immediately recognized the neat handwriting and tore the present open. He tilted his head, examining the black leather notebook. Leafing through a few pages, his breath caught. He glimpsed dates at the top of the pages, his name flashing in almost every passage. He opened the front cover, where he found a short note in the same writing:

To familiarize yourself with the material for the future. You know, since you don’t have the pleasure of having a photographic memory like I do.

Happy Christmas, Draco.

Draco sunk back against his chair, running his hand through his hair. She had made a copy of her diary. He wondered if it updated whenever she wrote in it. Turning to the first blank page, his mouth fell open as he watched Hermione's writing appear on the page in real time: "You're welcome."

Every morning, I rushed to gather the post, sifting through to find those addressed to me.

Every single letter came from him.

Draco wrote of how his mother was doing, how he spent his time reading in the Manor Library, and his very strong and detailed opinions on the Muggle books I was making him read. He said his mum heard so much about me that she knows me almost as well as he does, and that she can't wait to finally meet me. He told me that I would love the library, and that someday it would be mine. His opinions on Lord of the Flies consisted of phrases like "revolutionary symbolism" and "recurring theme of hierarchy and injustice". My thoughts exactly, Draco.

He also had quite a few reactions to reading my diary.

You make me sound like a Greek god. Rightfully so.

This doesn't seem like a diary, honestly. It's more like the Draco Saga.

I like that word you use for the color of my eyes. Quicksilver. Much better than grey.

Why do you think my skin is so hot? Do I really make you that nervous? Well you make me nervous too, Granger.

That's what turns you on? Tilting my head and my hair falling over my eyes? Noted.

He never talked about Death Eaters, or his father, or Voldemort. I don't blame him.

I replied to every single letter. I told him about some Muggle Christmas traditions my family partakes in, such as opening one present on Christmas Eve and putting candy canes in our hot cocoa. I told him how my parents were careful to never spark a fire, despite it being winter. Thank Merlin for electric heaters. I told him not to worry about me, and that I was doing much better.

Yet nothing could stop the nightmares, forcing me to relive everything. The pain, the screams... I woke up in cold sweat, only calming down when mum laid with me and rocked me back to sleep, singing lullabies under her breath.

I made sure to think ahead. Before Rita Skeeter could get a jump on writing an article about my freedom, delving into details the public shouldn't know, I sent her a Howler threatening to keep her in a jar again if she ran the story. That would keep her mouth shut.

I told Draco about that, too, and he said I should be careful; my Slytherin side was showing.

December 31, 1996

I looked down at my parents from the balcony. They were standing in the backyard with an arm around each other, each of them holding glasses of champagne and staring into each other's eyes with an almost overwhelming amount of adoration. A twinge of sadness shot through me, missing

Draco a little extra. The radio crackled beside me, turned to full volume, the New Years countdown cutting clear across the crisp night air.

“One minute left.”

I whirled, and Draco was leaning against the doorframe with his arms and legs crossed. My breath caught when I took in the sight of him: He looked incredible in a classic black tuxedo, and the first few buttons were undone as always. His hair was neatly combed with gel and looked a little shorter. His nails were painted electric blue, making his eyes appear even brighter. And I felt embarrassed when I cast a quick look over myself and realized how I must look in comparison in my denims and white tank top.

“Draco!” A grin spread across my face. “How are you here?”

He stepped onto the balcony, sliding his hands into his pant pockets, his eyes dragging over my entire body. “I slipped away from my mother’s party for a minute to supposedly use the loo.”

“Only a minute?”

He shrugged. “Maybe two.”

I laughed, gesturing to my attire. “I’m a bit underdressed for you.”

Draco shook his head and hummed, running his hands down my arms and leaving goosebumps in the wake. His eyes held the same devotion I glimpsed in my parents. “You’re perfect.”

I blushed, looking up at him through my lashes. “Are you going to make a new year’s resolution?”

“Of course.”

“Tell me.”

“Well then it won’t come true.”

I giggled. “I think that’s for birthday wishes.”

“Either way, I’m not taking any chances.”

I smiled, glancing down at my parents. “I’m not making a resolution.”

He tilted his head. “Why’s that?”

I locked my hands around Draco’s neck, drinking him in. “I have everything I need.”

The countdown closed in, ten seconds left. With each passing second, Draco leaned in closer and closer, bowing his head. When the last second ticked, his lips brushed mine, a featherlight kiss.

“Happy new year, Granger,” Draco murmured, breathing into me.

I couldn’t take his teasing anymore, and I pulled him hard against me, crashing our lips together, devouring him. Fireworks burst both within me and in the sky above us.

January 26, 1996

“Let’s get out of here,” Pansy suggested.

We were lounging in the Slytherin common room after another school day. Draco and I occupied one couch, my legs strewn perpendicular across his. Pansy and Theo were on the couch across from us, her head in his lap as she stared thoughtfully at the ceiling. Blaise sat in his usual chair, his legs wide so Luna could sit between them. We had all quickly changed out of our robes after class ended, eager to get into more comfortable clothes. We had gone through a few rounds of Wizarding Chess (I beat Draco, much to his dismay), and we were utterly bored, given that our professors remarkably didn’t give us any homework over the weekend.

“And where would we go?” Draco responded, his eyes flitting to Pansy curiously.

An image pushed its way through my mind. “I have an idea,” I offered.

Pansy glanced at me sideways. “All ears.”

“There’s a park in New York that I think everyone would love.”

“New York?” Theo perked up. “As in America?”

Pansy rolled her eyes. “What other place could she possibly be talking about?”

“I don’t know, somewhere that’s in the same country as us, or the same continent at least?”

“Granger and I are great at Apparition,” Draco added, smiling crookedly at me. “We can come back and forth and Side-Along everyone.”

Everyone agreed enthusiastically, so we quickly made our way off the school property to exit the Apparition wards. The air was crisp, feeling sharp in my lungs. It was already late at night, around nine o’clock in the evening, and the moon seemed to watch us and grow brighter as we ran across the grounds.

“Thanks for Apparating me, mum and dad,” Theo joked, grinning.

I laughed, waving him over in a motherly fashion. “Come to mum, son.”

Pansy paled slightly. “I’m not gonna be your daughter, right? Because then that would mean I can’t date Theo, that’s incest.”

“I don’t quite understand why we’re playing house, but I’ll happily be your mother, Pansy,” Luna said kindly, offering her a warm smile.

Blaise laughed, a clear ringing sound that only came out with Luna. “Behave yourself, daughter,” he scolded, playing along and pointing his finger at Pansy.

“I hate you. I’m running away from home.”

Draco took Blaise and Theo while I took Luna and Pansy. I made sure to describe the park to Draco in vivid detail so he could Apparate easily. We were in a clearing, a vast expanse of snow stretched underneath our feet. The time zone was a few hours behind, so the sky swirled with oranges and magenta. It was warm, with a slight chill as sunset steadily approached. We were surrounded by tall, grand trees of different varieties, oak and maple and elm, coated with a light layer of snowflakes. The buildings reached towards the clouds just beyond the park, glittering in the light.

“Wow,” Draco whispered. His eyes had glazed over in admiration, his hands deep in the pockets of

his grey pants. Minuscule snowflakes drifted, scattering across his white collar, his black crewneck sweatshirt, his blonde lashes, his pink cheekbones. A snow angel.

“What do you guys think?” I asked, turning to my other friends, who wore similar expressions of wonder.

Blaise shrugged. “Not too shabby, Granger.”

A puff of white powder burst across Blaise’s right cheek, who flinched and whirled in the direction it came from. Theo’s eyes blazed, tossing up another snowball in the air and releasing a low laugh. “Got you!”

“What are we, five?” Blaise complained, and Luna wiped the snow off his cheek with her thumb affectionately, a thoughtful look on her face.

“Five or sixteen, you can’t escape me and my wrath of snowballs!” Theo had managed to make multiple, and whirled one at each of us, his aim ringing true as each of us were struck with snowballs.

Pansy grinned, dropping to her knees to create snowballs. “Oh, it is *on*!”

And so began an elaborate and very serious snowball fight, with fortresses and alliances and planned attacks. It ended up being the girls against the boys, laughing and yelling as we hurled snowballs at one another as the sun melted into the skyline. It got completely dark, the only light the bright crescent moon and shimmering stars, and still we played, tackling one another and rolling in the snow.

It was no doubt one of the greatest nights of my life.

We finally tired, settling at a picnic table under the trees. “Spider!” Pansy warned, glaring at the insect crawling across the table.

“Don’t kill it,” Theo urged, his arm around her. “It has a life, a soul.”

“It’s not human.”

“Maybe it used to be.”

She looked up at him at this, surprise clear in her eyes. “Do you believe in that? Other lives after this one?”

Theo’s face was thoughtful, his brown eyes distant. “Yeah, I think I do. My mom did. She said she wanted to come back as a bird, because she always wanted to fly.” A sad smile.

“I don’t know.” Pansy shook her head, her expression conflicted and doubtful. “I don’t know if there’s anything after this. If this is it for me.” Her eyes bore into Theo’s. “If this is all I get.”

For once, his face wasn’t full of humor. His gaze was stern, and he wrapped her short hair around his fingers, twirling it. “There will be other lives, Pans.”

“I don’t know.”

“I know.”

“I believe that my mother reincarnated as a Crumple-Horned Snorkack. Her spirit has always been a free one, she would flourish in that form,” Luna said dreamily, her eyes fixed on the stars.

Blaise nodded. “I bet she is, and she's very happy.” Luna beamed at him.

I stared up at Draco, our hands interlocked under the table, his foot holding mine. “That would be nice, don’t you think? To find each other again in different bodies?”

His silver eyes glinted with complete certainty. “I could find you from a million miles away, Granger.”

My cheeks turned pink, not from the cold. “You really think so?”

He kissed me, fierce and hard. “I know so.”

I didn't like that he stopped kissing me. I leaned forward eagerly, but he continued, “Your unwarranted opinions and arguments are loud enough to hear across the world, how could I not find you?”

I giggled, rolling my eyes and shoving his face away. Arse.

Chapter 35

February 10, 1997

"You okay?"

The sun was setting, deep oranges and reds leaking through the windows. We were still dressed from class, but we shed our robes onto the floor so we were left in our dress shirts, him in his black pants and me in my skirt. I was sitting in between Draco's legs on his bed, my head in the crook of his neck as we both read our books in a comfortable silence. I was deep into my favorite book, *Hogwarts: A History*, while Draco read *A Tale of Two Cities*, my next recommendation for him. But he had stopped reading, his book still in his hands, and his heart pounded against me.

"He's getting more impatient with me." His voice was clear, stating a fact. He didn't need to say his name for me to know who he was talking about: the wizard he served, one he was forced to pledge his loyalty to, one who had given him a horrendous task.

I sat up, turning to face him and sitting on my knees between his legs. "You need to do something else, don't you? You need to show another attempt?"

The look in Draco's eyes was confirmation enough, but he shook his head. "I don't want to, Granger."

"I know, Draco."

He craned his neck at me, gears turning in his head, his expression resigned. "Do you think I can do some poisoned alcohol? I heard Slughorn mention buying a gift for Dumbledore, so that can work, it'll be wrapped. I'll use a poison pungent enough to smell so Dumbledore won't drink it, but I won't tell Voldemort that part."

I nodded, impressed at his plan. I smiled a little, reaching forward to lay my hand on his cheek. "I'm proud of you."

Draco's eyes darkened, and he took my hand off of his face. "You shouldn't be."

"But I am," I insisted. How could I not be?

His jaw clenched, and I watched thoughts dart across his features. "You know how I've been repairing the Vanishing Cabinet in the Room of Requirement?"

I remembered what he told me, the apple, the birds, the sister cabinet at Borgin and Burke's. "Yes, because the Death Eaters want to surpass the wards and get into Hogwarts that way, right?"

"Right." Draco sighed, raking his hand through his already unruly hair. "I figured out how to wholly fix it the first day, but I've been trying to repair it as slow as I can." His gaze was rock hard, desperation clawing under the surface. "I've been trying to keep things at bay as long as I can."

"I know," I whispered, edging my face closer to his. I placed my hands on his neck. "You're doing the best you can, and I am so, so proud of you for that."

He shook his head and his eyes darted down, as if he didn't like hearing my words. "It can't go on like this much longer."

"I know."

His eyes locked to mine, a storm rumbling to life. "I don't know if I'll be able to do it. Kill him."

Something burned within me. Hatred. Loathing for the evil man who kept hurting everyone I love. I took a deep breath, grazing my thumbs lightly over the skin on Draco's neck. "No matter what happens, I will never be angry with you. I will support you through anything, do you hear me?"

I felt him tense. "You'll support a killer?" His eyes flashed. "You'll be proud to have a murderer for a boyfriend?"

I released a breath, trying to think of how I can explain that I will never leave him. "Don't you forget that you've murdered two wizards, and I'm still here," I reminded, as gently as I could. "You have to stop resenting yourself."

His expression shuttered. He was closing in on himself, but I didn't want him to. I wanted him to let me see him. "I see their faces every night." His eyes closed shut. "Blue eyes and a round face. A thin one with black eyes."

Images of Ryle and Ren burst across my vision, and I almost cried out at the sheer fear that racked through me. "They were monsters," I rasped. "You saw the things they did to me."

His eyes open, wide and apologetic. "I know. Damn it, I know." He gripped my arms, his fingers trailing over my scars. "I don't regret it, not one bit. It just eats at me regardless. They were human beings."

I understand. No matter the type of person, a life is a life. "They would've told Bellatrix if you didn't kill them," I offered softly, attempting to console him.

He went rigid. "Do not speak her *goddamn* name."

"Draco—"

"She took you from me. She tortured you, she ruined your future." Draco's voice was rising, filling the room. "I hate her. I hate her more than Voldemort himself." His face was twisted with rage, contorted with overwhelming anger. "I'm going to kill Bellatrix. That's a promise." A laugh dripped between his teeth, bitter and rotten. "And I won't feel anything except joy. Because she's not a human being. She's a demon." The storm in his eyes was fully unleashed, destroying everything in its path. "And when the time comes, I'm going to be the one to condemn her back to Hell where she belongs."

If he were talking about anyone else, anyone at all, I would cry. I would hug him, beg him to revoke his promise. I would hold him, and I would tell him no. I would find a way to drain this ruthless fury burning within him.

Instead, I kissed him, hard. "I can't wait to see it."

February 12, 1997

"There's no way you expect me to believe that Captain Pam cried when Teddy got kidnapped," Pansy scoffed. I had met my friends in their common room and we were walking down to breakfast. Theo was telling us of Captain Pam's newest adventure, and Teddy had gotten kidnapped by a terrorist group called the Life Drinkers. Yes. The *Life Drinkers*.

"I agree," Luna piped, "it seems quite uncharacteristic of her." Pansy nodded adamantly.

"Oh, yes she did," Theo assured, clicking his tongue and jutting out his bottom lip in sympathy for his character. "Bawled her eyes out for days in her bed."

"Shouldn't she be out trying to find him?" Pansy countered, crossing her arms over her chest.

Theo pressed his lips together, trying to suppress a laugh. "She's on her period, so her emotions are getting the best of her."

Pansy reddened. "*Theodore Sileo Nott*—"

"Guys!"

We turned around and Harry ran up to us, panting and resting his hands on his knees. His face was flushed and he was heavily winded; he had clearly been running throughout the castle to find us.

"What is it, Harry?" I asked, panic rising in me as I stared into his wide eyes.

Harry swallowed. "It's Ron."

My heart sank, images of my best friend playing in my head: saving me from the troll, his sacrifice in real life wizard's chess, driving a flying car with Harry, defending me when Snape would insult me. My breath hitched in my throat, afraid of the worst. Warm fingers latched onto mine, and I savored the comfort Draco sent through me.

Harry didn't say another word, he just turned around and started walking in the direction of the infirmary. I stalked after him, hand in hand with Draco, who squeezed my hand once.

I wasn't at all surprised when all of my friends followed, their footsteps echoing close behind, pride shooting through me.

In the Infirmary, there were many people crowded around one bed. I spotted Professor McGonagall, Professor Dumbledore, and Professor Slughorn. I noticed Professor McGonagall raise her brow in surprise when she spotted the Slytherins. Her mouth twitched in what might have been a smile, but she said nothing. I inhaled sharply at the sight of Ron: he lay completely still in his cot, the color drained from his face and his lips a deep purple. Sitting beside him was Lavender Brown, who had become his girlfriend not too long ago. She was fussing over him, clutching his hand and stroking his hair out of his face. I remember I was so happy when Ron had told me about Lavender. I saw them together all the time nowadays, in the halls and in the common room. She sat with Ron for every meal, so I got to talk to her on the days I sat with the Gryffindors. They were good together. They matched.

"What happened?" I asked hoarsely, unable to take my eyes off of Ron.

"Poison in this bottle of mead." My head whipped towards Dumbledore, who was holding a bottle wrapped in brown paper. Draco went still beside me, his grip slacking in mine. "Thanks to Harry's quick thinking by feeding him a bezoar, he'll recover just fine."

Luna nodded appreciatively, tilting her head to examine Ron. "That, along with an infestation of Nargles swarming all around his head." Blaise's lip curved at that.

Theo stuck his hands in his pockets and bounced on the balls of his feet, letting out a low whistle. "Should we sing a get well song, or....?"

Pansy looked at him incredulously. "He's unconscious."

"Well, I'm sorry if I'm not quick on my feet with comforting someone who's passed out."

"So why would singing be the first solution that pops into your head?"

Theo gasped dramatically. "You act as if you have not heard my melodic voice, able to woo any woman."

"Let's just write a get well soon card and we can all sign it," Blaise suggested, cutting in. Everyone agreed, and he took a piece of parchment and a quill out of his bag.

The card was passed around to each of us, and we each wrote a short letter. "I still think my idea was better," Theo muttered under his breath before passing it to me. I wrote to Ron of how much I love him, and how I'll buy him whatever candy he wants at Honeydukes next time we go to Hogsmeade. I handed the materials to Draco, trying to read him, but he had his mask on, cold and unyielding. He scribbled something quickly and set the card on the bedside table, immediately marching off and out of the infirmary. Theo looked after him curiously, jerking his head at me to go follow. I nodded, taking off after him.

I liked that, I thought as I ran through the halls. I liked my friendship with Theo, how easily we understood one another.

Draco was nowhere in sight, so I followed the slight burning sensation my charm bracelet sent up through my wrist. It led me to an empty hallway, and I realized it was the hallway where Draco and I had argued the morning after Halloween, dressed as an angel and a demon, a cigarette stuck between his teeth. He was right there in that same spot, his arms braced on the ledge, his shoulders tense as he stared out the open window.

