Houseguest

by gracediamondsfear

Summary

Lucius Malfoy brings Hermione home as a gift from the Dark Lord with express instructions that Draco is to leave her alone. It doesn't take long to discover that there's more than one person imprisoned in Malfoy Manor, and when Draco is left in charge of his father's property he decides to help her escape, which is far more difficult than it sounds.

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Persona Non Grata

The first thing his father told him upon bringing Granger back home was that she belonged to HIM and that Draco was to leave her alone. End of story. In the wake of their victory over Potter and his ridiculous makeshift Bumbling Army the highest ranking among the most faithful had been awarded some Amazing Fucking Prizes once the dust had settled and the world was back in order.

He could remember that day clearly, his father calling to him, the Dark Lord calling to him to cross the line and join the inevitable winners. Granger had caught his eye before he walked across the cobbled battlefield and looked at him with the most infuriating pity. As if he were so stupid that he didn’t understand what he was doing, the choice he was making. If he’d had the freedom to do so he would have ripped her hair out and choked her with it. How could she be so blind and? Mudblood or not, she had to understand it was better to be a living coward than a dead martyr. He knew they’d all stared at him as his heels clicked towards his father, could feel their eyes on him. He knew they’d all watched him run, pulling his mother along with him. But they didn’t know she was dying. And maybe they didn’t know that he would have given every ounce of his powers to save her, or have one more day added to her life, to not have to watch her wither away. No, they didn’t see any of that. They only saw a selfish coward. In fact it had been almost two years since they’d taken most of the leaders of the rebellion off in shackles but looking at Hermione now, he could tell that her feelings about him hadn’t changed a bit. Smug little bitch, fat lot of good her virtue and heroism got her. It actually never stopped being funny to him, the nosedive like downfall of the Golden Trio that ended with two of them six feet under the mud and one spreading her legs for a gang of Death Eaters.

Except him of course. Draco…was not in as good graces as the others and was, in fact, not counted among the prized faithful, or even considered an ally to the Death Eaters at all anymore. Persona Non Grata was a term he learned fourth year, using it often to describe muggles and mudbloods, and now it applied to him. Even walking around at home it felt like there was a cold wind in the manor, a soul crushing stench of disappointment for the Boy Who Failed. But this. Well this whole situation was a rare ray of sunshine in his shit pile of a life.
She’d sat beside Lucius on the three hundred year old settee worth more than her family’s home, staring at Draco’s shoes, her humiliation, he assumed, complete. He could see from six feet away that she was trembling, her fingernails chewed down to the quick. There was still dirt smeared on her shins, a smudge across her cheek. The dress they'd given her to leave the prison in was too big for her and cut too low, revealing the sides of breasts. They hadn't even given her a bra, poor little mouse! He let out a short laugh and sipped his drink.

“She is not your slave, or your plaything Draco,” Lucius said, looking every bit his old self in his black robes, his legs crossed at the knee as if this were a perfectly normal situation, this family sex slave orientation, something occurring every day. He sipped at his wine, swirling it in the glass for some sort of dramatic effect. “She isn’t your whipping boy.”

Hermione’s eyes flicked up then and Draco caught her gaze, quickly wagging his eyebrows and giving her a wink. Her face was white with fear, and probably a touch of anemia. Her hair, which she’d finally gotten control of in the last year or so was dull and frizzy, matted in the back. No day spas in Hogwarts’s Prison. He was waiting for her to spit some sort of invective, but she only looked down again, folding her hands in her lap and for the first time Draco noticed the choker around her neck. A collar more than jewelry, it was a plain flat circle of dark, heavy iron with their family crest engraved on the front. It didn’t look particularly tight, but he assumed there were some entertaining charms associated with it that would keep the fucking Mudblood in line.

“Don’t worry, father. I got my fill of pulling her pigtails at school,” he said, downing the rest of his vodka tonic. “Although, I must admit, I’d never gotten the urge to dip my quill in that particular… ink.”

“Draco!”

Lucius rested his hand on Hermione’s knee, or actually, the skin above it, his fingers brushing over the inside of her thigh, under the edge of her skirt. Her cheeks flushed red, not wanting to be groped in front of her childhood rival. But before it could go any further Draco stood and raised his empty glass.

“I’ll be off to my wing then. You have fun with your little fucktoy, father,” he said, pulling the sitting room door open. “I’m sure Mother would be so proud.”

He left the room and pulled it closed again, just in time to hear his father’s glass shatter against the wall.

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She was given much more freedom than she expected – all things considered. The collar was charmed to keep her within twenty yards of the Manor so she was free to roam the grounds, which, once well manicured and impeccably landscaped were beginning to fall into disrepair. She found weeds in the cutting garden, broken and low hanging branches on the trees, bushes overgrown, their shoots clawing up over the windows. Still, it was fresh air, and when she was outside, she could be alone.

“Is that thing heavy?” She heard Malfoy before she saw him, heard the sarcastic smile on his face. “Not as heavy as failure I suspect,” she said calmly, lifting an eyebrow at the man who’d tortured
her on a nearly daily basis for years.

The way his face fell was, well…like a five course meal. It gave her energy, a spark of life. He was as much a prisoner as she was and it showed. The Malfoy that used to walk around in thousand dollar suits and perfectly coiffed hair was now a hot mess, shuffling around the manor barefoot in ripped jeans and untucked shirts. His hair had gotten a bit longer, long enough to hang down in front of his eyes like an unkempt dog. He still wore that sullen frown though, and always long sleeves covering his forearms, although she wondered why he bothered since they all knew he bore the mark. Just like she bore hers. Everyone had their scars.

He recovered quickly from the jab, leaning against the trunk of an overgrown willow tree, looking away from her, out over the grounds. She noticed his pupils were dilated, the silver of his eyes barely visible. A thin line of sickly sweet smoke trailed up from his fingers.

“Are you smoking marijuana?” She asked, looking at the wrinkled little cigarette in his hand.

He picked it up to his face and examined it, his eyes widening in mock horror, eyebrows shot to his hairline as he gasped.

“Am I?” He took a quick drag. “Oh my gods!” he muttered through tight lips as he held the smoke before blowing it out in a stream over her head. “Still the same ol’ Granger aren’t you, darling? Can’t resist passing judgement.”

“I’m not judging,” her voice was filled with exasperation. “I’m just surprised. It’s a muggle pastime after all.”

“Right,” he said, rolling his eyes. “Us wizards have never used natural herbs to alter our behavior.”

Actually, she looked at the cigarette with longing. She’d never smoked weed before but she knew well enough that it would dull her senses, fray the edges, soften everything that was happening to her. In fact, she suspected it was why he was high himself. It wasn’t right that before they’d even turned twenty-one they’d seen so much death, so much violence. It wasn’t right that they’d both been tortured and imprisoned, forced into acts they’d never have chosen on their own, for the honor of people who sat back and watched.

Pulling her into his bed, Lucius had rested his head in her lap the night before, crying about the loss of his wife in the past year, but also the “loss” of Draco, his greatest disappointment, unable to carry out the simplest of tasks for the good of the family. Where oh where did we go wrong? He was a man who put up the coldest and strongest of fronts, but in the dark he always ended up seeking her comfort.

“And now he wanders…lost…unable to see the light at the end of any tunnel,” he whispered morosely, as if Draco were some sort of undead spirit haunting the manor.

She hadn’t dared to open her mouth, to remind him that his side had actually won, that ‘mudbloods’ and ‘blood traitors’ were all but considered animals now, and Draco’s “failure” had little consequence and maybe reminding him of that at every turn wasn’t the way to heal the past. She knew better than to speak out of turn, having been beaten nearly senseless for it on countless occasions while in prison.

Now she looked up to see Malfoy holding the cigarette out to her, his face blank. She wondered if he was always high, or drunk, or otherwise ‘altered’. Would she blame him?

“I-I shouldn’t. I’m sure your father would know. Somehow,” she said, touching her fingers to the
seal on her collar.

He shrugged and took the joint back, taking another short hit before wandering away, leaving her alone under the willow tree. He was surprised at how quickly she shrunk back at the mention of it, of him. Lucius had only had her at the Manor for two weeks but there was no doubt she’d been quickly brought to heel. He’d had the distinct misfortune to overhear a great deal of her “training”; both the punishments and the rewards. Behind closed doors he’d heard the whip cracking, the smack of thick leather paddles against her flesh, clanking chains. More surprising, were Hermione’s reactions. She’d screamed on her first night there, loud enough that even when he went to the other side of the house to sleep he could hear her begging for mercy. That his father wouldn’t soundproof the rooms or use a Silencio on her was just further evidence of his perversions. But before long, her screams began to change. She still begged for mercy, she still cried out in pain, but inevitably her nights ended with her crying out in passion, coming loudly with breathless whining and whimpers of pleasure and it always made his cheeks flare with heat, wondering what his father had done to tame her so quickly. Draco knew she’d been tortured in prison, and as much as he’d disliked her and everything she stood for from day one, no one deserved the kind of violence the Death Eaters were fond of delivering. He’d seen it first hand. At one time in his life he’d thought he’d be happy to take part in it, but apparently he hadn’t the stomach for rape and abuse and this was something he was supposed to be ashamed of. Perhaps she’d learned the valuable lesson of doing what it took to survive. She obviously had something that drew Lucius in, and she could use it to stay out of prison and out of the grave.

Ever since he’d introduced her in their second year, his father had always had an eye for Hermione, asking about her progress at school, whether she could keep up with the purebloods, what her subject specialties were, whether she’d come from money or poverty and of course, was she promised to anyone. As if arranged marriages were something common among non-pureblood wizards. It had all disgusted Draco as a kid, for a myriad of reasons, but she was a woman now, a softer woman with fewer edges and considerably less sass and his father’s attraction to her was, if not obvious, at least understandable. Besides, it was…nice? to have a different face around the manor. She was, at least, someone else to talk to, and someone who understood.

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“Would you mind explaining this?” Lucius slapped the morning’s paper down on his desk. “Without any smartass remarks or outrageous justifications if you will.”

Draco picked up the Prophet and sighed. He’d always loved being on the front page, but the quality of local reporting had really taken a dive.

Disgraced Malfoy Heir Spotted With Tipsy Underage BTs!

And in fact there he was, a photograph taken from across the room of a decidedly seedy bar, very dark and barely focused, but his hair always had given him away, and this time it had pretty little fingers tangled in it, his mouth trailing kisses down the neck of a girl in his lap. In his defense, the girls had told him they were seventeen, promised him all kinds of filthy things in exchange for free drinks. Now that he was sober, he wondered if they were plants.

“Just so I'm clear father, are you more upset with their age or their Blood Traitor status?” Draco said, glancing down at Hermione who was kneeling on the floor beside Lucius’ chair. “Because one of those things would make you a blazing hypocrite.”

He threw the folded paper on the floor at Hermione’s feet and she wondered if he’d done it on purpose for her to see. She glanced at the picture, reading the details of how he’d been “aggressively snogging” according to one witness, with a dark haired witch in the corner booth of
The Wraith, the seediest bar set on a narrow street off of the revived Knockturn Alley. She’d studied enough psychology, muggle and otherwise to know that Draco was acting out. All of this was a reaction to his pain. Not only pain at his massive and public failure, but the loss of his mother as well. And he wasn’t the only one doing it. She’d heard of several of her classmates on both sides of the war had all but fallen apart in the last couple of years, some turning their back on wizarding completely and living life as muggles in America. She glanced up to find him staring at her with that lopsided, lazy grin on his face, very nearly proud of what a fuck up he was. But as soon as he caught her empathetic eye, it all melted away into a frown, his face a mix of hurt and embarrassment.

“They set me up,” Draco said, looking back at his father, slouching down in his chair, his long legs stretched out in front of him. “I went out on Thursday to get some air, tired of listening to your little games all night.”

Hermione blushed the darkest shade of red he’d ever seen. Worse than the sunburn he’d gotten in Dover as a child. She still had dark purple bruises on her neck where Lucius had suckled and bitten her skin, coming dangerously close to drawing blood.

“They came up to me. They immediately knew who I was,” he continued, picking at pieces of lint on his pants. “I should have known it was a set up by how...excited they were to make my acquaintance. No one’s ever been that thrilled to meet such a monumental prick.”

Hermione could hear that although his face was stony, his eyes clear and focused, he was on the verge of falling apart, that if he were forced to come up with another word, another excuse, he would break down completely. She looked from Lucius to Draco and back again, the tension in the silence nearly making her nauseated. All she wanted to do was tug at Lucius’ pant leg and warn him, to beg him on the knees she was already on to not say whatever he was going to say. To just let it go.

“Well, perhaps you should have listened to your first instincts then, instead of being lead off into the corner by said prick.”

Hermione gasped audibly and both men looked down at her. Draco was forcing a fake smile, fake smugness, fake control. Lucius was genuinely calm.

“Perhaps,” Draco said standing. “Or maybe you should put a collar on me too so I’m sure to never leave the manor and embarrass you ever again.”
Everyone Broke

They ate their meals together in miserable silence, served by moody little house elves that broke Hermione’s heart with their pitiful faces and big watery eyes. She supposed it was somewhat poetic that she was on the same level as them now, her hopes of one day seeing them all freed dashed to dust. At least she was given a closet full of clothing...so to speak. Before bringing her back to the Manor he’d bought dozens of sumptuous jewel toned satin nightgowns with the most delicate, tearable little straps and plunging laced trimmed necklines. Some swept the floor with long slits up the side and others barely made her decent, but he’d also gifted her a handful of robes for when she needed to sit at the table with...him.

“I’m going to London for a few days,” Draco said, leaning his antique chair back on two legs. “Is the apartment in Richmond still open for me to stay in?”

They had properties all over England and when Draco could no longer stand the inexplicable claustrophobia of the Manor he would go and stay at one of them. Not only could he drink and smoke and fuck in peace when he was away from home, but the Wizarding Libraries and research labs were far superior to anything he could set up at home, even with his near limitless resources. And by paying for the pleasure to use them, no one hung over his shoulder asking questions.

“It’s open,” said Lucius, not looking up from the Prophet as they all pushed their dinner around on their plates. “But you’re not to take any elves with you. I’ll need them for this weekend. All of them.”

Hermione’s head popped up from her plate. She hadn’t heard of any plans for the weekend. Lucius had been moody though, even moreso than usual, quiet and demanding. And although he was always gentle with her when he took her into his bed, his punishments beforehand had been vicious and his words unbelievably cruel over the past two days. Even now she had dark red rope burns on her wrists from the two hours she’d spent standing, her arms tied against a black wooden cross in Lucius’ bedroom while he sat and read his mail, occasionally swatting her with a crop when her attention started to fade. He’d tied the rope too tight and left her there too long, but apologized afterward for being “distracted”. In truth, the news of Draco leaving made her heart drop. Not because she enjoyed his company, but because...well it was better than being alone with a “distracted” madman.

“Hosting a ball are you?” Draco drawled, his eyes half open in what Hermione assumed was drunkenness. It was the first time she’d ever seen him unshaven, the tiniest hint of golden scruff on his cheeks.

“Some of my old...associates are coming over. A bit of a celebration, a chance to unwind after all of this recent unpleasantness.”

Unpleasantness. She and Draco nearly snorted in unison. It was a commonly held disdain amongst veterans of the war that the older generation were undeserving of laying claim to its horrors. They talked about their misery and their losses and their struggles to reclaim normalcy when for the greater part of all of it, they sat back and let what were basically children do the dirty work. But of course, as they say, history is written by the winners, and the winners decided that the Almighty Death Eaters were the heroes of Wizarding England.

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Having been released from Lucius’ bed shortly before midnight, Hermione went to her suite of
rooms and ran a bath to soothe her aching muscles. After Draco’s announcement that he was leaving town, the older Malfoy had become even angrier, sending her to her knees as soon as she entered his bedroom, giving her six lashes with the split cane for not finishing her dinner.

“I’m sorry sir! I wasn’t feeling well,” she cried, feeling unsafe for the first time since the day of her arrival. “I won’t do it again!”

But he was already behind her, soothing her wounds with healing charms, covering her neck and shoulders with kisses.

“My pretty little mudblood. You always had such a clear and honest heart,” he said, nuzzling against her throat from behind, his hands covering her breasts, her stiffening nipples rolled between his fingertips. “How funny that you’re the purest witch I’ve ever known.”

Her head lolled back against his shoulder as he slipped two fingers between her legs, finding her hot and slick to the touch. The sensory overload of her war torn history left her twisted and receptive to pain, or maybe to the relief that came when it stopped. Of course she’d always had a bit of a kinky streak. Being so controlled and organized, so even keeled in public it felt good to let go of it in bed, being tied down and told what to do, what to say. Before her life had gone so haywire she’d had dark, delicious fantasies of being held prisoner by a silent, insatiable incubus, pulling pleasure from her until she could barely breathe.

“What do you want me to give you, princess?” He whispered against her ear, his erection grinding into her bare back. He was still fully clothed, crooking his fingers inside Hermione’s pussy making her tremble, tilted back against his crouching body.

“Your cock, please Mr. Malfoy. Please give it to me.”

She was smart enough to know that her current reality was far different from her childhood fantasy, she had the lasting scars and fear to prove it. But the Death Eaters had reduced her to the status of an animal and now her body reacted to animal instincts. It had shamed her at first, how quickly she grew wet for him, how easily he could pull an orgasm from her with wretched insults and violent thrusts. But that was her life now, and she’d learned to take what pleasure he chose to give her. She’d seen enough pain in her life to dare refuse it.

Before the bath was full she wrapped herself in a black satin robe and went down to the Butler’s pantry to fix a glass of ice water. Draco was in the kitchen, leaning against the counter in his black pajama pants staring out the kitchen window with a bottle of beer in his hand. She flushed in embarrassment, knowing that Lucius’ rooms were right above them. How long had he been standing there? Had he heard her begging for his father’s cock? Heard her coming? In the moonlight his skin looked almost ethereal, pale and tinged with blue. When she stepped in closer she could see the thick, snake like scar that whipped across his chest and down, wrapping around his hip, disappearing in the waistband of his low slung pants. Even completely healed it was an angry looking scar, dark and raised, a permanent serpent beneath the skin.

“Granger,” he said, lifting the bottle to his lips so that she could see the other scar, the dark black snake crawling up his forearm. “Taking a break from your after dinner activities?” He asked, finally turning to look her in the eye, his irises nearly supernatural with silver blue light.

“We’re finished actually,” she said, sneaking past him to the refrigerator, holding her head high pretending not to be embarrassed by his questions.

He was silent as she pulled a glass from the cupboard and ice from the freezer. But while she stood at the faucet she heard him right behind her whispering “Finite.”
“What are you doing?” She asked, turning back to find him looking at her with his head tipped to the side, as if examining her.

“I was thinking you were under the Imperius. Does he do that to you? When he-” His voice was soft and if she didn’t know better she’d think it held a hint of concern.

“Draco Lucius Malfoy, are you worried about me?” She said, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Forget it,” he said, the old Draco bubbling to the surface as he held his hands up in surrender. “Fuck it, I’m going to bed.”

Before he could leave the kitchen she touched his arm. He froze beneath her fingertips as if she’d petrified him, and she gave him a soft smile.

“No, he’s not. I promise you. He’s actually very nice to me,” she said, and Draco rolled his eyes. “Yeah, please don’t tell me anymore about this love story ok? I can only throw up so much.”

She almost laughed at how the color drained from his already pale face.

“Oh yes,” she said. “As if we didn’t have to suffer through detailed stories of your sexual exploits all through school as you ‘whispered’ them to your gang in the library. She could suck an apple through a straw, mate,” she said, trying her best to imitate his low, amused whisper. When she looked up again he was smiling, his arms crossed defiantly but not quite angry.

“The difference there, Granger, is that all those girls were willing participants.”

She rolled her eyes and shouldered past him, surprised at how forcefully he grabbed her arm to spin her back around, his brow furrowed in absolute seriousness, all traces of their joking gone.

“They were. All of them. I mean it.” His eyes searched hers as if demanding her to acknowledge it, to understand how important it was that she know it. When she looked down at his hand around her arm he dropped it immediately and made his way to the doorway of the kitchen.

“I know you think I’m weak for giving in to him,” she said quietly. “for letting him fu…for letting him have me, for enjoying it. But he knew from my interrogations at the prison that I’ve engaged in….that sort of play in the past and so he knew I’d eventually break. Everyone eventually broke.”

“I don’t think you’re weak Hermione,” he said. He didn’t want to hear anymore. He could hear enough pain in her voice, but she went on as if she didn’t hear him, her eyes stinging with tears.

“I was in that prison for almost two years. Sometimes in solitary confinement for weeks at a time, sometimes watching my friends die of infection or starvation or being beaten until they couldn’t be healed. I told them…I finally told them that I couldn’t take it anymore. I told them that whatever they wanted me to do, whatever they wanted to do to me, I would do it. Your father came for me the next day. Lucius promised to take care of me, and after two years of sleeping on concrete I have a bed now and three meals a day and someone who tells me I’m beautiful and pure and lets me feel. I hadn’t FELT anything in so long.”

By the time she was done the tears were streaming down her cheeks and even in the darkness she could see that Draco’s chin was trembling, his mouth in a tense frown. He ran a hand through his hair and sighed, looking up to the ceiling to keep his own tears from falling.

“I don’t think you’re weak,” he said. “I never did.”
She started to sob, her head dropping into her hands, her shoulders shaking. He wanted to hug her, to wrap his arms around her and tell her that everything she felt, he’d felt it too, locked up alone, hearing about his classmates dying, watching his mother fade away and having no one there to comfort him, trapped under the weight of his guilt. But at the very least he had been free. At least he could go outside, take a swim, pet a dog, use magic. He knew she wouldn’t understand. No one did. He was someone you didn’t have sympathy for. And he knew from the look on her face earlier that she didn’t want him to touch her.

So instead he put the empty beer bottle on the counter, and while her face was hidden, Draco walked away.
Gifted Women

When Lucius left the house on business it was a good bet that you’d find Hermione in the library, huddled up next to the fire reading. It was the end of October and The Manor was cavernous and old and nearly impossible to keep warm without magical intervention; but she wrapped herself in a blanket and sat on the fur rug in front of the hearth with a mug of tea and was perfectly content...relatively speaking. They had books dating back nearly five hundred years, some with locks and braided leather ties, others closed tightly with charms, even a small section of muggle novels purely for research purposes. Most of them were available for her use, the shelves reaching up nearly six feet above her head. To some it would seem daunting, but to Hermione it was something of a comfort, a shelter of knowledge, a million little vessels of escape.

Draco wandered in after she’d been there alone for nearly an hour. She was surprised to find him freshly showered, his still damp hair in some semblance of order and wearing a black shirt and trousers- the old Draco making a surprise appearance.

His original intention had been to go to London for only two nights, but upon hearing that the house would be filled with people who quietly wanted him dead, he decided to leave a day earlier. When his father threw a Death Eater Party they lasted the whole weekend. Part of him wanted to warn her, to let her know that the man who she thought had been “very nice to her” up until now was about to quite literally throw her to the wolves, but he was sure she wouldn’t believe him and besides, what good would it do? It wasn’t as if he could save her from it or talk his father out of letting it happen.

“Not allowed on the furniture Granger?” he asked, flopping down on the sofa, staring out at the rain that blurred the windows and turned the world into a melting painting. He wasn’t flooing to London until six and was bored and anxious. The air was heavy and he felt closed in, trapped.

“Leave me alone,” she said, still angry at how he’d left her in the kitchen, how he’d drawn her out, getting her to empty her heart onto the floor and then not giving the slightest shit that she was falling apart as a result; that maybe she’d needed someone to tell her she was going to be ok, or that maybe he could be a human being for just a moment. “And that sofa is from the Edwardian Era for Merlin’s sake, it’s very uncomfortable.”

“Of course it is...for someone like you.”

“You are an insufferable ass, but I’m sure you grow tired of hearing it,” she said, rolling her eyes and going back to her book.

“No, go on,” he said, the claustrophobia he’d been feeling suddenly squeezing his lungs. “Nothing tickles my funny bone more than a worthless cunt in a collar calling me names while reading my books.”

She looked up at him and he was almost startled by how hurt she was, as if he’d just punched her in the stomach, her eyes wide and tear filled. Maybe he’d been a bit harsh with that last bit. But lashing out was his specialty, had been since he was a child and she knew that. She knew it was all just words. How pitiful she looked in the daylight, little pet Mudblood curled up in front of the fire sniffling up her tears, turning her back to him, shoulders hunched. He decided not to push her any further, pulling his own book off of a lower shelf.

“What do you think you’re doing?” she snapped. “I told you to leave me alone.”
He sat up then, leaning forward to balance his elbows on his knees and she shrunk back, regretting yelling at him. Lucius wasn’t home and Draco never had bothered to follow rules, particularly when he was angry.

“This is my fucking library, you Mudblood bitch! I’ve put up with you strutting around this manor trying to manipulate me at every turn for nearly a month now and I’ve kept my mouth shut…”

“Draco wait. I wasn’t trying to manip…”

“Oh Draco, I was so sad in prison, so tortured! oh Draco, how nice of you to worry about me, let me walk by you wearing nothing but a strip of lace, let me touch your arm…”

“What? I…” Thoroughly confused, she stood and moved further away from him even though he hadn’t advanced an inch. She could tell that he had snapped, that something else had caused his rage and that nothing she tried to say would calm him.

“You think I don’t see how you look at me like I’m some sort of pitiful lost cause? Some irredeemable coward? You think I don’t know that you lay in your bed laughing your ass off at how far the mighty have fallen? Giggling while my father tells you stories about his embarrassment of a son who couldn’t complete the simplest of tasks? Fuck you Granger.”

He stood then and she backed herself up against a great mahogany desk that sat near the bookcases. He’d trapped her, his arms on either side caging her in. He looked at her with more disgust than she could ever remember, his lip curled into a sneer. She could smell alcohol on his breath but his eyes had laser like focus. He was only inches from her face, chewing on his bottom lip as his eyes roamed over her trembling body. She was like a little girl again, so tiny and frail, completely helpless with no one to save her. All her bravery melted away and she looked down, submitting to him just as she had his father. His throat went dry.