I approached him slowly, stopping behind him and putting my hand on his shoulder. "Draco?"

"I'm so sorry, Granger." His voice was rough.

I shook my head. "You can't have known Ron would drink it."

"It's my fault nonetheless."

"I don't blame you."

Draco spun around suddenly, his eyes aflame. "Why? Why are you so insistent on seeing the good in me?" He exhaled in exasperation, his nostrils flaring. "I almost killed your best friend, and you're not even mad at me. Do you realize how crazy that is?"

Is he serious? He wants me to blame him, even though it's no one's fault but the dark wizard forcing him to take on this mission?

Okay, fine. He wants mad? I'll give him *rage*.

"You want me to be mad?" I hissed, shoving his shoulder back. "Fine! I'm goddamn furious!"

"You should be!" Draco yelled, his fists clenched tightly at his sides.

"I'm absolutely infuriated with you!"

"Good!"

I shoved his chest, slamming him against the wall. "I'm so enraged with you that I can't breathe! But it's not because you put poison in a bottle, it's because you keep screwing yourself over, you keep beating yourself up for no reason!" I was screaming, the words pouring out of me. "You are a *boy*, Draco, a boy thrown into the shittiest situation in this whole messed up world! You keep blaming yourself for things out of your control, and I'm so sick of it! You refuse to accept that you are a good person, Draco, such a good person, the best goddamn person I know—"

Draco's hands shot out and grabbed my shoulders roughly, pulling me hard against him and smashing his mouth down on mine, my teeth clattering against his on the impact. I fisted my hands in his robes, clutching onto him. His mouth was hot and fast, his tongue diving in and exploring my mouth.

It took all of my willpower to wrench away, pressing my lips together and trying to stay mad at him. He can't just kiss me and expect me to forget. "I'm still angry," I huffed, crossing my arms over my chest.

He laughed and shook his head, dipping his chin as his hair swayed across his eyes. "You're insane."

"I'm the insane one? You—"

Draco slanted his lips over mine once more, softer this time, and yet it felt so much more intimate. He pulled back and rested his forehead against mine, breathing heavily. "I am so out of my mind in love with you, Hermione."

Hermione. He had just called me Hermione.

I opened my mouth to say so, but he brought his lips down to mine again, and this time I didn't push him away.

Chapter 36

June 25, 1997

The past few months had been peaceful. Fun. Happy. And I knew to cherish every moment, knew that war was coming, and everything would change.

"Why do I never see that creature?" Draco thought aloud, eyeing Crookshanks curled around my crossed legs. We were sitting across from each other on my bed, having finished dinner early to have some alone time.

I reached forward, stroking my cat's hair affectionately. "Crookshanks likes to stay here in my dorm or the common room."

Crookshanks prowled over to Draco slowly, and Draco scrunched his nose. "Nasty thing."

The orange cat snuggled on Draco's lap, who recoiled. I laughed, "He likes you."

"Get off of me, fur ball," he grunted, shooing at Crookshanks, his expression sour. But my cat did the opposite, nuzzling further into my boyfriend.

"Normally he doesn't get close to anyone, save for me and maybe Harry."

Draco warily placed his hand on Crookshanks, and his brow shot up. "He's soft."

I grinned, studying his grey eyes as they visibly softened. "You like that 'nasty thing'."

"Do not."

"Do too."

His mouth tugged up at the corner, just for a second, and his fingers began to move ever so slightly over Crookshanks's fur. "He's alright, I suppose."

I smiled, watching Draco's expression inch closer and closer to fondness with every passing moment. But when he looked out the window at the setting sun, his eyes froze over and his mouth pressed into a thin line. "I've run out of time."

I didn't need to ask; we had come to understand one another, better than anyone else. "When are you letting them in?"

"Voldemort said I must do it on Wednesday night."

I gnawed at my lip, and I decided to voice the idea that had been keeping me up at night for a while. "Run away with me," I said softly, locking eyes with him. "Let's leave all of this behind and go somewhere, New York or someplace else."

"You know I can't do that, Granger." Draco's voice was laced with exhaustion. "Don't you think I would if I could? It would sentence my mum to death, and me as well."

I shook my head, drawing myself up on my knees in front of him, gripping his elbows. "I hate that you have to do this."

"That makes two of us."

That look is creeping onto his face, that look of self destruction and hatred. Hatred of himself. I twirled one of his stray curls through my finger. "I'll tell you again so you don't forget: I won't be mad, okay? No matter what happens."

He nodded, but his eyes told me he didn't believe me, not really. "Please do one thing for me."

"Yes?"

Draco laced his fingers through my hair on the back of my head and lifted his gaze to mine, a pleading stare. "Stay away on Wednesday night. When the sun sets, go to Hogsmeade, or even Apparate somewhere else, just until things calm down."

I shook my head. "I can't leave Harry and Ron, or Pansy or Theo or anyone, they'll all be here." I placed my hand on his cheek, and he leaned into my touch. "I can't leave *you*."

"Please, Granger." Draco's voice wavered, and his grey eyes raked over me, his pupils blown wide. "I need you to be safe. Please."

"I'm staying, but I'll be safe. I can take care of myself."

He laughed bitterly. "Last time I trusted you to do that, you got kidnapped and tortured."

I flinched, drawing back as if struck. "Don't do that. That's not fair, Draco, and you know it."

Draco's brow drew together. "I know it's not, but it's the truth, isn't it?" He placed his hand on top of mine, threading our fingers together against his cheek. "I wouldn't be able to live with myself if anything else happened to you."

He was right, in a way. We know I'm a target now, so I need to be careful, but I'm not leaving.

"I'll take extra precautions, safety spells, shields, the works. On one condition."

"Yes?"

"You explain yourself to Dumbledore."

"Granger..." He closed his eyes, fair lashes brushing high cheekbones. "What's the point?"

"No, he needs to know." Crookshanks had hopped off the bed and onto the floor, so I came closer and sat on Draco, straddling his lap. His eyes widened briefly, his hands jumping to rest on my waist. "Don't let him think you're a monster. Explain the position you're in. Promise me."

He looked up at me, tilting his head. "I promise."

"Good."

Draco sighed, running his hands over my shoulders. "I'll find you afterwards."

"You better."

"I'm..." He hesitated, his hands stilling at his sides. "I'm probably gonna be a mess."

I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling my face closer to his, never breaking his stare. "Nothing I can't handle, Draco."

Draco offered a half-hearted smile, our noses touching. "Everything is gonna change, isn't it?"

Yes.

But I'll be damned if it tears us apart.

I raised my chin just a fraction, our lips brushing against one another. "We won't change," I whispered into him, and it was more of a prayer than an assurance.

He pressed his lips into mine, breathing me in. I cupped his face with my hands, holding him exactly where I wanted him.

We kissed for hours, like we always did, but this time it felt deeper, hungrier, as if neither of us were expecting to do it again.

June 30, 1997

It's time.

Every day closing in had been a siren, the ringing sounds increasing with each passing minute, and now it was a deafening warning, impossible to ignore.

Harry wasn't at dinner, and Ron told me he was somewhere with Dumbledore. Draco wasn't there either, and neither were any of my Slytherin friends.

The hurricane was approaching steadfast, and I'm not ready, I'm not ready, *I'm not ready*.

I scarfed down my food as quickly as I could and raced to the Slytherin dorms, racing against the steadily sinking sun, meaning nightfall was approaching.

I burst into the low lit common room, where Theo was pacing back and forth in front of the fireplace, and the others were sitting down. Draco was sitting on the bottom of the spiral stairs, his fingers pulling at his platinum hair.

"Shit, it's time," Blaise murmured, staring up at the clock.

"Go," Draco ordered, standing up and taking my hands in his. "I'll see you guys later."

Blaise nodded once at me, turning and entering the secret passage, the one we had taken to the kitchen that one night. Pansy whimpered, and Theo threaded his fingers through hers. He looked back at me, his eyes fierce, before they disappeared.

Draco locked his pinky with mine, a gesture that held so many memories that it felt like the most intimate thing he could do right now. He led me into the hallway outside, turning to face me.

I thought I was scared already, but I wasn't, not really. Not until I beheld his face, full of the one thing I didn't want to see: his expression held a goodbye. "See you on the other side, Granger," Draco said softly, but there was no conviction in it.

Tears pushed their way to the surface, brimming behind my eyes. I threw out what I could, asking him for something I knew he would always keep. "Promise?"

Draco brought our hands joined at the pinky up to his lips, pressing them there. "Pinky promise."

I exhaled, trusting him, always trusting him. "The other side."

Draco yanked me forward by our attached fingers and kissed me firmly, hard and desperate. I shut my eyes and savored the feel of his lips, and I wished time would stop forever so he could never leave me.

He released me all at once and pushed himself back a few steps, as if he didn't trust himself to leave me. He stared at me for a couple more seconds, a raging storm, and he turned the corner and was gone.

This is not looking too good.

I stood back to back with Ginny, fending ourselves off. I did what I promised Draco and activated extra shield charms on myself, but there was only so much it could do. Curses and hexes were flying left and right, Death Eaters swarming around us. There was no sign of Bellatrix, but I couldn't tell for sure with all of the masks.

I blocked, I dodged, but I didn't fire back with anything other than stunning spells. I couldn't, wouldn't risk hitting Theo, or Pansy, or Blaise. Everytime a face flashed behind a mask, I squinted through the smoke, looking for them.

Ginny and I were backed into a corner, and a Death Eater shoved Luna into us. I gasped, shoving her behind me against the wall. There were three now, two close behind the first one, and I raised my wand—

The first Death Eater grabbed my wand and forced it down, ripping their mask off, and Blaise stared down at me, his brown eyes wide.

I sagged against the wall, breathing heavily. Luna's eyes shone as she looked up at Blaise, her hands shaking.

The second and third came up behind Blaise, and Theo ripped off his mask, feeling the wall next to us and grunting, and a passage appeared. "Go, go! Hurry!" Theo urged, grabbing me and shoving me into the escape with Ginny and Luna. Hazel eyes peeked out from around his shoulder, strong and determined.

I sobbed, "*Pansy—*"

"Run, Granger!" She cried, shutting the door in our faces.

So we ran.

The castle was silent.

The passage had spit us out at the entrance of Hogwarts, so we were first to find the body.

Even when I lose my memories, I don't think I'll ever forget seeing Dumbledore's crumpled corpse on the pavement, or Ginny's ear shattering scream.

Word spread fast that Dumbledore was murdered at the hand of Professor Snape.

I know I had said I wouldn't be angry if Draco went through with it, but relief overcame me when the news broke, grateful he didn't have to go through that.

Through his tears, Harry had pulled Ron and I aside briefly and explained the barest details: Voldemort had created seven Horcruxes in order to keep him alive, and Harry was going to spend his time seeking and destroying them, in place of his seventh year of education. He had been planning this for some time now, he explained, but it was set in stone now.

Naturally, Ron and I agreed to accompany him.

It's the right thing to do. Plus, they wouldn't get anywhere without me, would they?

Everyone trudged back to their dorms, stepping over the debris, the moon high and bright in the early hours of the morning. No one talked, too shocked to say anything. The Death Eaters were nowhere to be found, though I scanned the crowds for familiar Slytherin faces.

I told Harry and Ron to go head back, and that I needed to find Draco. Harry opened his mouth to say something, but I had already started running, following the warm feeling on my wrist.

I rounded the corner and slammed into someone roughly, and I mumbled an apology before looking up into familiar eyes the color of worn wood.

"Theo." I threw my arms around him, the boy who had become one of my best friends, holding him close. "Hey," he sighed into my hair, closing his arms around me.

Pansy and Blaise came up right behind him, their postures relaxing at the sight of me. They had shed their Death Eater robes and were wearing plain jeans and shirts.

I drew back, looking around them, looking for him. "Where is he?"

Theo winced, hanging his head. "He's gone, princess."

The world stopped turning.

"What?"

Pansy came forward, tear streaks staining her cheeks. "They took him."

I'll find you afterwards.

"I don't understand."

"The three of us are low in rank, not very important, but he is," Blaise explained gently, though his jaw was clenched. "They took him."

See you on the other side, Granger.

"Well get him *back*."

Theo shook his head, and I hate, I hate the pity in his gaze as he looks at me. "He's gone, Granger."

Pinky promise.

"No." My voice cracked, but I pushed on. "He promised, he promised me—"

Pansy buried her head in her hands. "I'm so sorry."

No.

"Take me to him." My voice is a foreign sound, harsh and abrasive.

"We don't even know where they're congregating right now," Blaise argued, and there it is again, that gut-wrenching sympathy.

"And it's too dangerous," Theo added apologetically, "especially for you."

"Voldemort is going to punish him for not following through with his mission," I pleaded, fisting my hands in Theo's shirt. "He's in danger. I knew he wouldn't do it. Harry even said he was lowering his wand—"

"Snape made an Unbreakable Vow for Draco," Theo interrupted, gently closing his fingers around mine and prying them off of his shirt. "Voldemort won't care who killed him, as long as he's dead."

Draco. Draco. Draco.

I gulped. "Are you sure?"

"He'll be fine, Granger." Blaise.

My eyes moved between my three friends. "When will I see him again?"

"I don't know," Pansy answered, her voice weak. "After the summer, maybe."

After the summer. Seventh year.

My heart tightened in my chest. "I won't be here."

Pansy stiffened, her face anxious as she stepped closer. "Where are you going?"

"I need to go with Harry and Ron."

They nodded, knowing not to ask for details. Theo managed to smile at me for a moment, full of sorrow. "Guess this is it for a while, huh, princess?"

I threw my arms around Theo again. "I'll miss you."

Another brief smile. "I don't think as much as I'll miss you."

Blaise hugged me next, short but strong, no words needed. Pansy went last, holding me against her for a good while. Her hazel irises were shining again. "Don't get into too much trouble, okay?"

I nodded. "What about you guys?"

"We'll be fine," Blaise dismissed, shrugging. "We're leaving now and we'll be back next year, but we're used to being hated. I think we thrive under it."

I laughed a little, and Theo locked eyes with me. "Can we write to you?" He asked, hope rising in his voice.

I shook my head sadly. "I'll be on the move. And it's too risky, our letters might be intercepted."

"Who's going to take care of Crookshanks?" Pansy wondered aloud, and I opened my mouth to reply that Ginny would probably agree.

"I will."

I gaped at Blaise, his expression as neutral as ever.

Theo let his mouth hang open, gasping dramatically. "Blaise Zabini, secret cat boy?" Something warmed in me seeing them joke around despite everything.

Blaise grunted. "Draco told me he's fond of the creature, so it's the least I can do."

Pain coursed through me at the sound of his name, but I nodded and gave Blaise instructions on how to care for Crookshanks. At some point he had pulled out some parchment and quills jotting down notes.

I admit, I dragged my speech on for as long as I could. I wasn't ready to let them go. I wasn't ready for everything to change.

Blaise said a final goodbye, hugging me tightly and heading down the hall, walking with an urgency to find Luna.

"Farewell, princess," Theo murmured, kissing me swiftly on the forehead before walking away hand in hand with Pansy, who waved back at me with a grim smile.

"Bye," I whispered into the empty hallway, alone once more.

Chapter 37

July 29, 1997

Everything feels grey.

Irony, isn't it? My favorite color, yet also how the world looks without Draco.

I rolled my neck, going down off my mental checklist of things to bring when we go horcrux hunting. Essence of Dittany, blankets, my diary, healing herbs, clothes...

My heart thumped aggressively against my chest when I saw my MP3 player and earbuds, flung yet again into a memory, a memory of him.

The song is about not giving up when the world and negative people or forces are creating adversity for you. It's about not letting negative people or forces get between two lovers, friends, or just those on a path of liberation and transcendence who can help each other and work together in spite of what is up against them. It's about never giving up, never giving in and throwing in the towel, because it's never over.

His voice resonated within me, deep and clear. It was almost as if I was back in the Astronomy Tower, fingers grazing, watching the stars in a content silence as a melody flowed between us.

A tear tumbled down my cheek and I wiped it away quickly, blinking. I tended to do this, to think of him as a memory of the past instead of a promise of the future. *Don't dream it's over*, I reminded myself, although it sounded like it was his low voice instead of my own. *It's never over.*

Sucking in a deep breath, I spun in a slow circle, taking a long look around my bedroom, focusing on every crevice, every book, every trinket, every green flower on my bed sheets. It was already cemented in my brain, of course, but I did it anyway. I'm not sure when I'll see it again. If I ever will.

I had wanted to bring Draco here, to show him where I grew up. He had come onto the balcony on New Years, but only for a couple minutes. I wanted to show him everything, the house that was my home when Hogwarts wasn't. The kitchen stool at the island where my first tooth came out as I bit into an apple. The table where I played board games with my parents every Saturday night. The small backyard where I was a princess one day, an astronaut the next, and a firefighter the day after that. The corner of the coffee table that I had fallen against when I was four, resulting in the small scar on my shoulder.

Most especially my bedroom. I wanted to show Draco my overflowing bookshelves, which books I liked more than others. The nook by my window, where the sun hit my open book perfectly if I sat in a certain spot in the afternoon. My stuffed lamb sitting comfortably on my bed, named Cotton, who had kept me safe from the monsters at night ever since I was three. I grabbed Cotton and placed him in my bag, deciding I still needed him to protect me. My bed, with the same white sheets with different shades of green flowers.

My bed, where I would lay at night as a child and think of a blonde boy with eyes of salt. Thoughts of him running through my mind, laced with something close to hatred.

But, then again, the line between love and hatred is quite blurred, isn't it?

I firmly promised myself that it would still happen, that I would bring Draco here one day and

show him my childhood home. He had taught me the importance of promises.

"Hermione, tea is ready!" Mum called up the stairs.

"Coming, Mum," I answered, my voice cracking at the end.

I swallowed, my breath stuttering in my chest, drawing myself up. There was no question that this would be one of the hardest things I'd ever have to do.

Trudging down the stairs quietly, my mind seemed set on making this as hard for me as possible; with each step, another memory was pulled forward. Mum placing an extravagantly bedazzled tiara on my head, slightly too big so it settled sideways. Sitting on Dad's shoulders so I could see the whole world of New York.

In the living room, they were facing the other way and sitting on the couch, a cup of tea in each of their hands.

"Winter is certainly not the best season, are you serious?" Mum laughed, shaking her head.

"Of course it is! Presents, hot chocolate, and ice skating. There's no competition," Dad insisted, his curls bouncing atop his head.