“My manor, my library, my sofa,” he whispered. “Say it.”

“And I don’t give a shit what my father says,” he hissed at her, his breaths short and shallow, his words barely audible as he leaned in even closer, hooking his finger under the tight collar to painfully wrench her neck forward. “…my mudblood.” She met his gaze again for just a moment, silently pleading for him to stop, looking for the real Draco, the one she’d seen the night before. But he never showed up. Instead he pounded his fist on the desk, hard enough to make her jump. “Fucking say it, Granger!”

“Your m-mudblood.”

Thunder rumbled outside, rain slapping against the window and he stared her down for almost a full minute before she dared to speak.

“I never thought you were a lost cause, Draco. I know how fucked up we all were, the choices we were forced to make. I never thought…”

He held a hand up and shook his head and stepped away, cracking his neck to the side and offering her a cruel, crooked smile.

“Enjoy pulling your Death Eater train this weekend, baby. You always were so desperate for that male attention.”

She slid down to the floor after he’d left and stayed there crying until well after the storm had
London was supposed to be the perfect escape. He could pretend to be someone else there, go out and walk among the muggles, watching them on their phones and hailing cabs, reading their strange, newspapers with static photographs. As much as he detested the non-wizarding world, he did love the architecture. The soaring steeples on their churches, the monuments to war heroes, blank eyed praying figures carved out of stone, their mouths permanently open in cries of supplication. They were amazing. Artifacts and Statuary were his secret fascination, like functional art, worn and altered by time. He’d intended to spend the long weekend stoned to the hair, visiting the potions lab to test a few ideas he’d had and then paying a visit to a Wizard club hidden beneath the Golden Square.

And yet as soon as he arrived, his mind wandered back home, how he’d treated Hermione the night that he left, the disgusting things he’d said to her, the things he’d made her say back. He was smart enough to know that he’d done exactly what his father had told him to avoid…he’d made her his whipping boy, lashing out at the weakest person in the house because of his anger with the most powerful. Even once he’d resolved to apologize as soon as he got home, he couldn’t stop thinking about what she was going through. And sitting in the dark, low ceilinged rooms of The Iron Wand, watching lithe, wriggling little witches dance in their black hot pants and silver bras he was continuously drawn back to thoughts of Hermione. To block them out he drank more.

Even as a child he’d hated his father’s parties. When he was very young, he’d been shuttled off to the furthest wing of the manor, silencing charms muffling everything as he sat with his nanny and played games or read books. His father's guests would sometimes stay for days, his mother stopping by his room every so often to give him a hug and kiss or sing to him before he went to sleep. But when he grew older he knew exactly what these parties involved, why his father hired “cocktail waitresses” that stayed overnight, why there were rooms on the second floor that were locked with complicated charms he couldn’t undo. He’d crept down to the dining room once and saw one of the women stretched out on the table naked, her arms pulled taut above her head, her ankles chained to the legs. Two of the hooded, masked men were pouring streams of hot candle wax between her breasts and legs while she screamed, her head thrashing, tears streaming down her face. Draco had jumped back from his hiding place, his face hot with embarrassment, but also horrified at how his dick had hardened. He sat against the wall, catching his breath, willing his arousal to go away, convincing himself that it was just her nudity that had gotten to him. He was a sixteen year old boy, he was hard half the day. But still, he’d stayed away from Lucius’ friends since then. Except now he knew who would be stretched on the table, who would be screaming and begging for mercy. Now when he closed his eyes he could see Hermione naked, covered in dull, cracking wax, her face turning to catch his eye while she cried out for help. Now he knew who would be suffering and there was nothing he could do to save her.

A dark haired girl with a tattoo up one arm of a thorny flowering vine that continuously twisted and bloomed as she spoke approached him, straddling his stretched out legs, her hips rolling over his lap. He sipped at his drink and watched her breasts bounce as she danced, her bare stomach, covered with some sort of iridescent fairy dust, stretched and rolled as she moved on top of him and his cock started to respond, his eyelids heavy with drunkenness. The girl took his face in her hands, tipping his chin up so she could look into his eyes, her painted lips spreading into a tempting smile.

“You can touch,” she said, her voice a little too squeaky for his tastes. He ignored it and put his hands on her hips, slipping around to feel her ass grinding against him. He was starting to get warm, smelling her sweet sweat and perfume as she leaned in close to undo the first two buttons of
his shirt, placing a kiss at the base of his throat. He groaned, pulling her closer to his cock, his fingers digging into the flesh of her ass so he could thrust against her.

“You’re a pretty one,” she said, running her hands through his hair, kissing the hinge of his jaw, the tip of his nose, his bottom lip. “Such long fingers!” She laced her fingers with his, pushing them against the wall before she leaned forward, her breasts smashed into his chest, her covered pussy grinding hard against his aching cock. He sighed contentedly at the touch of her tongue along the soft skin below his ear. A good filthy fuck in the back room would clear his mind. But then she whispered, “The pictures in the paper never do you justice Mr. Malfoy.”

He growled and pushed her to the floor as if she’d burnt him, standing up to shake off whatever fucking trance she’d put him in. She scrambled to her feet, her eyes shooting daggers.

“What the fuck?” She said, brushing herself off. “I was trying to show you a good time, asshole.”

“No interested,” he said, digging into his pocket and producing a handful of Galleons. Her anger seemed to melt away at the sight of the coins but he threw them on the floor so she’d have to crawl for them. “Do us all a favor and see if this is enough to buy you a bit of tact, you miserable star fucking whore.”

He shouldered past her and made his way to the entrance before apparating back to the flat.

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She soaked in the bath for hours, laying perfectly still beneath the bubbling surface until the water was cold and her fingertips wrinkled. When the bubbles dissipated and she could see the marks on her skin, the fading wax burns and purpling bites and bruises on her thighs and stomach she closed her eyes and practiced her counted breathing, doing anything she could to empty her mind and simply…exist. It had gotten her through the interrogations and punishments in prison, maybe it would get her through this.

After sending her to bathe and dress for the welcoming meal, she’d found a new black gown laid out on her bed. It was long and skin tight, made of delicate black lace. He’d given her no underwear as usual, only a black garterbelt that hooked to sheer black stockings and a pair of dangerously high black stiletto heels. The dress was completely see through, leaving nothing to the imagination and he’d given her no robe, no wrap.

“Will there be other…gifted women…at the party?” She’d asked. Lucius prickled when she referred to her slave status.

He stood behind her, skimming his hands over her body, moving to cup her breasts, squeezing them almost painfully while holding her gaze in the mirror, his face set in a frown, as if she suddenly weren’t allowed to ask questions.

“I suspect there will be, pet, but because this is my home you will be the guest of honor.”

The way he said it made her blood run cold. A guest of honor among Death Eaters seldom made it out of the room alive. But Lucius simply kissed the back of her neck and held out two sparkling black hair combs encrusted with diamond and jet jewels.

“Pin your hair up, They’ll want to see your collar. Then join me in the library at 7:00pm.”
He put her on the floor when she walked in, instructing her to kneel quietly at his feet with her head bowed and her mouth closed. For a moment she thought she saw a flash of uncertainty, or even fear cross his features, perhaps worry that she would embarrass him. But he could rest assured that if there was one gathering of people in the world that terrified her into instant submission it was his little evil garden club of Death Eaters. And in fact when the first group of three appeared in the green flames of the fireplace, dressed fully in robes and glinting silver masks, Hermione had fainted dead away.

She woke up to Lucius lightly slapping her face, holding her on his lap as he sat on the sofa. The room was silent but across from her she could see the three masked men watching her, faceless and terrifying. She’d seen them often enough to recognize the designs of some of the masks, swirls and flames and cage like bars hiding their mouths. But since the end of the war a new generation of Death Eaters had been initiated, younger and far more debauched. In times of peace the super rich needed something to fill their time and apparently they now organized Mudblood Hunts as well as dealing in the underground slave trade or shaking down blood traitors for protection money to keep their secrets. As more of hooded men arrived she saw new masks, some highlighted with streaks of red or green, some set with jewels. She wondered if she knew any of these men, if Blaise or Theo or Goyle for Gods’ sake were hidden beneath those robes. One thing was clear though, there were no other slaves on the menu. The men had all come alone.

“You’re shaking, pet,” Lucius said, still holding her on his lap. “Can I fix you a drink?”

“No, thank you…I’m just…” she lowered her voice to a whisper, looking deep into her owner’s eyes, knowing that he felt something for her, that she wasn’t just an object to be used and if that was true, he had to know this was torturing her. “I’m afraid.”

“Imperius her,” a voice said, low and rasping, as if he were attempting to alter the sound. “She’ll enjoy it much more.”

“But then she won’t scream,” said another and she could swear it was someone she’d heard before. “Don’t you want her to scream?”

She looked back at Lucius whose face had gone dark, as if he’d been put under a spell himself. She couldn’t tell if he was angry with her or his guests.

“The rules in my home are the same as any other,” he said, pulling his arms out from around her back. “No Imperius, no Cruciatus, no kissing on the mouth.” He stood and held his hand out to her, a silent order for her to get up. “Otherwise, there are no rules.”

She stood and wobbled on her four inch heels, already feeling the eyes of every man in the room raking over her form, some seeing her as a slave for the first time, she was sure.

“Then bring her to the dining room, Malfoy,” someone said with a low chuckle. “Some of us have been waiting all day for this feast.”

“Some of us have been waiting eight years!” Another man said and the room rang with more hideous laughter.

The Dining Room. In all her time there she’d asked only one mercy of him and that was to stay out of the Dining Room. She never wanted to see it again, never wanted to see the floor or raise her
eyes to the ceiling or look at the chandelier. She didn’t want to breathe the air or see the light or ever step her foot into that room ever again. Just the thought of it made her tremble, standing in the corridor outside the library rubbing hard at the skin of her forearm.

“Please. Please Mr. Malfoy, don’t make me do this!” She was crying, her breath coming in short gasps, her head swimming and light, the feel of it making her drop to her knees, pressing her face to Lucius’ legs in supplication. “I can't do this. Don’t let them hurt me, please! Not in there. You promised me. You promised me that you wouldn’t!”

“Get up,” he hissed, his voice laced with venom. “Do not embarrass me in front of these men.”

He gripped a fistful of her hair and pulled her to her feet, glaring at her as she continued to cry. Behind her the assembled Death Eaters were crowding in and she could feel their heat, hear them laughing behind their masks.

“Lucius please!” she cried, as he took a step away from her. The back of his hand cracked hard across her face and she instantly tasted blood on her tongue. He’d told her in his bedroom that she could call him Lucius, she could cry out his name when she was desperate to be heard, if her heart called for it. Apparently those privileges didn’t apply here.

Someone grabbed her around her waist, prying her from her owner, her supposed guardian, the man who stroked her hair and told her she was beautiful. Arms were dragging her down the hallway as she begged for him to save her.

“Looks like she still has that same old Granger fire,” a voice said. “Someone’s going to have to fuck that sass out of her.”

“She can’t talk back if she’s got a cock in her mouth, mate,” someone else offered and a group of them laughed.

They opened the doors to the grand dining room and threw her onto the floor where she instantly went limp and silent, her limbs turning to wet sand, her mind going blank. Unable to speak, unable to cry, she allowed herself to be dragged to the table, her limbs stretched and locked down with magic. She stared up at the chandelier and let them all do what they wanted, knowing they’d finally won.

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Later, pulling herself out of the cold bathwater, she wrapped a towel around her battered body and shuffled to her bed, finding that Mr. Malfoy had left her a healing potion and a sleeping draught. There was a cream colored note card folded near her pillow.

“You disappoint me Miss Granger. And you will be punished for it at a later date. However tomorrow, you still have guests to entertain.

Meet us at breakfast at 9:30 am or I will send someone to fetch you.”

Her hand shook violently as she read the card, her stomach dropping to her toes. Tipping the vial of healing potion and the sleeping aid to her lips she curled beneath her covers, praying for unconsciousness, no matter how brief. Once the guests had left she would have to grovel and flatter and do what she could to get back into Lucius’ good graces, but even then she knew that her suffering had only just begun.

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Draco found her sitting on the balcony wrapped in the duvet from her bed. It was a cold Autumn morning, but the sun was bright and she had her face turned to it, her eyes closed as she absorbed its heat. Just seeing her tiny body curled up in the chair made his heart ache. He’d been an asshole and wouldn’t blame her for never forgiving him. If they were still kids he probably would have doubled down on his insults, digging himself a deeper hole, making worse jokes. But as he got older he found that those holes ended up eating away at him; guilt and shame and hurt crept through his blood the longer his cruelty went unanswered, and so he had to apologize. He stepped up behind her and put a hand on her shoulder and she jumped up to standing, the duvet fluttering to the ground around her, her eyes wide with a kind of terror he’d seen only once before.

“Woah woah…Granger. It’s just me,” he said, holding his hands up in surrender.