"But summer has the bright and warm sun," Mum sighed, and I could hear her soft smile.

"You keep me warm enough, darling."

"Oh, please."

My hand shook as I raised my wand, pointing it at my parents. I concentrated as best I could, forcing my hand to still, tears blurring my vision.

"Obliviate," I whispered, barely more than a breath carried stirring the air.

Their conversation faded, and their backs slumped slightly, shoulders curving in. I squeezed my eyes shut, refusing to watch as I was erased from their lives, reduced to nothing, with only my own memories to prove otherwise.

I don't know how long I stood there, but I finally forced my eyes open and lowered my wand, slipping it in my pocket. I allowed myself a couple more seconds to stare at them, her olive skin and petite figure, his unruly curls and broad shoulders. I clamped my hands over my mouth, shoving down a sob. I turned on my heel and fled, unable to stay for a single moment longer. I made sure not to look at the pictures on the walls, at the blank spaces that I once occupied with a big smile.

Slamming the red front door, I tipped my head back against it and let my tears break free, hot and pouring. I heard voices stir to life inside, continuing their conversation, as if I had never been there.

I told myself to go, to leave, but my feet refused to move. They were weighed down by one word, screaming through my veins.

RUINED RUINED RUINED RUINED RUINED

I would've stayed there till the sun set, then rose, stuck on the doorstep of what once was my home. But my eyes fluttered closed and a soft, deep voice urged me otherwise.

Don't dream it's over, the Draco in my mind assured me, taking my hands in his.

Don't dream it's over, I repeated, tightening my grip on his hands.

When I opened my eyes, I knew he wouldn't be there, but I still felt disappointed when he wasn't. That weight had been lifted; not gone, but lighter, easier to bear.

I took one step, then another, and another.

I didn't look back.

August 15, 1997

It feels greyer than before, if that's possible.

I can't stop thinking about him, missing him, and there's a persistent aching in my chest, like my soul is aware that half of it is missing.

I keep having the same recurring dream. Draco slams the door in my face, and I'm yelling, I'm crying, I'm begging on my knees for him not to leave me. It's not his fault for leaving, I know that. And yet the dream tells me that he left me because he doesn't want me anymore: a small, insecure part of me doubting everything, magnified.

It's an emotional hurt that rivals my torture.

The sun is out, but it feels as if everyday it rains.

We've been planning our infiltration of the Ministry, brewing Polyjuice Potion and going over every phase and detail for when the day comes, projected to be September second. I sat at the dining table at Grimmauld Place, sketching a rough map of the inside of the Ministry. Ron was cooking—yes, *cooking*—with the help of Kreacher, making some sort of stew Mrs. Weasley makes, humming along to the Weird Sisters on the radio. Harry was monitoring the cauldron across from me brewing with a fresh batch of Polyjuice when he looked down at his watch and abruptly jumped out of his seat, rushing over to the radio and fumbling with the knobs.

Radio static filled the air. "Bloody hell, I was listening to that!" Ron complained, handing the spoon to Kreacher and heading over.

"I need to change it," said Harry, continuing to turn the knobs. "It's Friday, and it's six o'clock."

I put my quill down, cocking my head. "What does that mean?"

Harry stayed focused. "I'm changing it to 103.5. FM."

Ron started, "What's on—"

"Captain Moldy is unaware of the Carrot and the other vegetables' movements."

My heart skipped a beat, that voice sinking into my skin, the voice I would know anywhere.

"Captain Moldy is unaware of the Carrot and the other vegetables' movements. Captain Moldy is unaware of the Carrot and the other vegetables' movements." Draco repeated the message over and over. A loop.

“Oh my god,” I whispered, my voice hoarse.

“Is that who I think it is?” Ron asked, blue eyes and splattering of red freckles stark against his paling face.

Harry nodded, and I noticed a glint of respect in his green irises. “He came to me a few days before everything happened and told me to tune into 103.5 FM on the radio every Friday for coded updates, letting us know if You-Know-Who was gaining on us or not.”

Pride filled me, spilling over the rim. “Oh, Draco...”

“‘Captain Moldy’?” Harry laughed a little. “Really?”

“It’s Theo’s name for a villain based off of You-Know-Who when he tells us stories.” I smiled a little at the thought of him.

The message played again and Ron winced. “Are we not gonna talk about ‘Carrot’?”

I smiled half-heartedly, but all I could focus on was his voice, muffled through the radio yet unmistakably his. I imagined him sitting at his desk in his room, head bent over, stray curls tumbling, slender fingers working efficiently at the radio.

“I know you really miss him, Mione,” Harry said quietly, studying me. “But you know none of us can write letters; they’ll likely be intercepted.”

As dangerous as it was, I had contemplated taking the risk almost every day, just to hear from him. “I know. At least I have this now.” I reached over, turning the volume up slightly, loud enough so it was almost like he was in the room. “It’s good to hear his voice,” I sighed, mostly to myself.

We were clearly all lost in our individual thoughts. “I miss Lavender,” Ron said weakly, fingers playing with the hem of his shirt.

“I miss Ginny,” Harry murmured.

I almost snapped at them, eager to release my pent up anxiety. I wanted to tell them it wasn’t the same, that it was different to miss their girlfriends as opposed to the other half of my goddamn soul.

That’s not fair to them, I know. Lavender and Ginny might very well be their other halves.

But are their worlds drained of color like mine is?

“I’m gonna get some rest,” I muttered, standing up and stretching. “Come get me when the food is ready.” Harry and Ron nodded, and I walked up the creaking stairs to the room I was staying in.

It had been full of dust and cobwebs when we arrived, but after some dusting it was much better, the air crisp as the night breeze drifted through the open window. I sat at the cushioned bench under the window, stretching my legs out in front of me. Placing my arms on the windowsill, my charm bracelet began to warm, and longing shot through me. Draco was somewhere out there, straight ahead, however many miles away.

The stars seemed duller than usual tonight, perhaps lacking motivation to shine, to carry on, similar to me. But the moon was full, a silver beacon breaking through the darkness. Almost the same shade as Draco’s eyes, but not quite.

I thought that wherever he was, he may be looking out at the night sky, gazing up at the very same moon.

“The moon is beautiful,” I whispered. My words caught in the star kissed breeze, and I prayed that the current carried them to Draco.

Chapter 38

March 13, 1998

The overwhelming feeling that I was being turned upside down overtook me, though this time, the feeling was unwelcome as I was Apparated against my will.

Landing hard on my knees, my eyes were still shut as a Snatcher wrenched me to my feet, his hands rough and calloused on my arms. A pop! sounded on either side of me, and I looked sideways to find Ron and Harry, Ron pale and covered in mud, Harry's entire face contorted and twisted thanks to my quick thinking. But neither of them were looking at me, they were looking ahead, eyes fixed on the building before us.

I followed their gaze. A humongous, towering manor stretched before us. A black Victorian style home, with green vines growing over almost every inch. Black wrought iron gates were up ahead, and on either side of the path were green shrubbery, bordering an expansive front lawn with white flowers of all sorts. There was a fountain on either side: on the left, a beautiful angel carved out of white marble, stretching her hand up towards the sky, her eyes shut and her face content, water falling gracefully around her. On the right, another angel, but composed of black marble. He was on his knees and his wings were broken, bent into sharp angles, his face contorted in agony. The water barreled harshly into his wings, as if trying to hurt him further. He too, reached out his hand, but it was to his right, to the other angel.

Dark and breathtaking. Beautiful and damning.

Malfoy Manor.

"Keep moving," the Snatcher hissed in my ear, shoving me forward through the gates. He was a foul looking man, with long greasy brown hair and uneven stubble. His breath smelled of alcohol and rot. I never learned his name, so I'll call him Kyle, because it rhymes with Ryle, the dead man I deeply loathe. My wrists rubbed painfully together at my back, tight against the ropes.

We were pushed through the front door, a wooden piece carved with intricate swirls. I looked up at the cathedral ceilings and the extravagant diamond chandelier the size of an automobile, but Kyle gripped my hair and shoved my head down painfully before I could look further, before I could take in Draco's home. So as we walked, I studied the sleek black tiles, unblemished, seemingly untouched.

Kyle yanked my head back. "Look up now, pretty," he crooned against my neck, and I cringed at the feeling of his breath on my bare skin.

The world stopped turning.

He was wearing a black turtleneck and a black suit, the material smooth and unwrinkled. He was ghostly pale, untouched by sunlight for Merlin knows how long, his under eyes dark violet. His fair hair was unkempt and wild, sticking out in all directions and grown over his brow. He was incredibly stiff and unmoving, save for the slightest tremble of his right hand, silver rings glinting. And his eyes were glued to mine, wholly black, save for a thin silver border.

There he was, Draco was here, he was here, no more than twenty feet away from me, jaw clenched, looking like it was taking everything in him to not run to me.

Harry was kneeling on the floor in front of Bellatrix. I swallowed, averting my gaze, unable to look

at her.

My relief was short lived; I found myself looking again when she was touching him, *hurting* him, gripping his scalp and shoving him to his knees on the floor across from Harry. "Draco, look closely," Bellatrix urged, shoving his face right up to Harry's swollen one. "Is it Potter?"

Draco's eyes were wide, his irises churning, scanning Harry's face.

"I'm not sure," he said finally, his voice a low rasp.

"Come on, son," Lucius snarled, coming forward and gripping his son's shoulders tightly. "*Look*, damn it!" Draco didn't wince, but his eyes flashed briefly.

"Lucius, his face is completely distorted, no wonder he isn't sure," Narcissa consoled calmly from beside her husband, softly prying his fingers off of her son.

Lucius shook his head, long blonde hair shifting. "You went to school with him all of your life, boy!"

"I don't think so." I recognized Draco's expression, his mask. A cold and unyielding statue. "It's not him." His tone was flat, final.

Lucius grabbed Draco's arm and dragged him to his feet, spinning him around and getting in his face. "If we hand him over to the Dark Lord, it will clear our name." Lucius looked frantic, and those eyes too similar to his son's were narrowed.

Bellatrix walked slowly around us and stopped on Harry's right, staring at me through her heavily lidded eyes. "But surely," she said quietly, "This is the Mudblood girl? This is Granger?" Amusement gleamed in her eyes, for she knew it was me. I glared at her, seething.

"Yes, indeed!" Lucius exclaimed. "And that red haired boy must be Weasley then, of course!" He turned to Draco expectantly. "Well, is it them?"

Draco didn't look at me, kept his eyes on the floor. "Could be. I doubt it."

Lucius grunted, rolling up his sleeve and exposing his Dark Mark, bringing his wand to hover over it to summon Voldemort.

"Stop!" Bellatrix shrieked suddenly, her eyes on a Snatcher on the other side of the room. Lucius rose his brow, slipping his wand back into his robes. She prowled toward him, a feral cat circling prey. "What is that?"

"Sword," grunted an out-of-sight Snatcher.

"Give it to me."

"It's not yours, missus, it's mine, I reckon I found it."

There was a bang and a flash of red light; I knew that the Snatcher had been Stunned. There was a roar of anger from his fellows. "What d'you think you're playing at, woman?" Kyle said incredulously.

"Stupefy!" she screamed, "Stupefy!"

They were no match for her, even though there were four of them against one of her: She was a witch, a cruel and heartless one, with prodigious skill and no conscience. They fell where they

stood, all except Greyback, the werewolf, who had been forced into a kneeling position, his arms outstretched. Out of the corners of my eye I saw Bellatrix bearing down upon the werewolf, the sword of Gryffindor gripped tightly in her hand, her face waxen.

"Where did you get this sword?" she whispered to Greyback as she pulled his wand out of his unresisting grip.

"How dare you?" he snarled, his mouth the only thing that could move as he was forced to gaze up at her. He bared his pointed teeth. "Release me, woman!"

"Where did you find this sword?" she repeated, brandishing it in his face. "Snape sent it to my vault in Gringotts!"

"It was in their tent," rasped Greyback. "Release me, I say!"

She waved her wand, and the werewolf sprang to his feet, but appeared too wary to approach her. He prowled behind an armchair, his filthy curved nails clutching its back.

She stood, panting slightly, looking down at the sword, examining its hilt. Then she turned to look at the silent prisoners.

"If it is indeed Potter, he must not be harmed," she muttered, more to herself than to the others. "The Dark Lord wishes to dispose of Potter himself.... But if he finds out... I must... I must know...."

Bellatrix turned back to her sister again.

"The prisoners must be placed in the cellar, while I think what to do!"

"This is my house, Bella, you don't give orders in my house," Narcissa said firmly, drawing herself up taller.

"Do it! You have no idea of the danger we're in!" shrieked Bellatrix. She looked frightening, mad, and it reminded me of why I am so afraid of her. A thin stream of fire issued from her wand and burned a hole in the carpet.

Narcissa hesitated for a moment, then addressed the werewolf. "Take these prisoners down to the cellar, Greyback."

"Wait," said Bellatrix sharply. "All except...." Her eyes flitted to me, her lips forming a satisfied curve. "Except for the Mudblood."

Dread rolled through me, and I searched for Draco, finding him already looking at me from next to his mum, his eyes desperate and panicked, a raging storm.

"No!" shouted Harry as he was dragged away, trying to break free from Greyback's grasp.

"You can have me, keep me!" screamed Ron, struggling against Greyback. His blue eyes met mine, full of tears. He knew about Bellatrix, they both did.

Bellatrix slapped him, hard, the sound echoing throughout the room. "If she dies under questioning, I'll take you next," she said. "Blood traitor is next to Mudblood in my book. Take them downstairs, Greyback, and make sure they are secure, but do nothing more to them yet."

She threw Greyback's wand back to him, then took a short silver knife from under her robes. She

grinned, showing all her yellow teeth as she cut me free, then closed her fingers around my curls. I bit back my cry as she dragged me by my hair into the middle of the room, fire exploding across my scalp.

Bellatrix threw me on my back, bringing her face to hover just above mine, black curls swaying. “Hello, Mudblood,” she breathed, dark blue eyes triumphant.

I kept my chin high, forcing it not to tremble. “Bellatrix.”

She jerked her head to where the sword lay on the floor. “Where’d you get that sword?”

“It came to us,” I answered truthfully. Surprisingly, my voice didn’t waver.

Granger.

It was only in my mind, but I knew without a doubt it was him, using the mind connecting spell. My sight was filled with Bellatrix, but he was here somewhere, watching.

Draco, god—

“Liar,” Bellatrix whispered, exhaling into my face. “It was in my vault.”

“We didn’t go into your vault.”

She cocked her head, not in a manner like her nephew’s. “Oh, really?” She flipped her silver knife between her fingers, and roughly rolled up my sleeve to reveal my forearm. I began to panic, she was going to carve my arm—

I numbed your arm. Draco’s voice was hoarse, but comforting, trying to soothe me. *You won’t feel a thing.*

Draco—

“I should brand you,” Bellatrix whispered, trailing the blade lightly over my skin, though I felt nothing. “Make sure everyone knows that you have filthy blood.”

Scream when I say so. She can’t be suspicious.

Bellatrix’s mouth twisted into a sick smile, and her arm jerked as she dug the blade into my skin.

Now.

I let out a guttural scream, arching my back off the floor. It sounded entirely convincing; after all, my screams lived on in my nightmares, so I knew exactly how they sounded, could mimic them to a perfection.

“Did you go into my vault?” Bellatrix asked again, stilling for a moment as she glared at me.

“No!”

“You’re lying, filthy Mudblood, and I know it! You have been inside my vault at Gringotts! Tell the truth, tell the truth!” She hissed, focusing back on my arm.

Again, Draco whispered into my mind, so I screamed more.

Bellatrix stopped again, and she brought her fingers to my face, soaked in my blood, and smeared it

across my face, all over my cheek and nose. Her face was full of complete disgust. "What else did you take? What else have you got? Tell me the truth, or I swear, I shall run you through with this knife!" She sneered, lifting the knife again.

"I didn't take anything!" I pleaded.

Again.

I yelled more, but I couldn't take it anymore, turning my head and tearing my eyes away from her.

And there he was, standing by the fireplace, his hands braced against the mantle behind him. His eyes were silver flames.

Eyes on me, Granger. Draco's throat bobbed, keeping eye contact. *Eyes on me.*

"How did you get into my vault?" Bellatrix screamed. "Did that dirty little goblin in the cellar help you?"

"We only met him tonight!" I sobbed. "We've never been inside your vault.... It isn't the real sword! It's a copy, just a copy!"

"A copy?" screeched Bellatrix. "Oh, a likely story!"

"But we can find out easily!" came Lucius's voice. "Draco, fetch the goblin, he can tell us whether the sword is real or not!"

I whimpered, shutting my eyes tightly. Footsteps soon sounded, Draco returning with Griphook. I kept my eyes closed, trying to think of anything else, anywhere else: Central Park, my mind decided for me, the snowball fight with my friends.

"Well?" Bellatrix said to Griphook. "Is it the true sword?"

"No," said Griphook, and I sagged with relief; Harry must have convinced him to lie. "It is a fake."

"Are you sure?" panted Bellatrix. "Quite sure?"

"Yes," said the goblin.

"Good," she said, and a thump sounded as Griphook dropped with a yell at her feet, and I peeled one eye open, seeing that she had slashed his face. She kicked him aside.

That dreadful clicking of heels filled my ears and Bellatrix came back over, kicking my side. I moaned, curling in on myself. I reached down and rolled my sleeve back down, blood flowing freely from the letters she carved: *Mudblood*. I gulped, flexing my fingers. I still had control and feeling in my hand, but my forearm was completely numb.

"And now," Bellatrix said in a voice that burst with triumph, "we call the Dark Lord!"

And she pushed back her sleeve and touched her forefinger to the Dark Mark.

"And I think," said Bellatrix's voice, "We can dispose of the Mudblood. Greyback, take her if you want her."

"No."

My eyes flew open. Draco was standing in front of me with his back towards me, his hands out, as

if to shield me. Bellatrix whirled around, shocked. The next moment, Ron and Harry stumbled in, glaring.

"Expelliarmus!" Harry roared, pointing Wormtail's wand at Bellatrix, and hers flew into the air and was caught by Harry, who had sprinted after Ron. I sat up, struggling to my feet as chaos broke out. Harry yelled, "Stupefy!" and Lucius Malfoy collapsed onto the hearth. Jets of light flew from Greyback's wand, while Draco and Narcissa flicked their wands, but the light that bolted out only carried a few feet before fading into nothing: a show. They were pretending to fight.

No one noticed when Bellatrix came up behind me and clamped her hand over my mouth, muffling my surprised gasp. "STOP OR SHE DIES!"