The sight of her face made him angry enough to be nauseated. Her lip was split in two places, her cheeks purple and yellow with aging bruises. The black and purple crescent around her left eye drew attention to the broken vessels near her pupil turning the white of her eye red. He knew from past meetings and reunions with old friends that Theo and even that asshole Cormac were now full fledged Death Eaters for no other reason than they needed something to do with their money and freedom. The thought of them touching her, burning her, leaving bruises on her neck, hurting her, made him sick. Even more painful was how she looked at him now, her fear not abating a bit. She thought he was as bad as they were. He tugged at the sleeve of his shirt, rubbing at the mark that would never fade.

“Go away. Please just go away Malfoy.”

“I will. I am. I’m leaving. But Hermione, I wanted…I just…” he bent down to pick up the heavy duvet and wrapped it around her shoulders, crossing it over her chest to keep her warm and safely hidden. She looked up at him with tears in her eyes and he pulled her into his arms, holding her against his chest as she cried. “I’m sorry Hermione. I’m sorry for what I said before I left. I’m sorry for the names I called you. Being drunk is no excuse. I was an asshole.”

“Thank you,” she muttered into his shirt, not wanting to pull away, not wanting to look at the house, at the sky, just wanting to hide.

He moved his hands to her shoulders and pushed her back, enough that she could tip her face up to look at him, at the sadness and hurt in his eyes. He touched two fingertips to the bruise by her eye and she winced.

“Why won’t he heal these?” he asked, still holding her close.

“He…he says I need to wear them, to suffer through them like a muggle because of how I misbehaved.”

He wasn’t listening, he was watching her lips, swollen and cracked, but still beautiful. Beautiful? Hermione Granger? But they were, they way they curled around words, how they parted for her to breathe, how she trapped her bottom lip between her teeth. He licked his own lips and took a breath. He wanted to…

“Draco!” His father called from inside the house and he quickly let her go, nearly pushing her out of his arms.

“Sorry,” he mouthed, stepping away.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen you awake this early,” Lucius said, his voice laced with sarcasm. “How was London?”
“Foggy. Why won’t you heal her?” He asked, putting himself between Hermione and his father. “Didn’t you make her suffer enough?”

“It’s none of your concern,” Lucius said, his voice quiet and even, his eyes over Draco’s shoulder to look at her. “She understands her punishment and she accepted it. I told you from the beginning that she belongs to me, not you. She belongs to our order, not you. She is a Mudblood and a rebel and she needs to be reminded of her place every once in a while.” He pulled back to look at his son. “We all do.”

Hermione bowed her head and walked inside from the balcony, leaving the two men alone. As surprised as she was to witness it, she was grateful to Draco for saying something, although she was confident he did it more just to get under his father’s skin than to seek any kind of justice for her. She believed and accepted his apology for their afternoon in the library though; her life was too volatile and her future too unsure to hold grudges, particularly against someone who proved to be her only ally. Her next punishment would come at the weekend, and she silently hoped Draco would still be around, regardless of whether he could do anything to help her or not.

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“I should tell you son, that I’m entertaining again this weekend,” Lucius said, stepping out to the edge of the balcony to look across the grounds. “A much smaller group, but a very necessary…”

“Gang rape,” Draco finished for him, picking up the book Hermione had been reading – *Justine*. He held it behind his back with an aim to return it to her once they were done.

“Punishment. She embarrassed me in front of some very influential men which will have consequences in the future.”

“Oh bullshit, any group with Greg Goyle as a member is severely lacking in influence. Just admit that your friends had a craving to punish the bitch who brought them down and I’d respect it more.”

Lucius thought for a moment before answering, looking at the trees waving in the wind. The fact was that the Death Eaters did still have great influence, but it was a different kind than he had originally joined up for. He was one of the older members, one who remembered when they had to fight for blood purity, when their cause was more than honorable. Now he feared that they kept him in good standing for two things, his money, and his access to Hermione for them to tear apart when they got their hackles up.

“The bottom line is that Miss Granger will be punished this weekend, in the style of my choosing. If you are unable to stomach such things, perhaps another trip to London would be in order.”

“Perhaps,” Draco said, heading back into the library.

But he had no intention of leaving.

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Her rooms were across the hall from Lucius’; an old guest suite that family used to occupy when they stayed for the summers. When she wasn’t called into service she spent her time there, having taken up embroidery and knitting, anything to add color or beauty to the dark, shadow filled house she was prisoner. On Wednesday Draco knocked on her open door and stood at the threshold holding her book. She had forgiven him for the hideous things he’d said and done to her before leaving for London, blaming it on his drinking and his damaged soul, but it didn’t mean she liked
being cornered alone with him. He’d gotten too close to her, close enough that she could feel him, and it made her uncomfortable.

“Malfoy,” she said flatly, sitting in the overstuffed chair tucked into the bay window. She was stitching a picture of an English garden, a riot of different colored flowers and greens, five or six butterflies flittering across the top.

“I found your book on the balcony,” he said. “And holy shit are those muggles twisted. This guy makes me look like a puppy dog.”

She smiled and stood, taking the book from his hand. In truth, he’d done all he’d intended to do. He knew she wasn’t ready to bury any hatchets and he wasn’t particularly interested in hearing her analyze his issues. He just wanted to make sure that the bruise by her eye was healing correctly and also that he could still make her smile.
Chapter Summary

Do you hear that? In the distance? it's smut...and its coming closer.

As the week went on, Draco could see Hermione beginning to crumble under the weight of whatever it was that was coming. Lucius hadn’t told her what her punishment would be, only that it would take place on Saturday night, and his “friends” would be welcome to witness it. As the day drew closer she began spending more time alone in her room, closing the door (it couldn’t be locked), or soaking the bathtub until she fell asleep. After shampooing her hair she would sink down to rinse it, sometimes floating just beneath the surface in the warm bubbly water, wondering what would happen if she just...took a breath. How would it feel if she just filled her lungs with warmth water and sunk to the bottom of the bath, making it all go away. It was a useless thought; the collar was charmed to keep her from harming herself, but it was soothing nonetheless. At night Lucius used her as he always did, and Draco had to cast silencing charms throughout the Manor before going to bed, eventually moving to the other side of the house where his nursery used to be and drinking himself into a stupor.

On Thursday Lucius gave in and healed her remaining bruises and she came down to breakfast with her hair pulled back into a tight ponytail and deep, cranberry colored lipstick. She looked a little more...alive...more herself. Draco offered her a polite smile that she didn’t return, her eyes flicking to Lucius for permission before she fixed her tea.

“I’ve received several invoices from the Bobbin Potions Labs,” Lucius said, breaking the uncomfortable silence. “Tell me, Draco, why have we sunk thousands into the custom lab on the second floor if you’re going to go to London and do the same things there?”

Hermione stared at Draco, her brows furrowed in confusion that he wanted to slap back into place. Yes, how strange that the spoiled little ferret might want to accomplish something with his life! How odd that he feels he owes some sort of reparation to the Wizarding world, particularly the generation that he helped to all but decimate.

“Close your mouth, Granger,” Draco said, “the spiders around here are relentless.”

“I was just…” she sat back in her chair and shook her head.

Draco had always been a good student, and when he wasn’t trying to torture the three of them he managed to keep up with her in all of their classes. She’d often thought that if Harry hadn’t been there to distract him, he could have been something incredible. And now Harry wasn’t here so his she supposed there was nothing there to stop him.

“There are specific tests and large volume equipment in London that I don’t have here,” Draco said to his father, not bothering to look him in the eye. “And I can bounce ideas off of other lab workers…particularly this little half-blood witch from Amsterdam,” he said, directly to Hermione, flicking his tongue at her like a snake.

"You just can't resist being an asshole, can you Malfoy?" she said, finally setting down her tea.
“Well you know what they say sweetheart, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree.”

“Enough!” Lucius pounded his hand on the table making both of them jump in their chairs like scolded students. “Either you show me some results from your ‘ideas’ before the end of the month, or your experiments and my funding of them are cut off. I’m not a charity.”

“Nah, just a father.”

“Ideas about what?” Hermione asked, trying to break the tension. But Draco had already withdrawn, his face like a sullen child as he pushed back from the table.

“What the fuck do you care?” He said standing. “It doesn’t cure dirty blood, so what good is it to you?”

Lucius picked up his tea and sighed, continuing his breakfast as if nothing had happened.

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He was surprised to find her back in the library, back on the floor where he’d first found her, except now she was just staring into the fire, her mind too cluttered to read.

“Do you remember the time,” Draco said, wandering in and sitting on the floor beside her. “In fourth year Potions, when we were working in groups and while Snape was out of the room Goyle’s cauldron fell off the table?”

She didn’t move, her face reflecting the gold and orange firelight, her eyes like two bronzed coins. He cleared his throat and kept talking.

“So the cauldron is on the floor and Snape told us it was some sort of whatever-the-fuck flesh eating disease or something equally horrid that would eat through concrete and so he and Crabbe and Nott all dived down to try and scoop all of the shit back into the cauldron and ended up knocking their heads together, all three of them falling down, slipping all over the floor.”

He saw the slightest twitch of her lips.

“And just as they’re all on the floor, all three of them ass up trying to pull themselves together, Snape comes floating through the door and says, ‘what is this, some sort of drawing room farce?’”

He’d done the best he could with the impression and it worked, Hermione’s face cracking into a wide smile before she laughed, and laughed hard enough that he saw her eyes wet with tears.

“We…we could hear…we could hear all their heads hit together!” she said, barely able to stutter out the words. “And Harry said they were like a bunch of coconuts!”

She threw her head back and howled which made Draco laugh harder, the two of them nearly doubled over before she began slowing her breaths. He just watched her, nodding, his forearms on his knees, fairly pleased with himself until he saw her face fall again, her eyes going dark.

“Yes, too bad he’s not here to judge your impression of him,” she said, not looking Draco in the eye.

It was clear that although he hadn’t been directly responsible for their teacher’s death, he would always be a symbol to her, like the snake on the Slytherin crest. He was evil and she was good. Dark and light, wrong and right and there was nothing he could do to change it.
It was one of the last warm weekends of Autumn and Draco walked the grounds, one of the sleek black house cats following behind as he kicked at piles of leaves and sticks gathering around the statuary in the yard. When he was younger his mother would put together incredible parties—candles and flowers floating everywhere, cakes four feet tall, music and laughing and swirling gowns. He could remember sitting on the landing of the grand staircase and watching through the railing as the guests arrived in handsome suits and lush skirts. He'd loved the heady combination of the men's pipes with wine and women's perfume. His mother in particular had worn a powder that smelled like roses and oak. Sometimes there were masquerades with elaborate costumes and living scenery, and sometimes there were solemn ceremonies that he couldn’t attend, the masked and hooded men gliding through the front door with their women on their arm, lead by his father into the parlor, the doors locking behind them. He'd always thought it was very regal, counting the days until he could be a part of it, not knowing the brutality that went with it. Now the halls of the manor were almost always silent and dark, and the gatherings his father held were always hidden behind closed doors. Only select Death Eaters were invited (male) and the only thing on the menu was violence. The dark wizards were sore winners, unsatisfied until they'd made every one of their enemies suffer, and Hermione Granger was most certainly at the top of their list.

Draco sat on one of the marble benches by the reflecting pool to light his joint and the cat jumped up beside him, rubbing her face on his thigh, begging for affection. He scratched her head absentmindedly while watching the sun turn blood red as it sank into the naked trees, knowing that once it was night, the guests would start arriving. He hadn’t seen her since lunch as Lucius had given her a list of instructions to prepare for her night. Since seeing her in the library and trying to improve her mood, Draco had avoided talking to her completely as she’d made it clear that he was her enemy and he didn’t really have the energy to invest in this reconciliation any further. The sky turned into a swirl of dusky blue and purple and he saw a flutter of movement out of the corner of his eye and looked up to the second floor where there was a fluttering in Granger’s window. No doubt she was watching the sun set as well, but by the time he looked up to see her face, the space between the curtains was empty. He twisted off the end of his joint and picked up the cat, tucking her under his arm; his bedmate for the evening. Even after a few hits and a walk in the fresh air, his heart was was still thudding hard against his ribs and with a last look up at Granger’s room, he decided to spend the rest of the night in the Guest House.
The Darkness

The guest house was an old converted carriage garage set far back from the Manor close to the wooded hills that lined the Malfoy property. Draco had always been popular, his name all but demanding it, and so even at fourteen he was attracting the attention of fifth and sixth year students who wanted a little taste of the generous decadence that Draco lived with, coming home with him for holidays, or stopping by for a weekend during the summer. When he was younger they would stay in the guest house practicing wandless magic or battling in sloppy and ultimately painful duels, being sure to break every rule issued to them by the school, Malfoy knowing that the wards around the property would keep anyone important from knowing what they’d done. When they’d tortured each other enough, they would conjure animals to fight, but he could never stomach it for long. Something about those pretty little birds…they didn’t ask to be conjured and they sure as hell didn’t ask to be thrown into a war. A fight. Thrown into a fight. He would always find a reason to leave when their painful squawking became too much.

Since his mother’s passing the guest house was hardly ever used, pantries empty, the furniture looking like lifeless ghosts in their slipcovers, the rooms cold until he cast a warming charm and started a fire. It was night and he sat in the small front parlor alone with the black cat and a bottle of vodka, staring out the window at the three dimly lit rooms of the manor: the library, his father’s office and Hermione’s suite. He’d actually brought books with him, his notes, his research, but they couldn’t hold his attention for more than a minute. The crack of apparition beside him nearly had him jump out of his skin.

“Malfoy you crazy son of a bitch, your dad said that you’re not going to hang with us tonight!” It was Theo Nott, dressed in his finest cloak and holding his mask in one hand, flipping it occasionally as he spoke. “Of all the people in the world waiting to get their hands on Hermione Granger I thought you’d be first in line.”

Why? Why would he be first in line? She was of no consequence to him and never had been, unless everyone was still dragging around memories from school, and even then he wasn’t quite sure that perpetual sexual slavery was an equitable punishment for being punched in the face nearly ten years ago. When were any of them going to move on to the next part of their lives? But he could tell that Theo had already had a few firewhiskeys he wasn’t really interested in a deep discussion of Draco’s internal moral struggles. So instead Draco stood, drained his glass and set it down carefully on the table beside his chair to keep from throwing it against the wall.

“Yeah, well she lives with me mate,” he said. “So it’s no special occasion tonight. Unless there’s also a floor show.”

“Truth is, Draco, your dad wanted me to come check on you, make sure you were ok. He said you’d been on edge lately.” Draco snorted, looking out the front window again to see if Lucius was staring back at him from the second floor, checking on the messenger.

“You know what you guys are doing tonight?” He asked Theo, pouring himself another drink. His friend gave him a blank look, shrugging his shoulders.

“A few drinks, maybe cards…he said we could play a few games with the Mudblood.”

“A few games,” Draco repeated back to him. “Why don’t you run along then, mate, make sure they let you be the Top Hat. Tell my dad I’m fine, just reviewing some research tonight. Or tell him to go fuck himself, whichever you’d think he’d prefer.”
Well after midnight, Draco walked barefoot across the grounds and snuck back to the main house, assuming that the party had ended, seeing no lights in the library. He needed a sleeping potion of some sort, something to just cut the tension of his muscles and shut down his brain. He had a few vials in the lab and he knew there were some in his father’s suite.

The library was indeed dark, the fire had been put out, but somewhere he still heard voices, low murmurs and the little giggles of a drunk female, a squeaky little sound he’d never believe was from Hermione Granger. They were in a smaller parlor off the front hall. Draco stood in the shadows of the grand staircase in his t-shirt and pajama pants just like he had as a child, and looked through the half open door. Inside his father sat with an empty glass, staring with half drunk derision at his guests. Only a few were left; Theo, Blaise and two other young men Draco hadn’t seen before; they looked young enough to still be in school. Not an outrageous thought, as he had been conscripted to assassination when he was just a child himself. There was also a woman, a girl really, and a free one at that. She wore no collar, no cuffs to indicate a prisoner taken out with supervision. In fact she seemed to be having the time of her life as he watched her do a thick rail of coke off of the desk before throwing her head back laughing. She was stripped down to her underwear, a very well chosen black and silver lace bra and panty set, and before he stepped away, he watched her climb up on a coffee table from 1765 and start dancing. His father sat there, blank eyed, saying nothing and Draco once again swallowed a lump of disgust on his mother’s behalf. She had known the kind of antics her husband got up to, even accepted his indiscretions when out with the boys…but for some reason this…this complete, half naked stranger, high out of her mind and slipping around on the furniture seemed a line too far too cross. What were they now, just a gentleman’s club for horny homicidal maniacs?

He left them to their devices and made his way to the kitchen, pulling out a beer before heading upstairs to the lab.

“Hermione?”

He called her name in a sort of half whisper, not quite sure if he wanted her to answer. Fighting with her in the library, or at the dinner table was one thing; he was good at arguing, flinging white hot insults and walking away. Words were his most perfect weapon. No, it was the other times that made him uncomfortable. The times that he found her just staring at him, her gaze wide and clear, not at all afraid to look him in the eye, were what he found unsettling. It was as if she were trying to figure him out; not read his mind or probe his memories, nothing magical like that…just that she was looking at his soul, without pity or disdain, not even anger, just curiosity. She wanted to figure him out. He didn’t want to be figured out.

Met with only silence, he made his way up the stairs towards his lab, the now half empty beer bottle dangling between two of his fingers. At the landing he paused to finish his drink when he heard a chain rattle. He made the turn and climbed the last four steps slowly, doing his best to be silent. Ahead of him he saw that the door of her suite was open a few inches, a soft gold glow suffused across the floor of the hallway.

He pushed the door open the rest of the way and saw her on her bed, awash in the warm glow of the candles that floated around her. Her collar was affixed to a heavy chain that snaked across the bed, locked to the post in the far corner, and other than that, she wore nothing, sitting back on her heels, her knees spread wide, a black satin blindfold hiding her eyes. Draco stood in the doorway frozen as she lifted her blindfolded face to the sound of the door creaking open. Her cheeks were
red and streaked with tears, her bottom lip split and bleeding at the corner and he was transfixed as he watched the tip of her pink tongue flick out to lick a little jewel of blood away, as if it would make her more presentable. His eyes slid down to her scratched and bruised throat and arms, red burns from candle wax streaking across her breasts and down her stomach. Usually pulled back in a ponytail, her hair was wild and wavy, damp strands of it stuck to her chest and face, a thin curl of it like a vine across her throat.

“Mr. Malfoy?” she whispered, her voice so desperate and sad. He’d never seen her so broken.

Draco swallowed, unable to speak. His throat had gone dry, his hands clenched into fists at his sides. So dirty and broken; and yet, she was breathtaking - beautiful, feral and base. It was as if she wore the scars and marks of ten years of torture, the lashing burns of his own words, the torture of his aunt, the struggle of the war, the loss of her friends, her love…and yet she still sat there, baring everything, her head held up to meet whatever was ahead of her, ready to battle an enemy she couldn’t even see.

“It’s so quiet,” she said, her words tentative, shaking. “Are they gone?”

Her frowning lips were swollen and dark, the color of her nipples, that he’d never seen before. Still he didn’t answer, suddenly unable to look away from her body, the curve of her waist, the flat plane of her stomach leading to the tangle of hair between her legs, her long, slim legs. He took a step inside the room and her head snapped back up to attention, facing where he stood. Without thinking any further of the endless trouble it would cause both of them, he pushed the door closed and slid her reading chair in front of it for a bit of insurance. He just wanted a bit more time.

She couldn’t smell him. It was how she’d recognized the others, knowing they weren’t Lucius. But this one hadn’t come close enough, and he was so quiet. The other men who had come to her had burst through the door chuckling under their breath, ice clinking in their glasses. They’d immediately grabbed for her, throwing her on her back, bending her over the chair, their hands fumbling over every part of her, licking, pinching and twisting, binding her with spells and charms, barely letting her catch a breath. They’d held her down and poured the wax on her stomach, ripping it off when it dried, their tongues laving over the burns. And yet, in a way, this silence was more frightening. It seemed like an eternity before she heard the footsteps again. And then he was close enough for her to smell; alcohol and cloves and cedar, and something spicy and earthy, sandalwood. It wasn’t anything she’d smelled this close to her before, but also not entirely foreign. One thing was for sure. It wasn’t Lucius.

“Who…” she started, quickly thinking better of it, knowing these visitors had very few rules and having already been slapped once earlier for speaking out of turn. “I…what would you like?”

In her darkness she heard, “Shhh.”

She nodded and there was another silent stillness. Whoever he was, he was still close enough that she could feel the heat coming off his body, she could still smell his skin. He was murmuring something under his breath and she felt her whole body warm and tingling, like a shiver of goosebumps from head to toe. Then suddenly hands, strong, warm hands, sliding up her legs, reaching behind her to touch her ankle, guiding her off of her knees to sit at the edge of the bed. Soft lips grazed her shoulder where someone had bitten her earlier, then brushed over her collarbone, where molten wax had dried and burned. The tip of his tongue dipped into the hollow of her throat before pulling away with a kiss. This gentleness, softness and silence was terrifying as she knew that this whole exercise was meant to be a punishment, and yet it felt so good, his fingers
massaging the sore muscles in her thighs, his mouth on her neck, the pull of soft, wet lips. But he stopped, backing away when a whimper slipped out and she reached out to find him, to pull him close again.

He caught her wrists before she could touch him, his hair, his jaw, and lowering his voice to a rasping whisper he leaned close to her ear saying only, “No,” before planting her hands firmly on the bed.

With that one word she stilled, her hands at her sides. It was everything in him not to heal her, to hide the marks on her body from the other men, to take away the pain of the wax burns, the welts from a leather belt, the blood from a slap to the face, but he knew that if he did, Lucius would know that he’d found her, found her and spent time with her…alone. When he’d gotten close enough to the bed to touch her he’d seen the evidence of her other visitors, smeared and dried on the insides of her thighs along with the fingertip shaped bruises pressed into her hips. He scourgified her, knowing somehow that of all the things she didn’t want to see at the end of her night, that was the worst. And now, now he just wanted to watch her breathe, to trace her features, feel the little bumps of her bones beneath her creamy skin, to map her body with his tongue and commit it to memory, knowing he’d never get a chance to see it again, or touch it. Standing between her legs he ran his fingers through her thick hair, brushing it back from her face, releasing the bright citrus smell of her shampoo. Her head tipped back, leaning into his touch and the feel of it, the way she let herself fall against his palm made him want to push her down. He wanted to pull off her blindfold and fuck her unconscious, make her say his name instead of his father’s. In that one moment, he could see why they’d marked her. Each man that walked through her door did anything they could to make her his, to consume her and let the whole world know they’d done it.

His fingers sunk into the skin of her thighs, prying them apart. She felt his body slide down, kneeling between her legs. There was something different about this visitor, aside from his silence and his slowness. His arms were mostly bare, and the fabric of his shirt was buttery soft, almost like an old t-shirt, nothing like the heavy robes and suit jackets or cuffed cotton shirtsleeves of the others. His mouth touched the inside of her thigh, his hands on her hips, not clutching, not digging into her flesh, just holding her, sliding over the surface of her skin. This was so far beyond what any of the other visitors had done. Was this a test of her loyalty? Were they allowed to make her feel so good, so lightheaded and aching? Lucius was fond of impossible puzzles, questions with no correct answers, contradictory instructions and unfollowable rules, anything that could result in her punishment. So she stayed quiet, the familiar pulse of arousal heating up between her legs.

Pressing his lips to her thigh again, he felt her breath on a sigh, warm over the back of his neck. He could smell her; her sweat and sweet soap mixed with the musky scent of her arousal raising goosebumps over his arms. His hands slid up the curve of her hips to her waist, his mouth trailing higher. So close. He blew a stream of air over her mound and she gasped, her back arching, her hips pushing forward, offering herself to his mouth, all but begging for a single flick of his tongue.

“Please,” she whispered, her voice nothing but a breath.

“Shh,” he said again, even though he wanted to tell her to beg for him, to say his name a thousand times, to tell him what filthy things she wanted him to do for her.

His hand lay flat on her stomach, his fingers splayed out like a starfish, feeling the desperation of her want, the tension of her muscles twitching beneath his touch. Tipping his face up he pulled at the back of her neck, finally lowering her mouth to his. This was what he’d wanted all along, for weeks. For years. He wanted to feel her lips against his, to know the taste of her kiss. If he was honest with himself, he’d imagined her sucking him off a hundred times when he was alone, particularly after their near daily arguments; but at night, his subconscious dreamed only of kissing
her, pushing her against the wall and stopping her mouth with his lips, holding her face in his hands, feeling her melt against him, her hands in his hair. Now her legs tightened against him as he licked at the closed seam of her mouth, coaxing her open, his hand tangled into the damp hair at the nape of her neck.

And yet just as suddenly as he pulled her down, she pulled away, her body stiff, her pulse like a jackrabbit. She could see it fluttering against her throat.

“Y-you aren’t supposed to kiss..”

He growled and pull her back to him, crushing his mouth against hers, his tongue driving in past her teeth to tangle with hers. The suddenness pulled a whimper that vibrated between them. And even though he could all but smell her fear, she was kissing him back, her tongue warm and eager over his, her hips rolling and her legs squeezing his ribs. And in that moment, he understood everything about his father’s passion for her. The power of owning her pleasure, of giving her what she needed and getting this response in return, it could easily take over his life.

He wasn’t supposed to kiss her.