Panting, Draco spun around immediately, eyes wide. Harry peered around the edge of the sofa, and Ron stilled. Bellatrix lifted her short silver knife, pressing the cool steel blade to my throat.

"Drop your wands," she whispered. "Drop them, or we'll see exactly how filthy her blood is!"

Ron stood rigid, clutching Wormtail's wand. Harry straightened up, still holding Bellatrix's. Draco's eyes were glued on my neck, on the knife that would slit my throat if I so much as breathed too hard.

"I said, drop them!" Bellatrix screeched, pressing the blade into my throat. Pain laced through me and I moaned, feeling the beads of blood appear.

"All right!" Harry shouted, and he dropped Bellatrix's wand onto the floor at his feet, Ron did the same with Wormtail's. Both raised their hands to shoulder height. Draco looked frightening, a thirst to kill written clear across his features as he took a step toward me and Bellatrix.

"I know you want to kill the Mudblood yourself, don't you Draco?" She clicked her tongue. "Don't worry, darling, of course I'll give you that satisfaction. You can finish her after Greyback does what he wants." Draco stopped dead in his tracks and glared icily, his fists clenched at his sides. "Greyback, grab the wands."

"Now," said Bellatrix softly, as Greyback hurried back to her with the wands, "Cissy, I think we ought to tie these little heroes up again, while Greyback takes care of Miss Mudblood. I am sure the Dark Lord will not begrudge you the girl, Greyback, after what you have done tonight."

At the last word there was a peculiar grinding noise from above. All of us looked upward in time to see the crystal chandelier tremble; then, with a creak and an ominous jingling, it began to fall. Bellatrix was directly beneath it; dropping me to the floor, she threw herself aside with a scream. The chandelier barreled toward me, and this would crush me, wound me terribly—

As it crashed to the floor in an explosion of crystal and chains, a warm body sprawled against me, hands covering my face, silver rings cool on my cheek. An agonizing scream ripped through Draco's teeth as the chandelier shattered against his back.

Draco groaned, shifting against me. "Oh, god," I sobbed, lifting his face from my shoulder. His eyes were half-lidded, his teeth grinding. I felt someone's grip close around my ankle, and I clung tightly to Draco as someone pulled us out from under the wreckage. Ron's face appeared, pinched with worry. I sat up, and Ron helped Draco and I to our feet. Draco swayed, but his eyes were clear. Tiny pieces of glass were embedded in his back, but he stood tall. Ron dragged me toward the back of the room. Draco stayed put; he couldn't come, he had to stay here, he had to, but I squeezed his hand briefly before leaving his side.

Dobby trotted into the room, his shaking finger pointing at his old mistress Narcissa. "You must not hurt Harry Potter," he squeaked.

"Kill him, Cissy!" shrieked Bellatrix, but there was another loud crack, and Narcissa's wand too flew into the air and landed on the other side of the room.

"You dirty little monkey!" bawled Bellatrix. "How dare you take a witch's wand, how dare you defy your masters?"

"Dobby has no master!" squealed the elf. "Dobby is a free elf, and Dobby has come to save Harry Potter and his friends!"

"Ron, catch it and GO!" Harry yelled, throwing one of the wands to him; then he bent down to tug Griphook out from under the chandelier.

"Draco, get our wands back!" Bellatrix hollered, jerking her head. Draco, grateful for the excuse to follow me, staggered forward, reaching my side quickly, locking our fingers together behind my back.

"I'll go with him, to Apparate back after!" Narcissa excused herself, hurrying forward.

Hoisting the groaning goblin, who still clung to the sword, over one shoulder, Harry seized Dobby's hand and spun on the spot to Disapparate.

As I turned into darkness I caught one last view of the drawing room of the pale, frozen figure of Greyback, but Bellatrix was moving, both of her arms extended as she threw two knives, silver flying across the room. One went straight toward the other side of our group, I couldn't see who it would hit. The other hurtled straight toward me, a perfect throw, one I knew would hit true in my chest.

But Draco's face suddenly appeared and completely covered my view, his grip on my fingers still firm. He nodded once, and I screamed, not faking my overwhelming pain this time as we vanished, as Draco took a blade that was meant for me.

Chapter 39

The wind was ripped from my lungs, and my hand was wrenched away from his, my screams drowned in the void of darkness and wind.

I landed hard on my knees, smooth sand softening the impact. I blinked, shaking my head back and forth to clear it. We were on a beach and it was drizzling, but I felt the rain getting thicker and heavier with each passing second. My eyes darted around frantically. Narcissa was unconscious beside me, she must have been knocked out. But where is he, *where is he*—

There.

Draco was only a few feet behind me, closer to the water. He was on his side, unmoving. I scrambled over to him, crawling furiously on my hands and knees. I cried out when I got closer: the blade had pierced all the way through the middle of his torso, the steel slick with blood on the front side and the black handle firm in his back. I quickly ran my eyes over his body, seeing the small crystal pieces deeply embedded in his back as well. “Draco?” His eyes were closed, his usually pink lips purple and parted. I aligned my body with his on the sand and took his face in my hands, moving the hair out of his face and smoothing over his cheeks with my fingers. “Draco, please.”

Fair lashes revealed a line of silver. “Hey, Granger.” His voice was rough, like the waves crashing against jagged rocks.

“Oh my god.” The blood was a slow spread of spilled ink, staining his black suit darker. I brought my bag to my lap and fumbled through it. I used *accio* to summon Essence of Dittany, uncorking the small bottle. “Oh my god.” I took a deep breath, the air doing nothing to salvage the burning panic in me.

Draco’s lips trembled as he gave the barest smirk. “Bleeding for you again, am I?”

“Stop it.” I shook my head. I’m no healer, but I know that removing the knife without knowing what I’m doing will only make it worse. I poured out all of the bottle’s contents onto the wound, trying to slow the bleeding. But only a few scarce drops landed; the bottle was as good as empty after I had used it all on Ron. I cursed profusely, shouting and pounding the sand with my fists.

Draco’s hand covered mine, clammy and cold, stopping my fist. I looked back at him. He shook his head once, water dripping from the curls at his temples. “It’s okay.”

I rose over him on my knees, cupping his face with my hands, speaking frantically as tears fell relentlessly, mixing with the raindrops. “No, it’s not, *nothing* about this is okay.”

His lips curved gently, a muted version of the bright smile he saves just for me. “I’m sorry we didn’t get more time, but I’m grateful for every moment you were mine.”

I opened my mouth to protest, to tell Draco it’s not over, that he will be okay, but his fingers fisted in my shirt and he yanked me down, slamming my lips onto his. It was pouring now, a persistent shower soaking us both, my drenched hair falling like a curtain around us. His lips were hot and frozen, as if memorizing mine, locking this moment into a place where it would stay forever untouched. His kiss was a goodbye.

Draco pulled back just a fraction, pressing our foreheads together. “Set fire to the goddamn world, Granger,” he breathed against my lips.

I raked my eyes over the sharp planes of his face. There was so much left unsaid, so many things I wanted to tell him, but the seconds were ticking by faster than grains of sand slipping through my fingers. Where do I start, where do I *begin*—

Silver vanished behind fair lashes and his head lolled back, the rain flooding his features. I inhaled sharply, wheezing, clutching his face tighter. “Draco?”

Two shaking, manicured hands appeared on his shoulders, attached to a beautiful blonde woman with a panicked expression. “Narcissa, please,” I begged, “We can still save him.”

Narcissa pressed his fingers to the crook of his neck, blood rushing back into her face. “He’s barely breathing.” She braced her hands on her son and carefully drew him into her lap, my fingers lingering on his cheeks. “I must Apparate him to our family healer immediately.”

I stood up, shivering, rubbing my arms. “I’m coming with you.”

She looked at me sadly, drawing her wand out of her pocket. “You know very well that you can’t come. I’m sorry, we have to go.”

“Hermione.” I whirled to face Ron, who stood a few feet away wearing a grim expression. “You have to stay with us, it’s too dangerous. Death Eaters or You-Know-Who could easily find you.”

I shook my head in protest, stalking forward to join Narcissa, but Ron wrapped his arms around my waist, restraining my arms and holding me tight. He was dragging me back, away, away, away from Draco. “Let me go, Ron! No!”

The wind picked up around the mother and her dying child, swirling and shifting the rain’s path. I fought and bucked against Ron’s grip, but he was too strong. His arms were a cage, a prison, barring me from the one person I needed to be with the most. “Narcissa, please!” I cried out, my voice breaking. I yelled for him relentlessly, tears and raindrops blurring my vision, Draco, *Draco*
—

I finally broke free, but by the time I got to where they had been, they were already gone.

A million images.

Quicksilver eyes.

Soft, pink lips.

Potions.

Smoke and cigarettes.

Shared earbuds.

Books.

Stray curls and a tilted head.

Blood.

Bones, broken in his arm.

Slender fingers dancing across piano keys.

Stars and skies.

Sunsets.

The moon, the beautiful moon.

Falling stars.

Bright laughs.

Snowflakes.

Strawberry roses.

The boy who bled for me. The boy who killed for me. The boy who was made for me.

The boy who may have just died for me.

I sank to my knees, dragging my palms over the indentations his body left. I roared, slapping my hands against the sand, I couldn't breathe, I couldn't live, I couldn't exist. I threw my head up towards the sky and screamed up into the charcoal clouds, eyes screwed shut against the downpour, releasing everything in me.

When I opened my eyes, I gasped.

A large, incandescent beam of light shot into the sky, and it was stemming from... me. The light flared and moved, ebbing with power. Flames.

I unleashed myself and set fire to the rain.

Chapter 40

The overgrown grass tangles in my feet as I run, stopping at every tombstone. Each one has his last name, it's his family's private graveyard. But I have yet to find one with his name.

I hope I never do.

It's raining now. I bring my arm across my forehead to help shield my vision as I stumble through. I pass every stone after a quick once over. Not him, not him, not him, not him—

My foot catches on an overgrown tree root and I fall clumsily, smacking my face into the mud. I curse, wiping my face. I look up and freeze.

DRACO LUCIUS MALFOY

JUNE 1980 - MARCH 1998

LOVING SON AND DEVOTED FRIEND

I'm crying, but my tears are washed away by the rain. I clutch the tombstone, fingers white. I laugh suddenly as I read the simple words on the stone. Devoted friend. Is that all he was to me, all he had been reduced to on a slab of rock?

They would never know that he bled for me, killed for me, was made for me, died for me.

I curl up against the stone, shutting my eyes and imagining I'm nestled against his chest instead, drifting off to sleep. I imagine the raindrops are his fingers as he strokes my hair. I imagine the rustling of the leaves is his book as he turns the page.

I'll stay here, I decide. I'll lay here until I die. I hope the rain carries on forever, breaks down my flesh, sinks me through the soil so I can be with him again, because what's the point? I'll never smile again, laugh again, live again, love again—

“Hey, hey, it's okay.”

My eyes flew open. Ron is standing over me, wiping my cheeks tenderly, his fingers coming away wet. I'm crying.

“It's just a nightmare,” Ron assured, sitting on the bed.

The room is cast in shadow, lacking decorations save for a few beach paintings on the wall and a plush cream armchair in the corner. I'm laying in a twin bed with plain white sheets.

Just a nightmare.

I don't know if he's dead.

I sniffed my tears back, sitting up hastily. My head spins, and I pressed my palms to my forehead, taking a shuddering breath. “Where are we?”

“Bill and Fleur’s cottage on the beach. You passed out yesterday, after...” Ron hesitated, rubbing the back of his neck. “You’ve been out for a day.”

I remember light shooting out of me, but that makes no sense. “What happened?”

Ron shook his head, staring at me like I was a rare jewel found underground. “I vaguely remember learning about it in class, how a powerful witch or wizard can lose control of their magic when they’re in extreme emotional turmoil.”

“That really was me, then?” My body felt weak, like I had spent almost every drop of magic in me. “The beam of fire?”

He was still staring. “It was breathtaking, Hermione. And it was terrifying.”

The irony of the whole situation caused me to burst into laughter. I cackled, bending over, unable to stop. Ron eyed me warily, cocking his head. “What did I miss?”

I caught my breath, pressing down my giggles. “Draco’s last words to me were ‘Set fire to the goddamn world, Granger.’ And I did that.” I laughed again, craning my head back. “I literally did that.”

“Hermione—”

“You should’ve let me go with him,” I said suddenly, snapping my eyes to him. I just remembered how mercilessly he had held me back, how I cried and tried to claw myself free. He had no right to keep me from going. He had no right to keep me from Draco as the life drained out of him.

Ron winced, reaching his hand out toward me. “You know it would’ve been too dangerous—”

“I don’t care.”

He dropped his hand, wringing them together. We sat in an uncomfortable silence. I know I was being too harsh, but I don’t really care. I just think about how since he held me back, I’ll spend Merlin knows how long wondering about Draco, unaware of whether or not he’s alive. I just think about how if he really is dead, Ron is the one who robbed me of a final goodbye with the most important person in my life.

“There was another one.”

Ron looked up at me nervously. “What?”

“A dagger,” I clarified, wanting to change the subject. “There was another dagger, she threw two. Did it hit anyone?”

Ron’s face crumbled, and he didn’t have to say anything else for me to know it did. “Who?” I whispered, not sure I want to hear the answer.

He stood up, offering his hand, his expression solemn. “Come with me.”

He led me down the stairs and out a back door. We walked through thick sand, heavy winds blowing my hair across my face. I see Harry standing ahead, relieved that he’s okay. He’s standing still, looking down at something. We waded through tall grass, and I stopped next to Harry. I looked down at the grave, covering my mouth with my hands.

HERE

LIES

DOBBY

A

FREE ELF

I dropped to my knees, tears silently descending down my cheeks.

I never thanked him for the strawberries, I realize.

I brought my feet in front of me and slipped my shoes off, then my socks. "Take off your socks, Ronald." My voice was weak. "You too, Harry."

Ron started, "What—"

"Do it."

Harry seemed to understand, sitting next to me and sliding them off. After a moment, Ron did the same.

I took our socks in my hands. "You were so brave, Dobby," I whispered, placing my hand gently on the stone. "So, so, brave, and kind, and considerate." I placed them at the base of his tombstone. "I hope these are enough to keep you a free elf in every life after this one." I leaned forward, murmuring so only Dobby could hear me. "And thank you for all of the strawberries. You made me so happy, giving them to me at every meal brightened my day."

I leaned back, and Harry was crying beside me, wiping his eyes. I wrapped my arms around him, and Ron around the both of us. Harry hugged me fiercely, burying his face in my shoulder.

After a few moments, I pulled back and kissed his cheek, brushing their arms off and standing up. "I'm going to take a walk."

I turned and left, heading for the water. Ron tried to say something. "Let her go," Harry said quietly.

The winds blew me side to side, swaying my body. I reached the dull cerulean waves, sitting down a few feet in front of them and pulling my knees to my chest. I closed my eyes, filling my lungs with the salty air.

I have such good memories of the beach. Swimming with my parents during the summer. Using bright neon floaties. Looking for fish underwater with a snorkel. Having contests with my dad to see who can hold their breath the longest. Burying mum in the sand until the water washed it away.

I hate the beach now.

The beach is where I used to come with my parents, who don't remember they're my parents, and maybe never will.

The beach is where I used to love swimming. I can never swim again, especially in salt water. Over a month of being tortured with liquid fire ruined that for me.

The beach is where Dobby died.

The beach is where Draco laid dying in my arms.

The beach is a sea of grey churning waves and raging storms. It hurts like hell how much it reminds me of him, of his eyes.

I stared out across the water, unmoving as the sun set, turning the sky into a canvas full of brilliant color.

The beach has beautiful sunsets, something that I enjoy most with him. I may never enjoy a beach sunset with him, I realize.

The roar of the waves is like a white noise, drowning out the world. I like that. I like how I burn the world, and the sea drowns it.

I stayed for hours. The moon is high in the sky, but muted, only a faint glow. I think it knows about Draco, the moon. I hope that it's luminescence isn't as stunning as usual because it's giving its light to Draco.

I turned my torso to the right briefly, and a familiar warm sensation shot through my wrist. I inhaled sharply, reaching for the gold chain.

Does the spell still work if he's dead? Or would it just lead me to his body?

I played with my charm bracelet, rubbing the charms between my fingers, trailing my fingertips over the engraving: *for the girl who never dreams it's over*.

I don't. I never dream it's over. It's never over.

Unless he's dead. Then it's over. Everything's over.

Chapter 41

April 9, 1998

I slipped out of bed, creeping down the stairs. I made my way to the balcony, prepared to do what I do every night: stare out at the waves, look up at the moon in silence. During the day, we had been planning our break into Gringotts, brewing more Polyjuice Potion and working out the logistics. Fleur would make lunch for us; it was never very good, but we never said that. She was already so kind to open up her home to us. For dinner, Bill cooked, and his food was much better. Overall, the days were full of work and chatter. This was my only time to myself in a serene quiet, with only the stars to keep me company.

But Harry was out there, his forearms braced on the faded wooden railing as he looked out at the ocean. "Can't sleep either?" He rasped without turning, his voice scratchy.

The thin blue nightgown Fleur lent me did nothing against the chill of the night air. I walked up and stood next to him, and there's a cigarette between his lips. "Since when do you smoke?" I asked, unable to hide the surprise in my voice.

"Started after Bill and Fleur's wedding, when I couldn't say goodbye to Ginny." The smoke fogged his glasses a bit. "Do it almost every night now."

"I didn't know that."

"Well, now you do."

"I never see you out here," I thought aloud.

Harry gestured a hand up toward the balcony on the second floor, connecting to his and Ron's shared room. "Usually do it up there, but Fleur is drying her pottery up there and I don't want to knock anything over and break something." I nodded. That was her new hobby, it seemed. All of our plates and bowls were made by her, and you could tell which ones she made more recently and which ones she made a while ago; she had improved greatly.

I fixed my eyes on the stick between his lips. "I want one."

Another puff of smoke. "No."

"Why not?"

Harry glanced at me sideways, eyeing me. "It's really unhealthy."

"I couldn't care less." I shook my head, looking back out at the still waters. "I'll die, anyways. You'll die, anyways. Everyone dies, anyways."

He sighed, removing his cigarette with two fingers. "I told Draco I'd look after you, and I don't think giving you a cigarette abides by that."

The mention of his name somehow freezes me and melts me simultaneously. I think of the day in the library, when I smoked and coughed and he laughed at me, that incandescent sound. "He gave me one once."

In an attempt to persuade me not to, Harry said wryly, "What if each cigarette shaves a week off of

your life?"