And now she was breaking her “Master’s” rules for him. And event though he knew she’d be the one punished for it, he didn’t want to stop. He wanted to kiss every part of her, to bury his tongue in her cunt and make her scream, make her sweat. He wanted to hear her beg for his cock, feel her hot, damp skin sliding against his. But she didn’t know it was him and as much as he wanted her, he wasn’t like one of the men downstairs, seeking to get off on her fear. He didn’t want to be remembered amongst their violence, as one of the villains. So instead he broke the kiss and trailed his tongue along her jaw line, his hands still tight around her wrists. His lips made their way down her throat, then bent to kiss the soft skin above her collar. She moaned and he covered her mouth with his hand before he bit down, sucking the tender flesh deep between his teeth, hard enough and long enough to leave a dark, wet bruise that he would see every time they were together for the next week. Then, kissing her gently on the mouth once more he stepped back, moved the chair back into place, and without another word, he left.
Cedar and Sandalwood

She fell apart when the man left. The instant she felt his heat leaving her skin, the second his touch disappeared and she couldn’t smell him any more, couldn’t hear him breathing; when his footsteps faded and the door closed she started to shake. It had all been too much; the whole night, the whole week waiting for this night to arrive, not knowing what or who was coming to her, how bad it would be. She’d done her best to stay calm, the old Gryffindor courage, putting up a brave front through the silent meals, the endless afternoons, silently accepting the way Draco looked at her like she was some sort of infected trash when he passed her in the hallway, knowing what she did to survive and hating her for it. When he’d looked up at her window earlier in the afternoon she’d been startled by how angry he’d looked, how deep the snarling frown on his face was, all because of her. She hadn’t seen him looking so dark and villainous in years. And yet only the day before he’d sat beside her, trying to make her laugh.

She thought back to the way he came in to the library, a bit startled at finding her sitting on the floor. Likely because she was an untouchable mudblood he’d sat down at least five feet away from her, leaning back on his hands, staring into the fire. The story about the cauldron spilling was a good one, and one of the only truly “normal” memories of Hogwarts she held onto. It had happened before everything went haywire, and strangely enough she could specifically remember Draco laughing, and for once not laughing AT her or AT Harry or Ron, but WITH them. The whole class, competing houses, enemies, rivals, friends, all laughing at some stupid overturned cauldron like it was the funniest thing that had ever happened in their lives. Looking back, it was if they were holding on to that moment for dear life, as if they knew it wouldn't happen again. She'd genuinely warmed at the memory Draco dredged up, but then he’d done his Snape impression and all traces of normalcy disappeared, replaced with images of blood and death and electric blue curses flying through the air, kids as young as twelve laying dead on the ground. That was her history. That was her life’s memory. She'd failed in her task to save those she loved and now she was a slave in the house of her worst enemy.

Unable to hold back any longer, tears flowed freely down her cheeks as she was overcome with pain and exhaustion and unspent adrenaline, the up and down of flight or fight finally taking its toll.

Three men had fucked her in one night, and then the last one had obviously been sent to comfort her, as if it would make up for the harsh treatment from the rest of the night. Or was it a test, romantic advances she was supposed to refuse? She tried at least, she’d reminded him that they weren’t supposed to kiss, but he’d only groaned with want and kissed her harder. The thought of it made her whole body warm and she lifted her fingertips to her mouth trying to recall the feeling of that kiss, a knot of pulsing heat between her legs. She pulled her knees together and scooted further up on the bed, laying back to wait for Mr. Malfoy.

He’d insisted she take her visitors in her own room. She supposed that was part of the punishment, to take the one place in the manor that was designated as HERS and defile it, throw the doors open and invite the whole world inside, so she’d never feel safe or comfortable or welcome in there again.

When he woke her and took the blindfold from her eyes, the sky was already gray with the coming dawn, mist on the grounds making it look like some kind of dreamscape. She was cold, shivering, and he picked her up and carried her across the hall to his suite where he’d run a bath for her.

“You did wonderfully pet,” he said, pouring a pitcher of warm water over her hair, smoothing it...
back from her face. She didn’t react, nearly catatonic as he washed her, done with crying for now.

She looked down at her arms and stomach, her chest and thighs…he’d healed her while she was blindfolded, like it had never happened. Still, deep down she could just barely feel the ache of the bruises, the sting of the wax burns, soft lips on her shoulder, long fingers tangled into her hair…she shook her head and lay back to float in the water. Lucius looked older, more tired than usual, dark circles around his eyes, stubble on his cheeks, his crisp white shirt unbuttoned and rumpled.

“Tell me then, how many of my friends came to…visit…you?” He asked, knowing the answer already. He’d handpicked who would administer her punishment, the young men who knew her, who hadn’t hated her, who wouldn’t be sadistic, but would have the stomach to do what needed to be done. Nott, Goyle and McLaggen.

“Four,” she said, staring up, unblinking at the ceiling.

“Four,” he repeated back to her, holding back his anger. Someone had gone against his rules, someone had gone to her without his permission.

“Why did you send him?” she asked, still not looking him in the eye as he swirled his hand through the warm, foamy water. “The last one.”

He tensed his jaw, grinding his back teeth together. Had they imperiused her? Crucio? Had they forced themselves into her mouth, broken the skin? He couldn’t remember if he’d healed any bleeding wounds.

“And what happened with the last one? Was he particularly cruel to you?” He asked, trying to stay calm.

She sat up then, and he noticed her withdrawing, pulling into herself. She was frightened.

“He kissed me. He was…soft and very kind,” she said, her voice dripping with bitterness. “Did you really think that one nice visitor would make up for the cruelty of the rest?” She finally looked at him, only to be met with complete confusion, his brows furrowed, lips pursed tightly as he looked her up and down.

“Who was it?” He asked through clenched teeth. “I only sent three men to you. Three men that I picked by hand to administer your punishment.”

Part of her reveled in his panic, in his knowledge that his little coordinated rapefest had gone awry. But another part of her wondered who the fourth man had been. She’d been brought down and made to bow to the whole party of assembled Death Eaters before she was taken upstairs and blindfolded and chained to the wall. There had been only six or seven men invited, four of them old classmates of hers. In fact she’d recognized McLaggen’s voice as soon as he’d come in, and if he hadn’t spoken she would have known him by the size of his hands and the feel of his lips. She’d made no secret in the past of how disgusted she was with his cowardly switch to the dark side after the war, taking the easiest road to save his skin and his money, and as a result he’d been rough with her, biting the insides of her thighs, closing his hands around her throat, pulling her hair, calling her every filthy name he could think of as he took out every aggression he’d ever had on her. When he was finished he’d licked the side of the her face and called her a good little whore. If she were given some time she could probably pick out the other two, but the fourth, the last had to have been one of the men she’d never seen before, one of the older men.

“He never said a word. And he didn’t…fuck me,” she said, quietly. “All I can tell you is that he was silent and he wore a short sleeved shirt. I could feel his arms.”
It couldn’t be. Lucius had told them all to dress alike, specifically so that she’d not be able to tell them apart by touch. Had one of them been stupid enough to strip out of his button down shirt in the height of passion? His bet was on the younger man, the one in the same class as the younger Greengrass girl. Harrison. He’d been the one.

Suddenly tired and not interested in doing any more detective work, she pulled herself out of the bath and wrapped a towel around her body. Lucius pulled her down, back into his arms, sitting on his lap while he stroked her damp hair, kissing the crown of her head.

“I’m sorry pet, for all of it. You know I wouldn’t do this if I didn’t have to.”

She pushed off of his chest frowning, and said, “You’re Lucius Malfoy. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do,” before shouldering past him into her room.

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He let her sleep alone, and she stayed in her room until late in the morning, stretched out and sleeping on her stomach, her hair a dark fan spread out on the pillow. Before heading downstairs, he closed her curtains with a flick of his hand and pulled her door shut, not wanting to wake her until she was ready.

He was sitting in the small breakfast room by himself with a cup of tea and a croissant reading the newspaper when Draco wandered in from the guest house, still in his pajamas, if you could call an old t-shirt and boxer briefs “pajamas”. He looked hungover, still tired and rumpled, his hair firing off of his head on all directions as he stretched and yawned, flopping down into a chair across from Lucius.

“How was your evening?” Lucius asked, setting his paper aside.

“Did Theo not report back to you like a good little mole?” Draco asked, his voice low and scratchy with sleep.

“In fact he did. He told me you were half drunk and that the guest house smelled like a manky old band van whatever that means.”

Draco laughed, rocking back in his chair, looking around the room, outside into the hallway, anxious for Hermione to arrive but not wanting to show it. He wanted to see her in the light of day, see the mark he’d left on her neck with his lips; and later he would ask her about her night and see whether he’d made an impression, but right now, he just wanted to make sure she was alright.

“When did your guests leave?” He asked Lucius, throwing and catching blueberries into his mouth, trying every bad habit he’d ever had to try and get a rise out of his father, but ever since his mother died, nothing seemed to work. Instead of slamming his walking stick into the ground or poking him in the chest with it he would just frown and growl as if it were all out of his control. Keeping up appearances just didn’t seem worth the effort to them anymore.

“Late. The last one flooed home at four.”

“Ah, you animal! Good for you, you lot sure do deserve a good coke and strippers party every once in a while.” Draco froze right after saying it and he saw that Lucius had too. There was no way of Draco knowing they’d had those things unless he’d seen them in the parlor. Of course it could always be a lucky guess. So he laughed and quickly added, “Did she strip for you? Hermione? Or did you move right on to the fucking?”

Lucius stood then, his eyes fiery, both hands curled into fists that he calmly placed on the table,
belying the rage boiling beneath his stare.

“You can ask her yourself, as I was just going to get her.”

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He threw the door to her room open wide and pulled her from the bed by her hair, throwing her to the ground.

“You know who he was, don’t you? You know damn well who the fourth man was.”

Hermione curled into herself, startled into full awareness, protecting herself from his madness, pulling the sheet off the bed to hide herself from him.

“I don’t. Sir! I promise I don’t. I told you he didn’t speak, he was only here for a few minutes! I don’t know who it was. Please, you have to believe me!”

She begged on her knees for the fire to go out of his eyes, for the rage to simmer. Even if she did know who it was that had come to her, why would it be her fault? The room had been charmed so that she couldn’t leave, she’d been chained by her collar, sitting there like bait and the first floor of the Manor was filled with bloodthirsty sharks. He had to know that one day that plan would go sideways on him.

He pulled her up from the ground with a hand clamped tight around her arm, yanking her from the room and pulling her down the stairs. As soon as his son had walked into the house, wearing that ten year old quidditch t-shirt that had been washed a thousand times, the logo nearly faded away, the whole thing nothing more than a rag, he’d felt the pit in his stomach growing. Then he mentioned the girl, the girl Goyle had brought from his office with the cocaine.

“How close did he get to you?” He growled at her as they stumbled down the stairs, tears streaming down her cheeks. “How close?”

“V-v-very close sir. I told you he kissed me!”

Lucius stop and spun her around to look him in the eye.

“So you would know what he smelled like. Like an animal rutting in the wild, you’d be able to smell him. Isn’t that right?”

“Cedar,” she said under her breath. Then, looking up at Lucius she nodded. “Yes. Yes I remember.”

Draco had considered leaving the minute his father tore from the room in a blind rage. He could hear him across the Manor screaming at Hermione, heard her tumble to the floor, heard her crying. This was why he should have just….closed the door and left her. He shouldn’t have given in to what his fucking cock wanted. Now she was going to pay the price for his trespasses.

When they got to the breakfast room Lucius all but threw Hermione at Draco. She stumbled over the leg of a chair, still gripping the sheet tightly around her body, letting it trail behind her like she was some ancient Roman goddess. He looked for the mark on her throat only to find that he’d healed them all. He supposed he should be happy that he’d done that for her, but it was all the evidence he had that they night before had actually happened.
“Smell him,” Lucius growled.

“What?” Draco looked up at his father like he was insane and took a step back from Hermione. He’d actually been awake for hours and had showered much earlier, but it was still a bizarre request.

Hermione looked up at him, pleading him silently to stand still. In his head he could hear her saying “Please…” like she had the night before, when she’d been pushing her naked pussy into his face. He swallowed and stood still, frowning at her, waiting for her to save her skin, to say that he’d beaten her senseless, raped her mercilessly, anything to throw him under the bus. But she only stepped forward, close enough that he could smell her hair again, feel the heat of her skin again. He didn’t dare move.

It only took a second for Hermione to know. The smells were all there. The cedar, the sandalwood…sharp, spicy cloves. She drank it in, wanting to commit it to memory, but quickly stepped back, furrowing her brow, staring at the deep frown on his face. Their eyes locked and she saw that his pupils were dilated, nothing but a thin ring of silver outlining his gaze. His lips were parted, his nostrils flaring as if he was smelling her as well. If she told she was sure he would say she’d seduced him, that he’d come in to steal a book and she’d thrown herself at him, anything to get her punished. She wouldn’t give him the satisfaction. So with one more deep inhale, drinking in the smell for the last time, she turned to Lucius, her eyes wide.

“No,” she said, stepping away. “It isn’t him.”
A Caged Lion

Lucius stared at the both of them, seeing through her lie but also seeing the fear, plain on her face. Draco hadn’t moved an inch but his eyes had been locked on her face since the moment she’d entered the room. Was she protecting him?

“I don’t take kindly to being manipulated,” he said to her, chucking her under the chin. “The wards have been changed, you can’t go outside, not even on the balcony.” When she started to protest he held a hand up to quiet her, his eyes a steely copy of his son’s. “But otherwise your punishment is over for now. I’ll see you this evening for dinner, eight thirty.”

With one last glare at his son, he turned and left the room, leaving Hermione still clutching the sheet to her chest with white knuckles, shaking from the words “for now”. She turned around to ask Draco a thousand questions, but a loud crack in the air let her know he’d gone, hiding once again from revealing any sort of truth, leaving her in the dining room alone but for one little house elf silently gathering empty dishes.

With the wards changed, she was forced to wander into places she’d not been, walking down halls she’d been too wary to explore. And with every new punishment that Lucius devised, there were fewer rooms and dark corners that didn’t hold horrific memories tangled in the cobwebs, fewer places to breathe peacefully. For a few minutes she sat in the library, her usual haven, but found that every snap and pop of the fire had her jumping out of her skin thinking a Death Eater had flooed in to attack her, so she gathered up the two books she’d picked and walked out.

No longer comfortable in her own suite, she found herself in a small room on the other side of the manor. It had the biggest windows of any of the other bedrooms she’d been in, a beautiful stained glass dragon set into top of each pane. The room itself was painted sky blue with a dark, star covered ceiling, swirling with planets and suns. An ornate rocking chair gathered dust in one corner, a plain single bed with blue and yellow linens in another. There was another book case, built in floor to ceiling of course. On the top shelves were little trinkets…toys? There were five metallic looking dragons…gold, silver, bronze, copper and iron, each of them no bigger than a field mouse, but when she waved a hand in front of them they came to life, flapping their wings and flicking their tails. There were wizard photographs on another shelf, a family portrait of Narcissa, Lucius and Draco, the little boy the only wiggling thing in the picture. Beside it a photo of first year Draco standing beside his mother and a pile of matching luggage in front of the manor repeatedly smiling and giving a thumbs up, no idea of what the next seven years held in store. The last was a beautiful, sunshine drenched picture of Narcissa holding baby Draco, the fairest, finest porcelain skin, the slightest hint of his snow white hair just fuzz on his tiny bald head as he yawned in his young mother’s arms.

There were other treasures on the shelf, old enchanted comic books with “PROPERTY OF DRACO” carefully and boldly written on the inside, an ambitious crayon drawing of a yellow haired wizard riding on the back of a purple dragon, a stack of primary school books from an academy just outside of Wiltshire. Hermione ran her fingers over these priceless artifacts, these tiny memorials to a boy with unsurpassed ambition and immeasurable insecurity. She’d known it the first time he’d set out to hurt her, the way he’d thought about it first, before calling her a filthy little mudblood. She’d cut him to the quick suggesting he couldn’t make the quidditch team on his own, and his only defense was to cut her right back. She’d seen enough failed relationships in her short life to know that those cycles rarely ended happily, if at all, and their cycle had gone on for nearly ten years now. She suddenly felt as if she were using legilimency, as if she’d dug to far into a part of Draco she wasn’t supposed to see, the bright shiny happy boy with big plans that would never be
seen. Knowing this room should have been off limits, should have been warded to keep her out, she gathered her books and closed the door, heading back down the hallway. Behind her she heard a crash and a hiss, like throwing water on a fire.

“Mother f—” Draco swore, his voice rattling through the corridor.

Hermione couldn’t help but grin and her curiosity got the better of her, leading her down the dark hallway to find Draco’s potions lab. She stood in the doorway for moment, watching his blond head bent over a broken vial on the floor, his long fingers delicately picking up pieces of glass from a puddle of smoking milky white liquid. The lab was strange, half medieval dungeon, half modern medical equipment. He was…he had a computer. She almost laughed out loud considering he’d asked her “what the fuck is a floppy disk” in their fourth year. Unable to keep from exploring she took another few steps in, wrapping her silk robe tight around her body, suddenly remembering who he was, where she was and why he was hiding from her.

Draco saw her bare feet and held his hand up without looking up.

“Don’t…there’s glass everywhere.”

He dumped a handful of vial pieces on the lab table and took out his wand to vanish the rest of the mess. Without even looking at her he went back to his work, dropping the milky liquid into the bottom of tiny plastic capsules before capping them with the other side. Undeterred by him trying to ignore her, she pulled up a rolling stool and sat next to him.

“You never told me what your ‘big ideas’ were,” she said, not daring to touch a thing even though her bored and starving mind begged her to pick up his note book, swirl the test tubes.

“What do you care?” He asked, his voice flat and dismissive, one eye squinted shut as he pulled the liquid into a pipette.

“Because I’m a swotty bitch who probably sleeps with a book between her legs,” she said, resting her chin in her hand, one eyebrow arched high.

He smiled then, recalling the idiotic and nonsensical insult he’d thrown at her fifth year. What did it even mean? He’d been so stressed, so conflicted and pulled in so many directions that anything she said to him that year got his hackles up. And hadn’t it been obvious to everyone even then that the hate that bubbled between them was probably laced with something else?

Still, right now he didn’t want to look at her, not her face, her lips, her throat. He didn’t want to see the space on her neck that he’d sucked on, the dip in her collarbone that he’d licked. But he turned his face up anyway and nodded.

“Muggles don’t carry potions around everywhere. It’s ridiculous for healers or anyone to have to carry around a satchel full of breakable vials full of dangerous, foul tasting ingredients. This is Skele-Gro, a homemade version of it. I’m trying to find a way to capsulate some of the healing potions, although I may have to change it to a powdered form…”

“It’s brilliant,” she said, and he couldn’t detect even a hint of sarcasm. In fact she was smiling; and smiling in that bright, happy way that he’d only ever seen her smile at…others.

“Thought maybe it was time we entered the 21st century. Or at least the 20th.”

He couldn’t look at her face any longer so he stood, taking his new capsules over to a cabinet, making himself busy with empty bottles.
“Why didn’t you say anything?” She asked after a few moments of quiet, her voice as small and scared as it had been the night before. When he couldn’t resist her. “I was terrified.”

“Yes, I know you were, I’m sorry. It was…I was drunk,” he said, deciding to use the excuse he used these days for every shitty decision he acted on.

She didn’t say anything, didn’t move, just stared at his back, his head hanging low, eyes closed. Finally he turned and looked at her and she could tell he’d put his mask on, his half lidded grey eyes, a bored pout, arms crossed over his chest.

“I didn’t come into the house with the intention of finding you. I was actually on my way to the lab for a sleeping draught and your light, as they say, was on.” The mask slipped when he looked into her eyes, when he saw how desperate she was to hear the truth. “I know you were scared. I know you were in pain, that they’d hurt you. But you…Hermione, you looked beautiful.”

She stood then and he was surprised by the fire that flared up in her eyes; her hands balled into fists at her side as she stalked over to him.

“Beautiful? So that’s what’s beautiful to you? Seeing a woman bound and beaten, raped and crying?”

“No...I mean yes, you were…listen to me. Granger, you were all of those things, crying and beaten and r-raped and you still looked so strong,” his voice dropped low. “Your lips looked so soft and perfect, your skin was golden in the candlelight, it was like…you looked like a…a caged lion. And knowing you couldn’t see me…I couldn’t resist.”

“But you could have told me it was you. If I had known it was…”

“I know. Yes, I scared you. I’m a coward, an animal and I’m as bad as any of the rest of them.”

He moved to shoulder past her but she grabbed his wrist, her fingers closed over the mark on his arm. She could feel it, the slightly raised, roughness of the brand on his skin.

“I was only afraid because I didn’t know what you were going to do. Because you were the only soft, kind thing that happened the whole night and I was waiting for...something worse. And when I realized that you weren’t going to hurt me…it felt so...nice.” The words fell from her lips on a sigh of relief, like she was feeling it again.

He ground his teeth together so hard he thought they’d break. She was close enough that he could smell her hair and the searing hot touch of her fingers on his arm held him steady as he fought the urge to pull her against him. He looked up, out into the dark hall, out towards the rest of the Manor.

“Yes, well, I’m glad, but it won’t happen again,” Draco said, rolling his neck and taking a deep breath to steady himself.

He pulled his arm free of her grip and walked past her gaping look of surprise. But before he could get out of the room she got hold of him again, this time with both hands around his arm to whirl him around. He was frowning, angry at being touched, but she didn’t care, she knew he was lying to her again and she was tired of it. Throwing her arms around his neck she went up on her toes and kissed him on the mouth, her fingers tangled into his hair, nails tickling the nape of his neck.

If Lucius saw them she’d be beaten beyond repair, he’d punish her for wanting him, she would bear the brunt of it and he’d simply go on as the failed heir. So as much as he wanted to push her against the wall and wrap her legs around his hips he pushed her away. He pushed her hard enough
that she slipped, falling to the floor, and he made no move to help her. If he went down to the floor, if he took her hand to pull her up, to straighten her silk robe and smooth her hair, he wouldn’t be able to let go of her.

“I’ll go to London for a while,” he said, looking down at her still huddled on the floor. He had to walk away from her. He had to leave the room. If she looked up at him and she was crying, if she looked up at him and begged…

“Please don’t leave me here Draco,” she said, sniffling, her head still bowed. “Don’t leave me here alone with him.”

She could hear him growl, a deep, low rumble that she’d heard from him before, before he’d kissed her, his hot tongue sweeping deep into her mouth, his hand heavy on the back of her neck.

“I’m not your knight in shining armor Granger,” he said.

Finally she stood, wiping her own tears away, staring him down like she had every day since first year.

“You think I don’t know that by now? I don’t need a knight. I just need…someone else here…someone I can talk to, someone who keeps me feeling human. Draco,” she reached out to touch him and he jumped back, glaring at her. “Don’t leave. Please. I don’t know why you won’t stop hiding, but I won’t touch you. I won’t go near you. Just please don’t go to London.”

After a long moment his face softened, the fire in his eyes dulling when he blinked. She could barely hear him when he spoke.

“I can’t free you, Hermione. I can’t take you away from here.”

“I know that. I’m not asking you to. I just can’t live my whole life feeling alone.”
Draco was conspicuously absent from dinner after his encounter with Hermione, and his strongest instinct was to find a bottle of vodka and go back to the guest house and hide for a week. But he knew that if there was to be a moment of peace in the Manor, he was going to have to address the issue at hand, and fast or they would all be on eggshells, holding their breath waiting for someone to slip. The longer they tried to keep what happened under wraps, the tighter a hold he would put on Hermione, closing the wards in on her until she wouldn’t be able to move from her bed.

It was close to midnight when he found his father in the front parlor, the same room he’d been in with the “boys” the night before, sitting in the same chair with the same crystal glass, only this time it was filled with two fingers of fire whiskey. Draco hesitated, leaning against the doorframe, his hands deep in his pockets, flipping a galleon between his nervous fingers. It was easy enough. He would say his piece, apologize for touching the merchandise and he would leave. For good. It didn’t matter what he told Hermione, it didn't matter that his heart cracked when she looked at him with tears in her eyes, begging him to save her, he was going to London. She'd be angry at him at first, she'd hate him just like she always had, realize he was the same asshole he always was and she’d know it was for the best once he was gone.

“I’m sure she told you that we didn’t –“

“You should have told me,” Lucius interrupted, looking into the fireplace. “You should have just told me that you cared for her. It would have made everything so much easier.”

“I didn’t…I didn’t realize I…I don’t know. I don’t know how I feel. What difference would it have made?”

“I would never have brought her here.”

“Right. Wouldn’t want to risk a chance that something you did would make me happy,” Draco said, straightening himself up to leave.

Lucius looked up, looked right at him, and finally Draco could see the exhaustion in his face, the dull, dark cast of his eyes, the deep creases beside his mouth when he frowned, all made more severe in the shadows of the firelight. He’d lost a considerable amount of his…flair after Narcissa died, but this was more than that. Something new was pulling at his soul, decaying. And now he wore the same vacant, defeated look he’d had the night before, in the presence of his supposed ‘friends’.

“This doesn’t end with any of us happy. Not if it doesn’t work,” Lucius muttered.

“What doesn’t work?” Draco asked, not liking the sound of an unnamed plan.

“The order is falling apart,” he said, standing. “The old ranks are fading from action, aging, dying, and the younger ones…they don’t care. When you run the show there’s nothing to fear, nothing to keep vigilant about. You just sit back and get fat on the spoils, thinking its never going to end. Who needs an army when there’s no war to fight?”

Draco took another step further into the room, the coin in his pocket flipping furiously through his fingertips, his brow furrowed, not comfortable with seeing his father so…diseveled, so out of order. It made him seem desperate, and plans made in desperation rarely worked. He hadn’t shaved, his shirt was unbuttoned at the neck, the sleeves wrinkled and rolled up to reveal his
for arms, the same dark brand etched into his fair skin. They were black all the time now, a supposed badge of honor that Voldemort wanted them to display. Anything to feed His ego.

“What doesn’t work?”

“He isn’t happy with the state of things. In peace there is less devotion to the cause. But with restrictions on marriage the population is dropping, there are more squibs coming from pureblood families who only dare to have one or two children. You don’t get broods a hundred like the Weasleys anymore,” Lucius said with a bitter laugh. "So now he’s shaking things up I suppose.”

Lucius drained his glass and filled it again, knowing he was going to have to answer Draco’s question at some point, but couldn’t quite bring himself to say the words, to assume his role in the charade, couldn't quit admit that what he'd worked so hard to build had gone so wrong.