"Then give me the whole damn pack."

His eyes flashed when he looked at me. "Don't say that."

"I can say what I want."

"You don't mean it."

"If he's dead, I mean it with everything in me."

Harry shook his head incredulously. "There are other people in your life, Mione," he says softly. "People who love you."

I pressed my lips together, watching the waters. "No one else is him."

He scoffed, turning to fully face me. "If he's dead, are you really going to live like this?" His face is aggravated. "Are you really going to destroy your whole life if he's not in it?"

"It won't be a life without Draco," I said simply, truthfully.

"Oh, come on."

I whirled, exasperated. "Do you still not understand? He's a part of me, Harry. I can't..." My voice wavered. "I can't survive with half of my heart, okay?"

"Yes, you can, with the help of your lungs and your bones and your arms and your legs." Harry's expression softened, and he grabbed my arms. "We're a part of you, too."

"To what end?" I tilted my head. "It's not like I'll remember any of it, anyway."

"I'll remind you everyday."

I stiffened in his grip, gently taking his hands off of me. I see the open pack of cigarettes on the table, so I snatched one.

I paused in the doorway and said firmly, "Don't bother." I went back up to my bedroom. I don't look back to see the hurt in his eyes.

"What if I read her diary to her?" Draco turned to me, staring at me with his grey eyes so intensely that I think I might shatter. "Would it help her remember?"

Doctor Bennett shook his head. "It's never been done before, so I can't give you a concrete answer, but the probability is slim. The magical wounds within her brain are irreversible."

"I'll do it regardless." The smallest of smiles for me.

"You're getting ahead of yourself," I teased, trying to take my mind off of my prognosis. "How do you know we'll still be together?"

"I have no doubts about you and I, Granger."

There are a couple of reasons why I don't want Harry to remind me everyday.

First, because Draco was supposed to be the one to do it.

Second, because if he's dead, I wouldn't want to be reminded of that everyday. To relive that pain daily would be the worst thing imaginable.

I'm sorry, Harry. I just... I don't want to suffer anymore.

Chapter 42

May 1, 1998

I love poetry.

I was thinking about it, and that's how I would describe my life with Draco. Before him, it was one big paragraph, with terrible grammar and run-on sentences. And with him, everything became beautiful and serene and lovely, like the poetry that flows down the center of the page.

I'm back to a big paragraph and run on sentences, wondering if I'll ever experience poetry again.

It's exceptionally lonely, being Hermione Granger without Draco Malfoy.

And this paragraph is so damn long.

Ron and I rushed through the halls, holding tight to our armfuls of Basilisk fangs. We had been looking for Harry for what felt like such a long time, though I also kept an eye out for other familiar faces, hoping to see Theo or Pansy or Blaise or Luna. We skidded around a final corner we saw Harry, who released a yell of mingled relief and fury.

"Where the hell have you been?" Harry shouted.

"Chamber of Secrets," said Ron.

"Chamber— what?" said Harry, coming to an unsteady halt before us.

"It was Ron, all Ron's idea!" I said breathlessly, impressed by his wits. "Wasn't it absolutely brilliant? There we were, after we left, and I said to Ron, even if we find the other one, how are we going to get rid of it? We still hadn't got rid of the cup! And then he thought of it! The basilisk!"

"What for?"

"Something to get rid of Horcruxes," said Ron simply.

Harry's eyes dropped to the fangs clutched in arms. "But how did you get in there?" he asked, staring from the fangs to Ron. "You need to speak Parseltongue!"

"He did!" I said proudly, nudging him. "Show him, Ron!"

Ron made a horrible strangled hissing noise.

"It's what you did to open the locket," he told Harry apologetically. "I had to have a few goes to get it right, but," he shrugged modestly, "we got there in the end."

I rolled my eyes at his downplay. "He was amazing!" I beamed at him. "Amazing!" I was proud of him, truly. Ron smiled.

"So..." Harry was struggling to keep up. "So..."

"So we're another Horcrux down," said Ron, and from under his jacket he pulled the mangled remains of Hufflepuff's cup. "Hermione stabbed it. Thought she should. She hasn't had the pleasure yet."

"Genius!" yelled Harry.

"It was nothing," said Ron, though he looked delighted with himself. "So what's new with you?"

As he said it, there was an explosion from overhead: We looked up as dust fell from the ceiling and heard a distant scream.

"I know what the diadem looks like, and I know where it is," said Harry, talking fast. "He hid it exactly where I had my old Potions book, where everyone's been hiding stuff for centuries. He thought he was the only one to find it. Come on."

As the walls trembled again, Harry led us through a concealed entrance and down the staircase into the Room of Requirement. It was empty except for three women: Ginny, Tonks and an elderly witch wearing a moth-eaten hat, whom I recognized immediately as Neville's grandmother.

"Ah, Potter," she said crisply as if she had been waiting for him. "You can tell us what's going on."

"Is everyone okay?" said Ginny and Tonks together.

"S far as we know," said Harry. "Are there still people in the passage to the Hog's Head?"

"I was the last to come through," said Mrs. Longbottom. "I sealed it, I think it unwise to leave it open now Aberforth has left his pub. Have you seen my grandson?"

"He's fighting," said Harry.

"Naturally," said the old lady proudly. "Excuse me, I must go and assist him."

With surprising speed she trotted off toward the stone steps.

Harry looked at Tonks. "I thought you were supposed to be with Teddy at your mother's?"

"I couldn't stand not knowing," Tonks looked anguished. "She'll look after him. Have you seen Remus?"

"He was planning to lead a group of fighters into the grounds."

Without another word, Tonks sped off.

"Ginny," said Harry, "I'm sorry, but we need you to leave too. Just for a bit. Then you can come back in."

Ginny looked simply delighted to leave her sanctuary, winking at me as she left.

"And then you can come back in!" he shouted after her as she ran up the steps after Tonks. "You've got to come back in!"

It was clear, as we stepped back into the corridor upstairs, that in the minutes that we had spent in the Room of Requirement the situation within the castle had deteriorated severely: The walls and ceiling were shaking worse than ever; dust filled the air, and through the nearest window, I saw bursts of green and red light so close to the foot of the castle that I knew the Death Eaters must be very near to entering the place. Looking down, I saw Grawp the giant meandering past, swinging what looked like a stone gargoyles torn from the roof and roaring his displeasure.

"Let's hope he steps on some of them!" said Ron as more screams echoed from close by.

I'm tired.

"As long as it's not any of our lot!" said a voice: We turned and saw Ginny and Tonks, both with their wands drawn at the next window, which was missing several panes. Even as I watched, Ginny sent a well-aimed jinx into a crowd of fighters below.

I'm so tired.

"Good girl!" roared a figure running through the dust toward them, and we saw Aberforth again, his gray hair flying as he led a small group of students past. "They look like they might be breaching the north battlements, they've brought giants of their own."

"Have you seen Remus?" Tonks called after him.

"He was dueling Dolohov," shouted Aberforth, "haven't seen him since!"

"Tonks," said Ginny, "Tonks, I'm sure he's okay." But Tonks had run off into the dust after Aberforth.

Ginny turned to us with wide, helpless eyes.

"They'll be all right. Ginny, we'll be back in a moment, just keep out of the way, keep safe." The longing in his voice was so clear that I looked away in discomfort. "Come on!" He urged us, and we ran back to the stretch of wall beyond which the Room of Requirement was waiting to do the bidding of the next entrant.

The furor of the battle died the moment we crossed the threshold and closed the door behind us: All was silent. We were in a place the size of a cathedral with the appearance of a city, its towering walls built of objects hidden by thousands of long-gone students.

"And Captain Moldy never realized anyone could get in?" said Ron, his voice echoing in the silence. I almost smiled at that, at the fact that the three of us had taken to saying Theo's character name for Voldemort.

"He thought he was the only one," said Harry. "Too bad for him I've had to hide stuff in my time..."

"You two go ahead, I'll go off on my own and look for anything useful we can take," I suggested. In all honesty, I just wanted a moment alone. Harry and Ron nodded, taking off to the right. I ran my fingers over some tables and cabinets, my fingertips gathering dust.

I'm just so, so tired.

I think of Tonks, searching tirelessly for Remus, the man she loves. She has the other half of her heart, she has him to fight for.

I fight for my friends, I know. But is it worth it to fight for myself if I won't see Draco on the other side?

I thought I was scared already, but I wasn't, not really. Not until I beheld his face, full of the one thing I didn't want to see: his expression held a goodbye. "See you on the other side, Granger," Draco said softly, but there was no conviction in it.

Tears pushed their way to the surface, brimming behind my eyes. I threw out what I could, asking him for something I knew he would always keep. "Promise?"

Draco brought our hands joined at the pinky up to his lips, pressing them there. "Pinky promise."

I exhaled, trusting him, always trusting him. "The other side."

Draco yanked me forward by our attached fingers and kissed me firmly, hard and desperate. I shut my eyes and savored the feel of his lips, and I wished time would stop forever so he could never leave me.

He always keeps his promises, but I don't know if he'll be able to keep this one.

I perked up, hearing something. Grunts. That indescribable sound made when a spell is fired. I turned in the direction of the sounds—

Oh my god.

My wrist is burning.

I shook my head, beginning to breathe hard. Is he here? Or is he somewhere else, but just in this general direction?

Fire shoots up into the air ahead, seemingly out of nowhere.

"Aguamenti!" I heard Harry scream.

"Harry!" I yelled, running toward them. I ran straight ahead, maneuvering around the clutter. I finally spot Harry and Ron. Flames of abnormal size were pursuing them, licking up the sides of the junk bulwarks, which were crumbling to soot at their touch.

"RUN!" Ron roared. But I'm frozen, staring behind him.

I have been stuck in one big paragraph, with terrible grammar and run-on sentences.

And when I see him, grey eyes blazing like the fire behind him,

everything becomes beautiful and serene and lovely,

like the poetry that flows down the center of the page.

He looked just as I remembered him:

stray curls

and

quicksilver eyes

and

full, pink lips.

His eyes lock on mine, and

the

world

stops

turning.

I'm pulled out of my haze when Draco rushed past me, locking our fingers together and tugging me forward. I came back to myself, sprinting like hell away from the flames. Crabbe and Goyle were running right in front of us, Harry and Ron in the front. As we turned a corner the flames chased us as though they were alive, sentient, intent upon killing us.

Fiendfyre.

Now the fire was mutating, forming a gigantic pack of fiery beasts: Flaming serpents, chimaeras, and dragons rose and fell and rose again, and the detritus of centuries on which they were feeding was thrown up into the air into their fanged mouths, tossed high on clawed feet, before being consumed by the inferno.

Suddenly, Draco's hand was forced out of mine; Goyle had grabbed him. I cried out, but they had already vanished, and Ron was already pulling me in another direction.

No. I have to find him. I just got him back—

The fiery monsters were circling us, drawing closer and closer, claws and horns and tails lashed, and the heat was solid as a wall around them.

"What can we do?" I screamed over the deafening roars of the fire. "What can we do?"

"Here!"

Harry seized a pair of heavy-looking broomsticks from the nearest pile of junk and threw one to Ron, who pulled me onto it behind him. With hard kicks to the ground we soared up in the air, missing by feet the horned beak of a flaming raptor that snapped its jaws at me. The smoke and heat were becoming overwhelming: Below me the cursed fire was consuming the contraband of generations of hunted students, the guilty outcomes of a thousand banned experiments, the secrets of the countless souls who had sought refuge in the room. Sweat dripped down my back, and I coughed, holding steadily on Ron's shoulders.

I could not see a trace of Draco, Crabbe, or Goyle anywhere. I didn't have to tell them, Harry and Ron knew we couldn't leave them. I pushed Ron's shoulders down and swooped as low as we could over the marauding monsters of flame to try to find them, but there was nothing but fire. No, *no*—

A thin, piteous human scream sounded from amidst the terrible commotion, the thunder of devouring flame. Goyle.

We wheeled in the air. I squinted through the smoke raked the firestorm below, seeking a sign of life, a flash of blonde, a beacon of silver. Come on, come on.

I let out a strangled sound when I finally saw him: Draco had his arms around the unconscious Goyle, the pair of them perched on a fragile tower of charred desks, and Harry dived. Draco saw him coming and raised one arm, but even as Harry grasped it, slid instantly out of Harry's hand. I cursed, tapping Ron's shoulder and pointing so he knew we had to help them.

Draco was able to get onto Harry's broomstick, and I dragged Goyle onto our broom and we rose, rolling and pitching, into the air once more. I clutched Goyle against my chest and kept my eyes on the back of Draco's head as Harry took the lead.

I was hardly able to breathe, and all around us the last few objects unburned by the devouring

flames were flung into the air, as the creatures of the cursed fire cast them high in celebration: cups and shields, a sparkling necklace, and an old, discolored tiara.

Harry must have saw it as well, and he made a hairpin swerve and dived. The diadem seemed to fall in slow motion, turning and glittering as it dropped toward the maw of a yawning serpent, and then he had it, caught it around his wrist. "Yes!" I screamed.

Harry swerved again as the serpent lunged at him. We soared upward and straight toward the place where, I prayed, the door stood open. Then, through the smoke, I saw a rectangular patch on the wall and steered the broom at it, and moments later clean air filled my lungs and we collided with the wall in the corridor beyond.

The door to the Room of Requirement had vanished, and Ron and I sat panting on the floor beside Goyle, who was stirring.

"C-Crabbe," choked Goyle weakly. "C-Crabbe..."

"He's dead," said Ron, not unkindly.

There was silence, apart from panting and coughing. I looked up, meeting a raging storm. A number of huge bangs shook the castle, and a great cavalcade of transparent figures galloped past on horses, their heads screaming with bloodlust under their arms, but none of it matters when I see him, alive, and my world is beautiful and serene and lovely poetry again.

Draco is stumbling forward blindly,

reaching for me,

and I reach for him,

the boy who bled for me,

the boy who killed for me,

the boy who was made for me,

the boy who almost died for me.

I clutched his shoulders,

staring up at him with wide eyes.

He grabbed my face with both hands.

And as destruction and ruin

seemed to raise from hell,

so our lips collided in a supernova.

He kissed me like he's starved for me,

like he's in the desert

and I'm the last drop of water. It's

desperate and

full of need.

A need to feel me.

A need to love me.

"Where's Ginny?" Harry said sharply, pulling us out of our moment. I drew back, keeping my hands on Draco, just to assure myself that he's really here. "She was here. She was supposed to be going back into the Room of Requirement." Draco removed his hands from my face and laced our fingers together between us, his grip firm.

"Blimey, d'you reckon it'll still work after that fire?" asked Ron, but he too got to his feet, rubbing his chest and looking left and right. "Shall we split up and look?"

Before anyone could respond, the diadem Harry was cradling in his hands shriveled to ash. Ron and Harry exchanged confused looks.

"It was Fiendfyre," I explained. "Cursed fire. it's one of the substances that destroy Horcruxes, but I would never, ever have dared use it, it's so dangerous." I glanced back at Draco. "Who cast the spell?"

"Crabbe," He answered, his voice rough. He had never been very close with Crabbe; he told me that he realized in the beginning of third year that Crabbe and Goyle were followers who would do his bidding simply because of his Malfoy name. That was when he started spending more time with Theo, Pansy, and Blaise, true friends who weren't afraid to speak their opinions and be themselves. Regardless, I could tell Crabbe's death was a rough blow.

"Must've learned from the Carrows," said Harry grimly.

"Shame he wasn't concentrating when they mentioned how to stop it, really," said Ron, whose hair, like mine, was singed, and whose face was blackened. "If he hadn't tried to kill us all, I'd be quite sorry he was dead."

"But don't you realize?" I whispered. "This means, if we can just get the snake—"

I broke off as yells and shouts and the unmistakable noises of dueling filled the corridor. I looked around and my heart seemed to fail: Death Eaters had penetrated Hogwarts. I turned back to Draco frantically, and his face confirmed everything I was thinking: he had to go now.

He bent down, putting his lips to my ear. "See you on the other side, Granger," he murmured. I tightened my fingers in his, nodding, trusting him, always trusting him. He pressed his lips to my temple. I screwed my eyes shut when his hands left mine, not wanting to see him leave me, not again. When I opened them, he was gone.

Fred and Percy had just backed into view, both of them dueling masked and hooded men.

We ran forward to help: Jets of light flew in every direction and the man dueling Percy backed off, fast: Then his hood slipped and I saw a high forehead and streaked hair.

"Hello, Minister!" bellowed Percy, sending a neat jinx straight at Thicknesse, who dropped his wand and clawed at the front of his robes, apparently in awful discomfort. "Did I mention I'm resigning?"

"You're joking, Perce!" shouted Fred as the Death Eater he was battling collapsed under the weight of three separate Stunning Spells. Thicknesse had fallen to the ground with tiny spikes erupting all over him; he seemed to be turning into some form of sea urchin. Fred looked at Percy with glee.

"You actually are joking, Perce.... I don't think I've heard you joke since you were—"

The air exploded. We had been grouped together, me, Harry, Ron, Fred, and Percy, the two Death Eaters at their feet, one Stunned, the other Transfigured; and in that fragment of a moment, when danger seemed temporarily at bay, the world was rent apart, I felt myself flying through the air, and all I could do was hold as tightly as possible to that thin stick of wood that was my one and only weapon, and shield my head in my arms: I heard the screams and yells of my friends without a hope of knowing what had happened to them.

And then the world resolved itself into pain and semidarkness: I was half buried in the wreckage of a corridor that had been subjected to a terrible attack. Cold air told me that the side of the castle had been blown away, and hot stickiness on my cheek told me that I was bleeding copiously. Then I heard a terrible cry that pulled at my insides, that expressed agony of a kind neither flame nor curse could cause, and I stood up, swaying.

Harry was struggling to his feet in the wreckage, and three redheaded men were grouped on the ground where the wall had blasted apart. I grabbed Harry's hand as we staggered and stumbled over stone and wood.

When I saw him, I burst into tears, falling at his side. *No.*

"No, no, no!" Percy cried. "No! Fred! No!" And Percy was shaking his brother, and Ron was kneeling beside them, and Fred's eyes stared without seeing, the ghost of his last laugh still etched upon his face.

Everything, the battle, the stakes, the lives, became very real as I sobbed over the dead body of the boy who had been the big brother I never had.

Chapter 43

It's a battle. There will inevitably be death.

So why wasn't I prepared to say goodbye?

It looked as if he's about to laugh. I almost expected him to, to sit up and say, "gotcha!" after a mean prank.

But it would be a prank. It wouldn't be real.

Percy was cradling Fred's face. Ron and Harry were both frozen, staring blankly at Fred's body in shock.

No. This is real.

Percy was sitting up now, roaring into the dust and oblivion. I scooted forward on my knees, my hands shaking as they found Fred's cheeks. I leaned forward, pressing a kiss to his forehead, my tears splashing onto his still face. "Thank you for everything," I whispered against his skin. "I love you, Fred. Goodbye for now. I'll see you again someday."

Loud voices sounded, and two Death Eaters charged in from different directions, heading right toward us. Harry scattered away, pulling a protesting Ron with him, but my path was blocked by one of the Death Eaters, so I couldn't follow them. That left only one escape route. I turned to Percy, and he shook his head at me. "Go," he mouthed, raising his wand.

I ran, rounding the corner as Percy let out a guttural scream, intent on protecting his little brother and exacting revenge.

I ran like hell, turning corner after corner. rammed into a tall, lean figure. I looked up into molten brown eyes and shaggy dark hair.

"Theo!"

His eyes widened, and he grasped my hand and slipped us inside a room. Theo wrapped his arms around me, leaning down and resting his chin on my head. He got so much taller. "Oh my god, hi," Theo said in quiet disbelief. "Hi."

I pulled back, smiling up at my best friend. "I can't believe it."

He grinned sideways. "Missed you, too, princess."

Theo released me and opened the door, peeking his head out to the left. "Pam, Blake," he yelled, "Code Disney!"

Light and quick footsteps, and Pansy and Blaise burst in. Pansy's hazel eyes lit up, her red lips parting in a big smile. "Granger!" She swept forward and hugged me, squeezing me tight. Blaise embraced me next, pressing a kiss into my hair.

"Are you guys okay?" I asked, scanning my friends from head to toe. Thankfully, I didn't see any injuries.

"Of course we are," Blaise waved a dismissive hand. "What about you, Miss 'off-to-save-the-world'?"

“I’m fine.”

“No. you’re not.” Pansy cocked her head, staring at my face. “You were crying.”

I had almost forgotten how well they know me. I shook my head, looking down. “I just saw Fred Weasley die.”

And then Theo’s arms were around me again, holding me close. Pansy came up behind me, stroking my hair soothingly. “I’m so sorry.” He loosed a breath. “I know how much you loved him, how he was like your brother.”

I missed his hugs. I don’t know when we had become so close, but I relished in it. I nodded against him, another tear falling. “I can’t believe all of this is happening.”

“Who the hell killed Fred?” Pansy said slowly, her voice low.

Blaise sent her a sad look. “Pansy...”

“I don’t know,” I answered, stepping out of Theo’s arms. “I didn’t see. I think Percy saw, though, and he’s taking revenge.”

Pansy groaned, crossing her arms and tilting her face up, closing her eyes. “None of this is okay.”

“Really?” Theo said wryly, “I thought this is what peace looks like.”

“I thought this is what peace looks like,” She mocked, contorting her face. “You’re not funny.”

“I’m funny enough to be your boyfriend.”

“You’re my boyfriend because it was between you and Blaise, and Blaise is into blondes.”

Blaise nodded. “I am.”

Theo glared daggers at Blaise.

That’s when I noticed his Ravenclaw girlfriend was not there. “Speaking of blondes, where’s Luna?”

“With Ginny.” Blaise jerked his head out the door. “I was on my way to get her.”

I opened my mouth to tell him he can’t very well go in his Death Eater robes when I stopped short, taking a second look at their clothes: they were all wearing denims and t-shirts. “Wait, why aren’t you guys in your death eater robes?”

Theo whistled, sticking his hands in his jean pockets and rocking back on his heels. “Who’s gonna tell her?”

Pansy’s lip curved in what I recognized as pride. “We defected, Granger. You know our loyalties have always laid with you guys, but now it’s official.”

I gasped, looking between the three of them. “Really?”

“We’re not important, so Captain Moldy didn’t even blink one of those creepy red eyes,” Blaise explained, shrugging casually. “Our parents have been after us all night, though.”

I knew how much courage it took for them to do this. I beamed, looking each of them in the eye.

"I'm so proud of you. All of you."

Theo winked at me. "Learned from the best."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "The best at what?"

"I don't know, being a good person?"

"I guess."

"Well, it just felt like the right thing to say."

"It wasn't really clear what you were saying, that's the thing."

Theo tilted his head, smiling softly. "Did I already tell you you look pretty tonight?"

Pansy's face turned sour. "Are you saying I don't usually look pretty?"

"I mean you look especially pretty."

"Why's that?"

Theo considered for a moment, then grinned sensuously. "I don't know, but you look so damn hot in that red lipstick. You should wear it more often."

"Noted, I'll never wear it again."

It was refreshing to see their playful banter again, but it only reminded me of who wasn't with us. "Where's Draco?"

Blaise turned to me, wincing. "I was hoping you had seen him."

"I did. I wasn't expecting it, obviously, after he got stabbed—"

Theo sputtered, coughing. "He got *what*?"

I rose my brow. "Did you guys not know?"

Pansy gestured at their collective expressions of shock. "Does it look like we knew?"

I sighed, wringing my hands together. "At the Malfoy Manor in March, Bellatrix threw a dagger at me, and Draco stepped in the way to save me and it struck him instead."

My friends burst into a flurry of questions, talking over each other.

"Why were you at the Malfoy Manor?" Blaise asked in a panic.

Theo rasped, "*March*? Ice queen was stabbed in *March*?"

Pansy hissed, "That whore Bellatrix I swear—"

"Guys," I interrupted, shifting on my feet. "As much as we need to talk, I don't think right now is the best time."

Blaise nodded. "Agreed, brightest witch of our age."

"There's a lot we need to do," I continued, "So we're probably going to have to split up."

Pansy came forward and looped her arm through mine. “Dibs on Granger.”

Theo looked at her. “I was going to say dibs on you, Pans.”

“Suck it up, I need time with my girl.”

I smiled, bumping her hip with mine. “Okay, so Pansy and I can find Ron and Harry.”

“I need to get to Luna,” Blaise added determinedly.

“And I’ll find Draco,” Theo finished. I shot him a grateful look, and he nodded once.

“Okay.” I moved toward the door. “Let’s all meet up in the Great Hall, yeah?”

Blaise sighed, bracing his hands on my shoulders and kissing my cheek. He tilted his head, his brown eyes full of worry. “See you soon?”

I smiled at my friend. “See you soon.”

Pansy was standing in front of Theo, looking up at him with her arms crossed. “Be careful.”

Theo laughed a little. “Come on, Pans, when have I not been serious and cautious?”

She stood on her tiptoes, grabbing his neck and pulling their lips together, only for a second. She drew back, quirking her eyebrow. “I’m serious, Theo.”

“Alright,” he relented. “I will.” He nodded, placing his hand on her cheek, and she rested her head in his grip. “Be safe, Pans.”

Her eyes shone, and she nodded once before pulling away, turning to say bye to Blaise, unable to stare at Theo any longer without starting to cry.

Theo embraced me again and encased my waist in his strong arms, already the third time today, but I wasn’t complaining at all. I had missed my best friend too much. “Adieu, princess,” he murmured, flashing me his signature grin.

Pansy grabbed my hand and tugged me out the door, sniffing, not looking at either of the boys. In the doorway, I smiled back. “Auf wiedersehen, Theo.”

Chapter 44

We walked quickly, and we had to turn around and take different routes a couple of times; parts of the school were completely destroyed. It broke my heart to see my home being torn apart, brick by brick. Then we heard loud shouts, and Pansy paled, for she recognized the voices as her parents. "In here," she whispered, ushering me into a classroom and locking the door behind us.

She pressed her back against the door, shutting her eyes. I inhaled deeply, taking a moment to myself and leaving Pansy with her thoughts.

My head was pounding, and I rubbed my temples in an attempt to ease the pain. Is this how Harry always feels, only much worse, I imagine? I shook my head at the thought. The fact that he can see into Voldemort's mind makes me sick to my stomach.

I paused, wincing. I winced at the thought that had been plaguing me for a while now, ever since I watched Harry *feel* his way toward a Horcrux.

Harry is a horcrux.

I'm positive it was unintentional on Voldemort's part, an unforeseen consequence of Lily's protective love of Harry. Nevertheless, I know I'm right.

And for once, I really, really hope I'm wrong.

He would have to die. Harry, one of my best friends. If Draco is my heart, Harry is my lungs.

My parents and now Fred, that's all I can take. I cannot possibly lose anyone else. I'll fall apart.

A soft crunching noise pulled me back to reality, and I glanced over at Pansy. "Are you eating a snickerdoodle right now?"

She nodded, taking another bite. "Keeps my adrenaline up." She opened her small bag and showed me her stash. "Theo taught me the recipe over the summer, so I made it myself."

"He revealed his secret recipe to you?" I asked in surprise. I smiled. "He really does love you."

Pansy rolled her eyes. "Of course he does. Not like he's ever said it, though."

"Really?"

"Come on, Granger, you know us." Pansy grinned mischievously. "We're trying to see who cracks first." She laughed to herself, taking another bite of her cookie. "I almost got him to say it the other day when we were making out. It was the damndest thing, he said 'I love—' against my lips and then completely froze, realizing himself, and he said 'your lips' instead. It was hilarious."

I stared at her, at her expression of humor and adoration. "You really love him, don't you?"

"It feels like..." She paused, struggling to find the right words. "Like he brings me happiness in every way. He makes my heart smile." Pansy laughed a little and shook her head, dipping her chin and smiling to herself. "That doesn't really make sense, but that's how it feels."

"I know the feeling," I assured, thinking of how incomparably happy Draco makes me.

Pansy sighed, tucking her short hair behind her ear. "After all of this is over, I want us all to go

back to the park in New York."

"Central Park?"

"Yeah." Her mouth pulled up at the corner. "I loved that night."

"Me too."

Pansy cracked the door open and looked both ways, waving me over to let me know the coast was clear. "Let's go."

We hurried through the halls, making sure to only go through the empty passages. I cursed the castle for being so big, we could be looking for Harry and Ron for hours. "I forgot to tell you," I added as we walked, "Earlier this year, I had to put on a few costumes. I did my own makeup."

Pansy twirled toward me and gaped, hazel eyes glazing over. "Damn it, I'm so proud I might cry."

We giggled, and for a moment, we were two friends laughing about cosmetics.

Until we weren't.

"I do not wish this." The rough voice filled the whole castle, coming from everywhere yet nowhere all at once. Voldemort. Pansy stilled, linking our arms tight and bulging her eyes at me.

"Every drop of magical blood spilled is a terrible waste. I therefore command my forces to retreat... In their absence, dispose of your dead with dignity." I swallowed, Fred's lifeless body flashing through my mind.

"Harry Potter, I now speak directly to you. On this night, you have allowed your friends to die for you, rather than face me yourself. There is no greater dishonor. Join me in the Forbidden Forest...and confront your fate. If you do not do this, I shall kill every last man, woman and child who tries to conceal you from me."

It was over as quickly as it began, and warmth rushed into the room, as if his voice had driven all of it out. "Oh god," I whispered. "We have to go." I broke into a sprint, Pansy easily matching my stride.

We had to improvise, trying different routes. Almost every hallway was wrecked, so we would have to circle back around and take a different course. Finally, we reached the Entrance Hall after around twenty five minutes. Pansy halted, heaving breaths, shooting me annoyed looks for making her run. I spun in a circle, looking out the front doors, up the staircase, into the Great Hall, but there was no sign of Harry and Ron.

Suddenly, Harry ran in through the front doors, looking miserable and shaken. He was gripping a small glass flask in his hand. "Harry?"

He simply sped past me, shaking his head, and bolted up the stairs, gone in a blink.

I groaned in frustration, turning to Ron to ask what the hell happened, but he was staring into the Great Hall, where there was a faint outline of his mum, leaning over something, or someone.

"I have to..." Ron looked at me, and I had never seen so much pain in his blue eyes, eyes that usually radiated such happiness. "I have to say goodbye... to Fred."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I didn't know what to say, how to comfort him. What do

I even say?

To my surprise, Pansy stepped forward, placing a comforting hand on Ron's shoulder. "Go. Be with your family, Ron." She jerked her head to the right, at a blonde girl standing by the door, looking at Ron with sad green eyes. "And Lavender, too, she's waiting for you."

Ron drew in a deep breath, giving Pansy a grateful nod before heading in, wrapping his arms around Lavender. Then he laced their fingers together and went toward his family, toward his big brother, to say goodbye.

I don't know why I couldn't move, I was still frozen. Pansy took my hand and led us into the Great Hall. I shut my eyes, unable to look at the mass of dead bodies on the floor, fearing the faces I would surely recognize. I would find out later. I didn't, I couldn't... not right now. It's too much.

When I opened them, Pansy sat us in the corner so we could still see out the doors of the Great Hall. Luna and Blaise were beside us, covered in dirt, her head resting on his shoulder. "Hi Luna," I said softly, mustering a small smile. "How are you doing?"

"Oh I'm alright," She replied wistfully, lashes flitting. "I was a bit worried, but now I'm fine because I'm with Blaise. And you and Pansy, of course."

Blaise furrowed his brow, trailing his fingers up Luna's forearm. "Theo and Draco not back yet?"

Pansy shook her head and pulled her legs up, resting her chin on her knees. "If they don't come back soon," She grumbled, "I'll find them and kill them for making me worry so much."

It felt like hours were passing as I kept my eyes out the door, looking for grey eyes or molten brown ones.

A boy appeared in the middle of the stairs: a boy with a wiry frame and unruly black hair, with dirt smudged glasses that fogged his green eyes. I stood up, twisting to look for Ron, and he was already by my side, grabbing my hand and dragging me out the door and up the steps eagerly.

"Blimey," Ron said in relief, stopping us in front of Harry. "I thought you went to the forest."

Harry barely blinked, moving around us and continuing on his way. "I'm going there now."

Ron started, reaching out. "Are you mad?"

Harry kept going, not answering. "No..." Ron continued, panic rising in his voice. "You can't give yourself up to him."

"What is it, Harry?" I said firmly, keeping my voice steady. Harry stilled, his back toward us. "What is it you know?"

"There is a reason I can hear them. The Horcruxes." He turned to me, and the resolve in his forest green eyes told me. He knows. "I think I've known for a while. And I think you have, too."

Tears welled in my eyes as I looked at him, one of my best friends, about to walk to his death. "I'll go with you," I offered, my voice breaking.

"No, kill the snake." His shoulders were back and he was standing tall, ready, set on what he needed to do. "Kill the snake, and it's just him."

The tears broke free and I stumbled forward, falling into Harry's arms. I buried my face in his neck,

breathing him in, the familiar scent of treacle tarts and pumpkin juice. "Thank you for always helping me breathe," I whispered, hoping he remembers our conversation, how he's a part of me.

Harry sighed softly, pulling back, tucking a curl behind my ear. "What are lungs for?" He said with a gentle smile.

It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do, to watch him walk away, knowing I'll never see him again.

Ron seemed to understand a little too late, after Harry was already out of sight. He cursed under his breath, sending me a tortured look. "I need Lavender," he muttered, whisking away.

I wiped my tears, my eyes suddenly dry. I seemed to have bottomed out, reached the maximum amount of tears my body would allow. I saw Lavender kiss Ron fiercely, and I only ached more. Like Ron and Lavender, the loss of my best friend could only be comforted by the need of my boyfriend.

I sat on the bottom step, waiting. Any minute now, Draco and Theo will walk through those doors.

Any minute now.

I fiddled with my charm bracelet for what felt like eternity. And then it burned.

My eyes snapped up, and Draco was standing there, looking at me. Everything fell away and it was just him and his eyes. The soft grey of the clouds.

"Granger," he whispered.

I shot to my feet and ran forward, and he met me in the middle. I jumped, wrapping my legs around his waist, squeezing his neck and threading my fingers through his askew locks.

"Draco," I gasped, clutching him as tight as I could. "I thought I lost you."

He smirked against my hair. "Can't get rid of me that easily."

He lowered me to the floor and I smacked his arm, exasperated at all the emotional turmoil he put me through. "You almost died for me, you arse."

Draco chuckled, gesturing down his body. "I'm fine, see?"

"Don't ever scare me like that again," I ordered, but I felt a smile creeping onto my face.

He nodded, draping his arm over my shoulder. "Only if you don't almost get killed again."

I huffed and rolled my eyes, kissing his hand on my right shoulder.

We walked the short distance into the Great Hall corner where our friends were sitting, and I settled in beside Theo, who was buried in conversation. Pansy shook her head adamantly. "No."

"Why not?"

"Theo, I'm not going to walk down the aisle to Bohemian Rhapsody."

His eyes brightened, the expression he had whenever he formed a great idea. "I got it."

She eyed him. "You don't got it."

He nodded triumphantly. "You can walk down the aisle to Tiny Dancer."

Pansy opened her mouth to object, but nothing came out, her face slack. "Yes," she finally said.

"You can design your wedding dress," Theo continued, and she beamed. He placed two fingers on her lips. "And wear this red lipstick, and have a bouquet of daisies, of course, your favorite."

She rose a brow. "I don't think I ever told you my favorite flower."

He shrugged. "You didn't need to, your teacup has a daisy on it, and you always pick them outside in the spring and put them in a vase next to your bed."

Pansy hummed thoughtfully, smiling. "And who will you pick for your best man, Blaise or Draco?"

Theo hesitated, then jerked his thumb at me. "Can I say Granger?" He winked at me.

"No," Pansy insisted, rolling her eyes. "She's my Maid of Honor."

Theo huffed, sending me a disappointed look. "Fine, I choose Draco. I think I'd like to see Blaise carrying the rings."

"Funny, Theo," Blaise grumbled.

"Is that what we're doing here?" Draco asked, twisting the ring I gave him around his finger. "Planning our weddings?"

"I think Blaise and I should get married underwater," Luna said thoughtfully, puffing her cheeks out to imitate holding her breath.

Blaise smiled at Luna. "Sounds perfectly different. Fitting."

"And we can hire the mermaids to sing for us," She added excitedly.

Blaise nodded, then faced her fully with intrigue. "You should wear your Cinderella dress."

"I doubt it'll still fit me," she remarked, "unless I shrink myself."

"I'm sure Pansy can design the same dress but bigger, eh, Pans?"

Pansy was picking at her nails. "Obviously," she said without looking up.

Theo smacked his lips, turning his attention to me. "What about you, princess?"

I thought about it for a moment. "I don't want anything extravagant," I explained, imagining it in my head, vowing my love to the boy beside me. "Maybe a small ceremony with just our closest friends."

"During a meteor shower." I turned to Draco, and he was looking up in thought. "And every course will involve strawberries in some way." He looked at me and tilted his head, his hair falling over his brow, and I felt heat rise to my cheeks, ever after all this time. "And the reception will be in a grand library," he went on, staring at me. My favorite, his soft eyes. "And each table will be themed after a classic book, like 'To Kill A Mockingbird'." I smiled, pulling my bottom lip between my teeth.

Theo let out a low whistle, scrunching his nose. "Do you realize how much planning it would take

to have your wedding take place under a meteor shower? Good luck with that, mate."

I laid down on Draco's shoulder. "I missed you so much," I said, a yawn escaping my lips.

"You should get some rest, Granger," He said quietly.

"No, I want to talk to you, we have so much to catch up on."

Draco lifted my head from his shoulder, placing me in his lap. "We'll have plenty of time for that," he said soothingly, stroking my hair. "Go to sleep."

I tried to protest, but I was already succumbing to sleep.

"You're an angel," he murmured, right as my eyes fluttered shut.

May 2, 1998

"Hey. Wake up."

I pried my eyes open. Draco's face was hovering over me, drawn together in worry. There was a flurry of activity, and people were rushing past us and out the door.

He swallowed. "He's coming back."

I sat up, blinking, unsure of what would happen next. Would Voldemort kill us all? Make us his slaves?

Draco slid his pinky through mine, locking them together. Whatever it is, I'll face it. As long as I have him.

He led me outside, squeezing in between people. We found our friends, and we were standing in the front, so visible. "He's gonna see you, Draco," I argued, trying to tug him behind some people. "He's gonna see you standing with me—"

Draco pulled me back into place beside him, bending down and kissing me. It was a different kind of kiss, a long one full of determination and lust, of promise and resolve. He pulled away, squeezing our interlocked pinkies. "It is the utmost privilege to be by your side, Granger."

My lips quirked up, but our moment was interrupted. "Who is that?" Ginny's voice. "Hagrid's carrying? Neville, who is it?"

Voldemort and the Death Eater were over the bridge now, and Hagrid was right behind Voldemort, holding a body. A body with a wiry frame and unruly black hair.

My hand flew to my mouth.

Voldemort's flaming eyes were appeased with satisfaction. "Harry Potter..." His lip curved. "Is dead!"

No.

I fell against Draco's side, pressing my lips together to restrain my sobs. His right hand shot up, cupping my cheek.

"No! No!" Ginny's cries were heart wrenching, ear shattering, as her dad held her back.

"Silence!" Voldemort hissed, "Stupid girl!"

I can't do this.

I lost my parents, I lost Fred, and now I lost Harry.

Harry.

My very first friend.

My best friend.

My lungs.

A vital part of me.

"Harry Potter... is dead!"

I screwed my eyes shut, trying to will everything into my submission: *bring Harry back*, I begged whoever or whatever would listen. *End this.*

The only answer is the howl of the wind, and Draco's thumb brushing featherlight across my cheekbone.

"From this day forth...you'll put your faith in me." A cackle that sends a shudder through me.

"Harry Potter is dead! And now it's the time to declare yourself. Come forward and join us...or die!"

"Draco!"

I forced my eyes open. Draco's hand dropped from my face.

Lucius had stepped forward, his jaw tense. "Draco," he said again.

Oh my god.

"Draco," Narcissa said softly, reaching her hand out toward her son. "Come." I pleaded at her with my eyes, but she wouldn't look at me.

I tightened my grip on his pinky, begging him silently. Don't give me up. Please. Don't leave me, not again, never again.

Chapter 45

May 2, 1998

Don't go.

Stay.

Stay with me. Please.

Because if you left, the world would crumble, and I would shatter in your wake.

When I look up at him, I look for Draco. The soft eyes, the gentle boy.

The world stops turning.

Because I only see Malfoy, the cold statue I worked with in the beginning of fifth year. Cold and unyielding.

No. Worse.

He's grinning at me, but there's no joy in it. His eyes are flashing, darting between mine. His lips are twisted into an ugly sneer.

I feel my heart begin to crumble, waste away to nothing. Dread crashed through me. Was this his plan all along?

He licked his lips maliciously, and I see the resemblance to Bellatrix for the first time. His expression is an answer in itself.

Yes. It was.

It's funny to think that seven years ago, we were strangers, unaware of the other's existence. It took a lot of time to realize what we are, trying to figure out the way our lives should intertwine. Somewhere along the way, I realized that the stardust flowing in our veins must have always been united, connected, long before the world was created.

I had been prepared to spend the rest of my life by his side, and the next one, and every one after that until the end of time.

I never expected to become strangers again.

With a final, evil glare, he wrenched his pinky from my grip, his face full of disgust. He shook his hand out, like it's dirty. Dirt from a Mudblood. He spun on his heel and sauntered happily to Voldemort, a skip in his step.

The world crumbles.

I shatter.

Chapter 46

I sank to my knees, wheezing. I can't breathe, I can't think, I can't feel.

I'm not okay. I'll never be okay. Not after falling in love with him. Not after watching his face as he revealed his evil plot. Not after he made it crystal clear that everything was a ruse.

His affection was fake. His stories were fake. His love was fake. Everything. *Fake.*

He stabbed me through my goddamn heart, and walked away as I bled out on the floor.

Strong hands on my shoulder, someone kneeling beside me. Theo. "What the actual *hell*," he growled, rubbing his thumb between my shoulder blades.

Luna's hands are clamped over her mouth. Blaise has such an utter expression of betrayal on his face that I have to look away. Pansy is seething, sending a menacing death glare Draco's way.

Or Malfoy, I should say. I guess I shouldn't call him that anymore.

A short yet substantial wave of relief rolled through me. From their reactions, I could tell at least my friendships with them are real. At least I have that, I tell myself. At least I have that.

"Well done, Draco," Voldemort crooned, embracing Malfoy, who returned the gesture eagerly. "And to break a Mudblood's heart, on your own merit? I've taught you well."

A tear escaped, and I wiped it away quickly. Malfoy would not see me cry. He would not see what he was doing to me.

Malfoy pulled back, smirking. "It was quite fun to screw over a piece of filth."

I had no choice but to watch the events unfold in horror. With every word said, I felt myself breaking further, even though I was already shattered into a fine dust. Theo slid his hand through mine, gripping it almost painfully tight. "Holy shit," Theo muttered.

Voldemort chuckled, patting Malfoy on the back. "Go join your parents, Draco. You deserve it."

Malfoy glowed with satisfaction, striding over to stand with Narcissa and Lucius. His father stood a little taller, glancing approvingly at his son. Narcissa smiled grimly, handing Draco his wand back. She must have taken it off of Harry's body. Nagini was curled in front of the Malfoys, ready to pounce.

I felt them first. His quicksilver eyes, glued on me. When I finally dragged my eyes to meet his, I felt taken aback. I had been expecting a hard scowl, a loathing expression. But his eyes were warm, the soft grey of the clouds. I have never been more confused than at that moment.

His lips moved, mouthing something.

The moon is beautiful.

Even from afar I could make out the words. I used to watch him say it in complete adoration; I had memorized the movement of his tongue, the rhythm of his lips, the flash of white teeth.

He tilted his head almost imperceptibly, stray curls falling over his brow.

I inhaled sharply, pursing my lips together. What the hell is he doing? Is he trying to screw with me, mess with a Mudblood, even still?

Voldemort was still talking, but I wasn't listening. I was just looking at him. God, how pathetic. He betrayed me, broke my heart, and I still could look only at him. It was always him.

That's when I noticed something peculiar: his hands were stuck in his jacket pockets. The black fabric was moving, rustling ever so slightly, like he was grabbing something.

He was still looking at me, and he shook his head once.

That's when my eyes flickered down to his hand, at the curved object peeking out of his pocket, at the unmistakable ivory gleam of a Basilisk fang.

A few hours earlier

Harry Potter trudged slowly, making his way to the Forbidden Forrest, willingly approaching his doom. Stepping onto the bridge, he spotted a crumpled figure on the floor, clad in black and with striking platinum hair.

"Malfoy?" Harry rushed forward and crouched down, turning the body over. The boy's eyes were closed, and it looked as if he was in a deep sleep.

"Malfoy!" Harry shook him gently. His eyes fluttered open. "Are you alright?"

Draco sat up groggily, brushing Harry's hands off of him. "Fine, Potter." He cracked his neck. "Just a Stunning Spell."

Harry sighed in relief. "Good." He helped Draco to his feet, not letting go until Draco regained his balance. "You should get back, find Hermione."

Draco's brow furrowed. "Where are you going?"

Harry hesitated, looking back and forth between his impending death and Draco Malfoy. "You really want to know?"

"Not really, but I have a feeling you will tell me anyway."

Postponing his death, if only for a few minutes, sounded like a good idea. So Harry gave Draco a brief but detailed summary, describing the seven horcruxes and the discovery that Harry is one as well.

Draco let out a loose exhale. "Merlin."

"Yeah."

"So that's it, then?" Draco was chewing his lip. "It's you, and then the snake, then he'll be vincible?" Harry nodded in confirmation.

"I'll do it."

"What?"

"I'll kill the snake," Draco clarified, his face set. "I'll do it."

"Really?" Harry cocked his head, looking at him up and down, at the boy who had once been his enemy and was now both a trusted ally and his best friend's boyfriend.

Draco nodded. "It makes sense. Nagini will be with the Death Eaters, most likely my father, actually. The snake is fond of him. Trusts him. I'm the only one who can get over to their side and kill it."

Harry thought for a moment, imagining Draco and Hermione hand in hand. "But you'll be on our side with Hermione, won't you?"

"Yeah." Draco's gaze dropped to the floor, his jaw tense.

Harry started, squinting at him through his glasses. "What aren't you telling me?"

Draco paused. "Voldemort knows about me and Hermione."

"What?"

"He's not stupid, he put two and two together when I was stabbed. Everyone knows that Bellatrix has impeccable aim." Draco shook his head. He knew how it would look, to take a knife in place of Hermione, but he hadn't cared. All he knew was that he had to protect her. He promised.

Harry stared in disbelief. "How are you even still alive?"

"I told him what he wanted to hear: That I was messing with her, fooling a Mudblood into falling in love with me to enjoy breaking the heart of a dirty, repulsive girl who deserves nothing but misery." Draco winced slightly. Even saying the lie out loud felt like a betrayal to Hermione. Harry opened his mouth, eyebrow raised, but Draco cut him off swiftly. "And don't even consider the possibility that it's true, Potter. Of course it's not true." Draco swallowed, shoving his hands in his pockets. "I love Granger more than anything, you know that."

"Alright." Harry knew he was telling the truth. He had seen Draco firsthand: seen the way he looked at her, like she was the most perfect girl that existed, the only person in the world that mattered. He knew that not even the most talented actor could fake that. "What's the catch, then?"

Draco ran a hand through his hair. "The catch is that I'm supposed to break her heart in order for my story to be true."

It took a moment to click. "You're gonna leave her," said Harry quietly.

"I have to."

"It'll destroy her, Malfoy."

"Don't you think I know that?" It was tearing Draco apart. The thought of hurting her so brutally, if only for a few minutes, made him sick to his stomach. "It's the only way. He has to trust me, Harry, to think he has my loyalty. He has to trust me to stand right next to his precious Nagini. And to make sure of that—"

"He needs to see Hermione fall apart," Harry finished for him, a solemn look on his face.

Draco threw his hands up in frustration, in dread of hurting the person he loves most in this world. "If you have any other suggestions, by all means, tell me." He looked at Harry sideways. "But we both know it has to be this way. It has to be completely believable and convincing."

Harry sighed, because he knew Draco was right. He just wished there was a way to do this without hurting Hermione, but it had to be done. Harry pulled a Basilisk fang out of his pocket and offered it to Draco. "You'll need this to kill Nagini."

Draco looked from the fang to Harry, taking it and tucking it into his pocket. "Thank you," said Draco. He meant it.

In a split second Harry wrapped his arms around Draco, who inhaled sharply in surprise. "No. Thank *you*, Draco," Harry said gratefully, letting him go. "Truly."

Draco smiled gently, his mind focused on his golden girl, with golden eyes and a golden heart. "I'm doing it for her. It's always for her."

So many things happened at once.

Draco raised the Basilisk fang high into the air and plunged it deeply into Nagini. The snake let out a terrible screech before exploding into a cloud of ash.

Voldemort stopped mid sentence, doubling over, clutching his chest.

Harry leapt out on Hagrid's arms, landing on his feet. He looked up. He smiled at me. I gasped, smiling back, not caring how he was alive, just that he was. I silently thanked whoever answered my prayers.

Draco brightened at the sight of Harry, and in one swift movement, pulled out his wand and tossed it. It arced through the dust, twirling, landing in Harry's outstretched hand.

Everyone, including Voldemort, seemed to see everything at the same time: Harry, arm outstretched in the air, clutching a wand, defying death, blazing in glory.

Both sides erupted in chaos. Screams filled the air, and people scattered everywhere. Theo dragged me to my feet. Most Death Eaters fled, terrified, knowing they couldn't win against a seemingly immortal teenage boy. But all I could think about was Malfoy. *Draco*.

He had tricked Voldemort, the most brilliant and evil wizard of our time. He had tricked him into trusting him by making a show of mistreating me, I realized. Mistreating a Mudblood. And my reaction, raw and real, sealed the deal. All so Draco could get close and kill Nagini.

Voldemort was frozen, staring at Harry. He was hunched over, his face a deathlike pallor. And, like the coward he was, he ran, rushing into the school. Harry darted after him, Draco's wand raised.

Theo was pulling me, trying to get me to safety, but I held my ground, scanning the grounds for Draco.

I locked eyes with him. He was ten yards away, and Narcissa was gripping his arm, pulling him towards the bridge to try to leave. He wrenched his arm away and said something to his mum. He kept his eyes on me, pushing everyone aside and surging toward me, cupping my face with his rough hands.

"I'm sorry," Draco whispered. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I love you, I promise. I love you, Granger. I'll explain more later, but I had to do it. I had to kill Nagini—"

I cut him off with my lips, grabbing his collar and yanking his lips down to meet mine, soft and inviting. Forgiving. It only lasted for a few seconds before I let go of him. I didn't need to say anything that our kiss didn't.

Theo cleared his throat, bouncing on his feet. "Now is *really* not the time, you guys."

Right. Theo grabbed my wrist again, and I locked my pinky with Draco's. We maneuvered through the insanity, pushing into the Great Hall. Pansy, Luna, and Blaise were at the doors, presumably waiting for us.

"You're clever, albino, I'll give you that," Pansy scolded, crossing her arms.

Draco smirked. "Was my performance convincing enough, guys?"

Blaise shook his head. "Too convincing."

"I was about to kill you myself," Theo grumbled.

"You should consider an acting career," Luna suggested, her eyes wide.

Draco's smirk faded, his eyes coming to life, a raging storm. I followed his gaze. Up ahead, a head of frizzy black curls, coupled with a loud cackle.

Bellatrix.

That expression cemented onto his face, one I had only seen when he killed Ryle and Ren. The craving for violence. The desire to kill. Draco let go of my hand, stalking forward.

I stumbled to catch up to him, and after a moment I realized my friends were following me. "I've been waiting for this," Theo murmured under his breath.

Bellatrix was dueling Mrs. Weasley. Draco came to a stop right behind her. "Bellatrix," he hissed, clutching Narcissa's wand.

Mrs. Weasley and Bellatrix paused simultaneously. Mrs. Weasley saw me, raising her brow. I nodded.

Bellatrix turned slowly, her face lit with amusement. "Dear nephew, now a traitor. Hello—"

Draco struck her.

Bellatrix is a gifted witch, powerful and cunning and talented. She has taught herself to block every spell and cast deadlier ones in its place.

However, she never thought to learn how to defend herself against her own creations.

Because Draco uttered two words from my nightmares, *gluma cute*, and hit her with her own skin peeling torture spell.

Bellatrix collapsed, writhing, but she wasn't screaming. She was laughing. The psychopath was giggling like someone had just told her the funniest joke. Her skin was pulled back, revealing raw pink skin, blood trickling from the seams.

Draco knelt by his aunt's head as she convulsed, plucking her wand from her open hand. "I have every right to do this to you for 46 days, just as many as you put Granger through," he said with a deathly quiet. "But I can't," he whispered. "I won't. Because that would make me just as bad as

you."

Draco turned to me, his eyes softening at the sight of me. "Do you want to say any last words to her before I end it, Granger?"

I gulped, coming to crouch beside her. She continued to laugh, but her face was pinched in pain, and it was obvious the laughs were a show, a last effort to look invincible. I inhaled deeply, then spit in her face. It got in her eyes and mouth, and she cringed. "Now you're as dirty as me," I said calmly. Standing up, her eyes still on me, I mimicked her malicious grin. "Burn in hell, bitch."

I nodded at Draco, giving him the green light. I walked back to my friends, whose mouths were hanging open. I heard the Killing Curse hit her, but I didn't look back.

"Atta girl, princess," Theo said lowly, glancing at me approvingly.

"Let's get out of here," Pansy urged, jerking her head out the door.

Draco came up behind me and draped his arm across my shoulder, his whole body stiff. I craned my neck to look up at him, at his flickering eyes and clenched teeth. I tiptoed, pecking him quickly on the lips. "Thank you," I breathed.

"Theo?"

I turned. Pansy was calling out to him frantically, her chest rising and falling rapidly. I whirled in a circle, scanning every face.

"You son of a bitch!"

Theo's voice came from toward the end of the hall by the far wall. We raced forward, following the sound. Theo was there.... dueling Pansy's father.

Oh my god.

I remember. Of course I remember. Theo promised to take revenge on Pansy's dad for abusing her.

Theo looked serious for once, his eyes on her, always on her. His hands fisted in the sheets when he said lowly, "One day I'm gonna get him, Pans. You'll see."

Theo's face was set with a determination I had never seen before. He pressed his lips together, extending his arm, firing a Killing Curse.

At the same exact moment, Pansy's father fired a hex as well. *Perfecta defectum organi.*

The curses sailed through the air simultaneously. The Killing Curse hit Mr. Parkinson's hand, and he fell lifeless to the floor.

Theo moved fluidly, trying to dodge, but the hex struck his shoulder. He grunted, collapsing.

"No," Pansy said hoarsely, dropping at Theo's side. We crowded around him, and I knelt on the other side of his face.

His eyes were open, but his face was white with pain. He pressed on his lower stomach, moaning.

I racked my brain, panting. What was that spell?

It was my Latin that helped me figure it out. *Perfecta defectum organi.*

Complete organ failure.

Chapter 47

He was going into complete organ failure. One by one, every piece of his body will break down. I started crying, shaking uncontrollably. Draco knelt beside me, keeping his hands on my shoulders.

Luna came back with Madame Pomfrey, and she hurriedly cast a diagnostic spell, her brow furrowing.

I watched him lock eyes with Luna, then Blaise, then Draco, giving them each a moment of his dwindling time to look at each other one more time. Then Theo's molton brown eyes glued to mine, full of both pain and acceptance. He knows. He heard the hex, he understood the meaning. I shook my head slightly, tears streaming down my cheeks.

He's one of my best friends. We understand each other effortlessly. He knows me better than almost anyone, and we can communicate without saying a word.

He was grunting in misery, but his lips curved gently, a small version of his bright grin I love so much. Goodbye, princess, he was saying.

I smiled back, my tears tumbling relentlessly. *Goodbye*, I responded silently.

Pansy took a shaky breath when she saw the healer. She stroked his hair out of his face, her fingers trembling. "Hey, Theo. Hey." She swallowed to try to control her wavering voice. "You're gonna be okay. She's gonna fix you, okay?"

Theo's eyes flicked to her. "I got him. Told you I would."

"You're gonna be fine," She assured, nodding furiously. "She's gonna make you all better—"

"Pans." He said quietly, bringing his hand up to close around hers. "Please."

Hurt flashed through her hazel irises. "Theo, *no*."

He nodded. "It's okay."

"No." She insisted, her breathing ragged. "This isn't how it ends. This isn't all we get." She pressed his open palm to her cheek, trying to control her breathing. "We get more. We *deserve* more."

Theo winced in agony, clenching his teeth. But when he looked at Pansy, there was nothing but an intense passion in his face. He brushed his thumb over her high cheekbone. "I will find you in the next life, okay? I promise. I promise I will."

Pansy's tears broke free, spilling out the sides of her eyes. "No, Theo. Please." Her voice broke, and she gripped his shoulders firmly, knuckles white. "Don't give up. I can't. I can't lose you. I won't be able to bear it."

"I'm sorry," Madame Pomfrey said gently, confirming what I already knew. "He's not gonna make it."

Pansy wheezed, her body shaking frantically. "Isn't there a counterspell or something! Anything, anything—"

Theo slipped his hand from her cheek to the back of her neck, tugging her down and pressing her lips onto his. She whimpered against him, sliding her hands into his dark curls. He pulled away,

gasping softly, putting their foreheads together. "I love you, Pansy. So much," Theo breathed, his thumb running across her lower lip, over the red lipstick he likes so much. "I've been in love with you since the day we met."

A sob escaped Pansy's lips, her mouth quivering as it curved into a half-smile. "I win."

And there it was, Theo's signature grin, but brighter than I had ever seen it, with molton brown eyes full of so much joy I thought he might burst.

But it subsided, eyes dimming and grin slackening, as if someone pulled the plug in the sink and the water swirled down the drain. His head lolled back and his hand fell from Pansy's neck, landing with a thud on his chest. And I knew he was gone.

"Theo?" Pansy patted his cheek gently. "Theo?" I watched as the realization settled, hazel eyes sputtering, a flame going out. "*Shit!* Baby." She gripped his face in her hands, her eyes darting across the stillness of his features. "Baby, you didn't hear me say it back." Tears were falling freely now, splashing on his face. "Theo, I love you, do you hear me?" Her voice was raw and agonizing. "I love you. I love you."

She kept repeating it, over and over and over, begging him to hear her words. I reached forward, closing his eyelids, putting him to rest. *Rest, Theo*, I told him silently, wherever he was. *Rest now*.

Pansy flinched, staring at me with more heartbreak and grief than a single person should be able to handle. "I can't see his eyes," She whispered, bowing her head over his chest. "I can't see his eyes."

I buried the side of my face in Draco's neck, and he instantly embraced me. His heart was beating erratically, his breaths shallow and labored.

"...You... You promised, okay?" Pansy ran her fingertips along the outline of his jaw, crying so hard her words were barely comprehensible. "You promised that you will find me. *Find me*, Theo." She jabbed a finger into his chest. "Don't you *dare* break it."

Blaise came forward, leaning down, his face grim and pale. He stroked her hair. "Pansy," he said in the gentlest voice. "Maybe we should get some air, help us breathe a little?"

"No." Pansy shook her head, black hair flying across her face. "You go."

I looked up at Draco, and he nodded, helping me to my feet and putting a hand on the small of my back to steady me. Blaise and Luna made eye contact with us, and we started walking out towards the door. We needed to mourn, needed to breathe in the cool morning air, and we also needed to give Pansy time alone with the corpse of who was no doubt the love of her life.

As we left, I glanced back. Pansy had laid down and lined her body with his, settling her head on his chest and placing a hand on his firm stomach, no longer rising and falling with breath. She closed her eyes, breathing deeply. She looked as if she would stay there forever. She would never let him go.

Chapter 48

August 7, 2001

Pansy and I were sitting in a Muggle cafe. We try to meet up as much as we can. Looking as stylish as ever, she was wearing a low cut black sundress that flowed in even layers and cut off a few inches over her knee. She left one earbud in, humming low under her breath.

"What song are you listening to?"

"Bohemian Rhapsody."

"I thought you don't like that song."

Pansy shrugged. "I don't. Theo does."

Does. As if he's still here. I can almost see him clearly, bellowing the lyrics in the common room with Blaise.

The song must have ended, because she took out her earbud and put it away. "How are your parents?" Pansy asked, sipping her tea out of her teacup with the daisy. She takes it everywhere in her purse. She insists that she always drinks tea from that little teacup.

"Good. My parents are so pushy." I laughed lightly. "They're brainstorming names for their grandchildren and Draco and I aren't even engaged yet."

"Speaking of marriage..." Pansy wiggled her brows. "Remember when we tried to plan our future weddings?"

"Yeah, why?" I approached cautiously. I was afraid of how she might react, remembering her and Theo that night, so sure of their future.

But Pansy just giggled. "I saw Luna yesterday, and she said she already bought an insane amount of gillyweed so we can all breathe underwater for their eventual wedding."

I laughed along with her, imagining how interesting that wedding is going to be. Our waiter came over with our food, waffles with syrup and strawberries for me and an omelet for Pansy.

"Is there anything else I can get you, ladies?" The waiter was young and good looking, with short black hair and striking blue eyes. His eyes lingered on Pansy.

She didn't seem to notice his attention. "No thank you," She said politely, not looking up from her plate as she cut into her eggs. I smiled gingerly at the waiter, and he nodded and left.

"It's his birthday tomorrow." I glanced over. Pansy was looking out the window beside her, reflections from outside drifting across her irises.

I had almost forgotten. His birthday is tomorrow. I suddenly understood why Pansy had insisted on meeting up today instead of tomorrow.

"He would've been twenty one," I said softly. I thought of his molton brown eyes and wide grin.

"Can you believe that?"

She smiled, closing her eyes briefly, conjuring a picture in her head. "He'd look more handsome than ever."

I nodded vigorously. "Wouldn't be so scrawny anymore."

Pansy's eyes flicked to mine briefly before dropping to her lap. "I hate how much we used to play games." Her voice was hard, full of resentment for herself. "Dancing around each other for years, then competing over saying 'I love you'. It was always stupid games."

"Don't hate it," I said, as gently as I could. "That's who you were. And that's the way you had fun amidst so much pain and darkness."

She shook her head, her black bob shifting around her cheeks. "We would've had more time together."

I reached forward and took her hand in mine. "You couldn't have known."

She shut her eyes, her expression pained, taking her hand back. "I should have."

I felt so awful for her, and there wasn't anything I could do to fix it. I sighed, cutting into my waffles and taking a bite.

"We never got to go back."

I looked up at her. "What?" I asked through a mouthful.

Her hazel eyes faltered. "To Central Park."

Oh. I gulped down my food, cocking my head. I offered, "Do you wanna go with me?"

Pansy shrugged, though there was no casualness in her manner. "Maybe someday. I know it won't be the same."

We ate in silence for a couple minutes as I mustered up the courage to ask her what I wanted to. "Pans?"

"Mm?"

"I met someone at work at the Ministry that I think you'll like," I said slowly. Her eyes snapped to mine. "His name is Graham. He's really smart and funny" *and he reminds me of Theo* "and—"

"Thanks," Pansy interrupted, eyes narrowed, "But no thanks. I'm not interested."

I had a feeling she would say that. "You won't know until you try," I said hopefully.

She shoved her fork into her eggs. "I already know."

"I know you loved him. But—"

"Love," Pansy corrected, pressing her lips together, her fork scraping against her plate. "Present tense."

Of course. She would always love him. She would never stop. "I'm just saying that you might want to move on eventually." She flinched, and I backtracked, continuing in a more comforting tone. "And I'll help you when you need it when that time comes."

"Hermione." Pansy locked eyes with me, brimming with sincerity. "I'll *never* move on."

I know she won't. But it's hard to hear it said out loud. "I just don't want you to feel alone," I whispered.

She leaned back in her seat, crossing her arms over her chest. She hesitated, trying to find the right words. "I feel lonely a lot," Pansy said finally, shifting in her seat, "But it's a specific loneliness. It's like the emptiness inside of me is labeled 'Reserved for Theodore Sileo Nott', and it can only be filled by him." She drew a breath. "No one else."

Tears rose behind my eyes and I blinked it back. "I'm sorry, Pans," I murmured.

Pansy shook her head and forced a smile. "Don't be. I just have to make it through." She downed the rest of her tea.

"Make it through what?"

"Life," She answered simply. "I need to get onto the next one already. He's waiting for me."

"I thought you don't believe in other lives."

"I didn't." A sad smile. "Until Theo."

Theo died for her. And Pansy's living for him. Just for him.

I slid the key into the lock and opened the door, placing the keys and purse on the counter and shrugging my shoes off.

Draco and I bought an apartment together right after graduating eighth year. It's a small flat in the middle of London, with only two bedrooms. Narcissa happily decorated for us, crafting our place with an elegant and simple style.

I took a few steps from the kitchen to the living room, passing the grand piano and glancing around, wondering if Draco was home.

"Boo."

I jumped around, startled by his voice in my ear. He had crept up behind me, and he was holding up a book in his hand. He was wearing a green robe, he must have just showered.

"Got you a new book off of your list," Draco smiled.

"Yes!" I squealed, taking it and hugging it to my chest. I tiptoed and pecked his cheek. "Thank you."

I plopped down on the sofa, curling my legs beneath me and beginning immediately. I was starting *The Book Thief* by Markus Zusak.

"Marry me, Granger."

I froze, looking up slowly, raking over his body. He was standing right in front of me with a serene expression. His robe was crumpled on the floor, and he was wearing a stunning classic black tuxedo. In his right hand was a bouquet of strawberry roses.

"I know this isn't some extravagant flash mob or skywriting, but I figured you wouldn't want that. I know you and I knew you would want something simple and real. So this is what this is, unrehearsed and straight from my soul." Draco was right, of course. He knows me better than anyone.

He lowered down to one knee, slipping a blue velvet box out of his pocket and opening it to show me. Inside was a simple and breathtaking golden band, with a moon and two stars engraved in the center. "Marry me, Granger," Draco said quietly, tilting his head to the side. His fringe tumbled across his brow, and although it was a sight I had seen a million times before, he looked more stunning than ever before. "The moon is only beautiful when I'm with you. And I promise I will love you more every day than I did each day before." His quicksilver eyes sparkled. "Marry me."

I nodded vigorously, chanting the word yes over and over, jumping to my feet and throwing my arms around his neck. He chuckled, holding me firmly and spinning in circles. I laughed in complete bliss, craning my neck back and letting my hair fly free as we twirled together. When Draco set me down, he grinned, leaning down to kiss me, but I put my finger to his lips. "We're hyponing our last names together," I insisted, raising my eyebrow.

Draco smirked, pulling my hand away from his mouth and bending quickly, kissing me fiercely. "Wouldn't have it any other way. Now you could call me Granger, too."

Epilogue 1

October 3, 2040

Deep in London there is a retirement home for witches and wizards, specifically those with medical needs. In the corner room on the top floor, an elderly woman is sitting on a plush red couch as the final rays of the sun sink into oblivion. She has wild brown curls, the color faded with age and streaked with silver. She has many laugh lines, as if her life has been full of nothing but laughter. Her eyes are as golden as they always have been, but with a slight dull, the haze of damaged mind that cannot remember it's life.

Across from her in a plush cream armchair is an elderly man around the same age as her. His hair is bright silver, although it doesn't look much different from his white blonde hair when he was younger. His laugh lines seem to match hers. His eyes are precisely the same as they have been his entire life, a sharp silver that seemed to have a mind of its own, changing and ebbing with his emotions.

"Is that it, Mr. G?" The elderly woman asked, looking hopefully at the man reading to her.

"No, no, there's plenty more."

"Now Mr. G, tell me, please!" The woman pleads, sticking out her bottom lip. "I want to know how her life was!"

The man nods, closing the white leather book on his lap. "Well, they got married in a small ceremony with close family and friends. They had the reception in a grand library with strawberries in every meal and tables themed after classic books, just like they planned all those years ago. The wedding table was themed after 'To Kill a Mockingbird', of course."

"Of course. What else?"

"They moved into Malfoy Manor but renovated the entire inside, replacing all the dark colors with light ones and opening up the space so it truly felt like home." The man opened the front cover of the leather book, taking out a photo. He leans forward and hands it to her, his lips pulling up at the corner. "They had three beautiful children whom they adored: a daughter Jem, named after 'To Kill A Mockingbird'; a son Scorpius, named after Draco's favorite constellation; and another daughter Theodora, for obvious reasons."

The woman studied the picture with interest. Jem was a carbon copy of how she imagined Hermione, though her hair was straight and strikingly blonde. Scorpius looked exactly like her image of Draco, save for his golden eyes twin to his mum and older sister. And Theodora's silver eyes seemed to glint with mischief, paired with her mother's wild curls. The woman thought that the humor in her face matched Theo's exactly, and she realized how perfectly the little girl's name fit her.

"That's so beautiful," she said in awe. "And..." She hesitated. "Did Hermione ever swim again?"

His smile was warm yet distant, being dragged into his memories. "Not for a long time. It wasn't until her kids wanted to go swimming with her. Her family helped her get through it, until the good memories in the water outweighed the bad."

She sighed in relief, glad that Hermione overcame her trauma. "What about everyone else?"

"Well, everyone pretty much stayed together and ended up getting married and having kids: Blaise and Luna, Harry and Ginny, and Ron and Lavender. Oh, and Pansy didn't get married, but she was the best aunt to all the kids. She would bake Snickerdoodles for them and tell them stories, stories of knights and pirates and faraway kingdoms. She even opened her own fashion line."

"What a perfect story," She said contently. She cocked her head. "Did you write down these people's life stories, Mr. G?"

He shook his head. "No. Someone I love very much wrote it."

"Your wife?"

The barest of smiles. "Yes."

She clapped her hands together. "I'd love to meet her."

His smile faded, but he hid his disappointment swiftly. He does it easily; after all, he's had more than five years of practice, more than five years of reading to her every day. "She is the loveliest person to ever exist."

She nodded, hoping to meet his wife sometime. She glanced out the window, at the wind rustling the trees and the glimmering stars. "It looks nice and cool out there. Can we go outside?"

"Of course." He stood up and offered his arm to her. She took it gladly, looping her arm through his. Where their hands met, he slipped his pinky through hers.

They walked the short way to the elevator and went down to the very first floor, making their way into the garden. He led her to a bench in the center of the clearing of the trees, a seat with a perfect view of the night sky. The side of the bench read: *reserved for the Granger-Malfoys*.

They sat next to each other, pinkies still locked, gazing up at the sky in silence. "I think there's supposed to be a meteor shower tonight," He says quietly.

Her eyes brighten. "Oh, how perfect."

He hums. "The moon is beautiful, isn't it?"

She freezes. Turns slowly to him. He's staring at her, his eyes quicksilver, the soft silver of the clouds. He tilts his head to the side, stray curls falling across his brow.

Like a raging storm, the chains on her mind shatter free.

She gulps, tears already spilling down her cheeks. His eyes widen, barreling into her, hoping, praying. "I can die happy, Draco," She whispers finally.

His eyes flash. He grips her pinky tighter, staring at his golden girl with golden eyes and a golden heart. He reaches up, taking her face in his hands. "Granger?" Draco says hoarsely.

As if the gods above were looking down on them, the meteor shower begins. Hermione sobs, memorizing his handsome face, vowing to never forget it again. "Draco..."

And as the stars fell from heaven down to earth, so their lips collided in a supernova.

Epilogue 2

A nine year old little girl sat on a bench in Central Park, staring out at the gentle snowflakes falling and thickening the layer of snow on the ground. She had long flowing black hair and hazel eyes.

She was so, so lonely.

For as long as she could remember, she had felt empty. Like something was missing. The only thing that brought a semblance of content to her was coming to Central Park every day. She didn't know why she liked it so much, and yet nothing was ever enough.

Her house was visible from where she sat, it was the reason her parents had moved here in the first place; in attempts to help their daughter not be so sad, they moved right by Central Park.

Her dad loved his daughter more than anything in the world, and had taken her to different psychiatrists and doctors. None of them could figure out why she was always so sad; her brain scans showed nothing awry, no chemical imbalances indicating depression.

So she sat on the bench and daydreamed of sailing the ocean, of being a daring pirate. She had always imagined being a pirate.

A nine year old little boy was walking his golden retriever dog and saw her there all alone. He had brown eyes and short brown hair. He was eating a snickerdoodle cookie that his mum made for him.

He should've kept walking, he had to be home for dinner. But something told him to stop.

He was so, so lonely.

He had always felt a feeling of incompleteness in his short life, and spent his time indoors writing down his dreams, dreams that were always the same. Dreams of a world of magic and wands and wizards and a beautiful girl with red lips and short black hair.

But when he saw her, the feeling suddenly started to leave, to trickle out of him slowly. Curious, he tied his dog's leash to the pole and walked over, sitting right next to her.

She looked at him, and he looked at her. That feeling of emptiness washed away from the both of them, leaving an overwhelming feeling of joy and completion. The sun peeked out of the clouds.

She's wearing a deep red chapstick, he notices. He really likes it. He thinks she looks very pretty in it.

"Hi," She said, a half smile curving her lips. "I'm Pam."

"Hi," He replied, grinning. "I'm Teddy."

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