“Father…”

“He’s calling for sacrifices!” He finally said, a bit too loud, a bit too sharp. He looked up at the ceiling. Hermione’s suite was at the other end of the corridor, but he still lowered his voice. “Public witch sacrifices on an altar built to Him. A tribute to a centuries long dead tradition. Its a call to arms, a celebration, a rally of support of sorts. Any witch under twenty-five not a pureblood is…eligible. Every three months a name will be produced from a book, from a record kept of all the enslaved. They're tracked when their names are entered into the book, another way to keep them imprisoned.”

It was Draco’s turn to sit, or else he would have fallen, dropping down hard into the club chair beside the door, digging his hands into his hair as he listened.

“They took Goyle’s slave as the first sacrifice last week. I was present at her ceremony outside the prison. Some had brought their slaves to watch, thinking it would keep them in line. This is no instantaneous killing curse, it’s a…disgusting bacchanal that appeals to the basest, ugliest desires of our order.”

“Like chaining a woman to a table and burning her with wax for three hours? Carving symbols into her body with hot knives? Hard to believe that human sacrifice would have ended up on the menu.” Draco said, looking up. “You saw where this was going and you stayed. You gladly took your very own slave and you stayed, swearing allegiance, giving them your money, inviting them into your house!”

“I never thought it would come to this. Believe me, this isn’t the order I knew. You know very well that I brought her here to protect her. Yes, I brought her here because she was a comfort to me, because I’ve been alone for a while now and you know that I’ve always felt she was beautiful and bright and…”

Draco jumped up and charged towards his father, poking him hard in the chest.

“Don’t say another fucking word about how wonderfully brilliant your sex slave is and how much you care about her, when you just invited three Death Eaters to attack her last night.”

“I’m trying to save her, if you’d let me speak. And if you care about her as much as you seem to right now, you may be able to stop all of this and…save her yourself.”

The younger Malfoy stepped back, waiting to hear something that sounded better than side apparating her to the other side of the world, or even Scotland. He could hide her in a cave until a different plan; a better plan was formulated. He wasn’t sure how far she could safely apparate or if
the collar would allow it but it was worth...

“If she carries a wizard, a healthy, male wizard to term, proving herself fertile,” Lucius said, interrupting his train of thought. “she’ll be protected from sacrifice and used as a breeder at the new Dark Arts Academy.”

“Hermione. Granger. She’s a muggle—she’s not a pureblood.”

“As I said, times are desperate and the population is dropping. The chances of Hermione having a strong...halfblood wizard are good. Our family is one of the healthiest of the 28 precisely because of our...diversity.”

“Halfbloods,” Draco said, shaking his head. “Not muggle born diversity.”

“I’d thought your position on blood purity had softened, Draco. I thought you ‘dipped your quill’ in witches of all kinds these days. As you know I’ve suffered too many extensive torture curses to father children any longer. So the question is, do you want to save your friend or not?”

As Lucius continued, his voice grew stronger, confident, as if all his problems were solved and he were back to his old self, cold and calculating, the world his chessboard. It had nothing to do with her fucking blood status. His father was right, he didn't care anymore. He'd seen witches and wizards from the poorest families and the ‘dirtiest’ bloodlines lay purebloods like him out like it was nothing. They'd sailed past him in school, on the Quidditch field, in life in general. The side of blood purity may have defeated the most recent rebellion, but it was only by enslaving them all that they stayed in power. No, it didn't matter what the CHANCES were, Hermione would never agree to carry the child of one of them.

“Like I said, if you care about her like you say...I can...gift her to you,” Lucius said, interrupting his train of thought. “Of course, she’s a prisoner and a slave and as such you can’t marry her but…”

“Marry her! Stop. Stop this! She wouldn’t do it anyway. She won’t do any of this. She will quite literally cut her own head off before she gives birth to a little death eater.”

Draco was pacing the room, sick to his stomach, wanting to get higher than he’d ever been and black out for three days. He should have just gone to London, skipped all of this chit chat with daddy and gone and forgotten that any of this was happening. SHE. WAS. OF. NO. CONSEQUENCE. TO. HIM. A school mate and nothing more, a school mate who had made his head spin for years, who didn’t care if he lived or died either. He wasn’t responsible for keeping her safe. He never had been. She didn’t belong to him. He wasn’t in lo-

“Do you want to see her burned alive on an altar to the Dark Lord? Screaming in pain?” His father asked, grabbing his shoulders and forcing him to stop moving. “Do you want to hear her begging to die so the pain would end? Or do you want her to live?”

He’d already seen her screaming in pain. He’d already seen her suffer unimaginable torture. More than she ever...more than anyone deserved. But his father should have known better than anyone that he couldn’t do these things. He couldn’t be the hero. He’d held people’s lives in his hands before and still crumbled under the weight of it. He didn’t realize he’d been crying until a tear fell onto his lip, salty and warm.

“She won’t want me to...she won’t have me…”

“She’s a slave Draco, she doesn’t have a choice.”

His father put a warm hand on his shoulder, sitting him down in the leather armchair. He sat
silently, staring into the fire while Lucius told him how it would all work out, laying out the steps they would take to save her and the time it would take. All Draco had to do was be a good boy and play his part, let her life be dependent on him following a script; like a flashback to a day not too long ago when he was forced into evil in order to save someone else. Yes Draco, sacrifice all of it, your future, your sanity, your morality, your own feelings, your happiness. Sacrifice yourself to save her.

And even then, it may not work. Don't worry Draco, no one will blame you if it doesn't work. Voldemort knew it would work either, in fact he'd counted on it.

That's when he started getting angry.

Everyone wanted him to dig down in the mud and do the dirty work but no one seemed to trust that he could make his own way, his own plan, untangle his own knots much less the knots of someone else. No one seemed to think he had the strength to save her on his own, the cunning to break her out of this cage. All he would ever be was a cog in a wheel, a failure. The irredeemable coward. The lost cause. He grit his teeth and shrugged his father’s hand off of his shoulder.

“Once it’s over,” Lucius said, “she’ll understand. She’ll understand and she’ll forgive you.”

“She won’t,” Draco said, already pulling the pieces of his old self together, already folding in on himself, shutting down the parts that were unnecessary, tucking his emotions deep down in the black muck of his soul. He could do it on his own. And he would. “But it doesn’t matter. Tell her in the morning that she’s mine, but not a word more.”

Lucius tried to say something else, but Draco had already turned his back on him, slamming the parlor door as he left.
When she went to sleep that night, Hermione had been terrified that Draco would be gone in the morning, that it would all be too much for him and he’d take the easy road, keeping her out of sight and out of mind. But she knew when she kissed him in the lab, the way his fingers dug deep into her arms before he pushed her away, the way he growled at her begging that he wanted her. She held no illusions that he loved her, or even liked her very much, but if she could find someone… something…to hold onto, someone who could make her laugh, or remember her old life, or give her a moment of pleasure while rotting away in this darkness, she would. Exhausted and still sore, she curled into her comforter and fell into a restless sleep, sure that the last ally she had would abandon her.

So it surprised her to see him sitting at the breakfast table, his eyes barely flicking up to meet hers as she came in. He had a cup of tea and a workbook and pen in front of him, making notes on what looked like a calendar. Lucius stood and pulled out her chair, giving her a polite, but strained smile.

“Good morning Miss Granger,"

“Good morning,” she said. “Good morning, Draco.”

He nodded, not looking up from his notes and she frowned, not getting the game. Why bother staying if he was going to shut her out completely? Did he regret kissing her? Had Lucius found out?

“And how did you sleep?” Lucius asked, his voice almost preternaturally calm and friendly.

“Not well, I’m afraid,” she said, mimicking his tone dramatically. “As you can imagine, I’ve had a pretty rough couple of days m’lord.”

Draco snorted a laugh but didn’t look up from his notebook. While she fixed her tea she noticed how…put together he looked. It was unusual for breakfast, actually for any time before noon for him. His hair was damp from a shower, swept back from his clean shaven face and he wore a black button down shirt, the sleeves rolled up high enough that she could see the fanged face of the serpent. Lucius put down his tea and cleared his throat.

“Let's address the unpleasantness in the room, shall we? Draco has admitted to…sampling you on Saturday night, and he’s told me that for a mudblood he finds your body suitably attractive.”

Her upper lip twitched in disgust and she bit her tongue to keep from audibly snarling. Across the table from her Draco refused to look up, to even acknowledge anything his father had said was a lie. She knew it was a lie. He wasn’t like that…he didn’t say any of that, did he?

“And as I’ve been called up to do some significant work for the expansion of the Order and I have had enough time to have…taken my use of you, I’ve agreed to gift you to him.”

Her breath froze in her lungs. As soon as he’d said it, Draco’s words from last week rang in her ears.

“My manor, my library, my books…my mudblood.”
She closed her eyes to steady herself and silently begged him to look up, to show her that he was the same man who hadn’t wanted her bare feet to step on glass. When he didn’t grant her wish she stood up from the table, doing her best to look as hard and strong as she needed to be, knowing that now she was completely on her own.

“This is ridiculous, and I don’t believe a word of it. Gift me to him! What’s going on? Draco!”

Finally he looked up, finally his eyes focused on hers, but his face gave little comfort. She’d seen that sneer before, those dull, icy eyes, cold and bored. He set down his pen and rolled his neck, folding his hands on the table.

“Sit down, Granger.” His voice was deadly serious, his mouth in a hard frown. Almost…a mask.

“Why are you doing this?”

He smacked his palm on the table hard enough to shake the china.

“SIT DOWN, GRANGER.”

She fell into her chair, immediately lowering her eyes, two years of conditioning, two years of imprisonment taking over at hearing the order spat at her. When Lucius had come to take her from the prison he’d given her his hand to pull her up from the floor. He’d told her that she would be safe at the Manor, that she would be under his protection in exchange for her company. He’d spoken to her in soft words and sweet little lies. But still she’d been quietly defiant, refusing to bow her head, refusing to thank him for his graciousness in willing to collar her, refusing to cry for him in front of the rest of the Order. But now she felt tears stinging at the rims of her eyes. Draco had never been her friend, per se, but he was someone who had been there. Someone who…understood. Whether they were friends or not, they’d known each other since they were innocent children and they’d watched each other lose that innocence. They shared that…horror, and now…

“You will call me Mr. Malfoy or Sir unless I come up with something more fun when we’re alone,” he said, standing up.

Lucius also stood from his chair and the two of them approached her, their wands pulled from their pockets. They stood on either side of her and Draco wrapped his hand around her arm, pulling her to stand. She stared at him, looked hard into his eyes, but he didn’t even blink, his half lidded gaze burning her until she had to look down. Each man touched the tip of his wand to her charmed collar and it began to heat, not enough to burn her but enough to let her know that something was happening.

“Draco…please,” she whispered, her voice shaking.

“Shut up, don’t say another word,” he hissed and then together with his father, they whispered “Commutatem Dominium”

Lucius stated his full name and began to mutter an incantation before Draco smiled and held up his hand.

“Don’t. Not yet. She’s a clever little witch. It’s almost like I can see her brain working,” he said. With a smile he pulled his wand back from her collar and pointed it at her face, playfully running it down the length of her nose before tapping it lightly and saying. “Muffliato” He winked as her ears filled with a senseless buzzing and the two men touched her collar again to continue their spell.

As they both muttered words she couldn’t hear the collar grew hotter and hotter. Just before she was about to cry out in pain, sure that the metal was searing her skin, it ended, the metal slowly
cooling and the buzz fading from her ears. Draco pulled her over to stand beside him and Lucius took one last sip of his tea before standing and straightening his suit jacket.

“The servants are packing up your things,” he said. “They’ll be in your new quarters shortly.”

“New quarters, what?” She looked between the two of them.

Draco had dropped her arm but stood close enough that she could smell him again, but he had changed. He’d used a different soap, bright and clean smelling, linen and snow, nothing like the dark spicy allure of the day before.

“We’re staying in the guest house,” Draco said, moving to the table to gather up his notebook and quill and a small leather bag that had a few books and folders of research in it. For the first time she noticed that around his left wrist was a thin iron band, almost identical to her collar. “I’m not so rude as to want Father to have to overhear all of your screaming.”

He smiled wickedly at her and she shrunk back in complete confusion and defeat. For the first time since the day she’d been brought to the Manor she felt the fullness of her helplessness. The walls seemed darker, the light more sinister. She could hear Bellatrix cackling in the walls, see Death Eaters in the corners.

“Once you’re there, that’s where you’ll stay,” Draco continued, actually handing her his things to carry like a pack mule. “Once the weather is nicer, maybe we can open some windows, but you won’t walk the grounds and you can’t come back to the Manor without me.”

She shook her head and felt the tears falling freely down her face. She turned to Lucius whose face was equally cold, his mouth set in a firm line. It was as if she’d woken up to a different world, all edges and darkness, all traces of familiarity or kindness wiped away.

“Mr. Malfoy please,” she said, staring at her old master. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry for anything I did to upset you. I didn’t know it was him. He came to me and you know I couldn’t see, you know I couldn’t deny him. I only did what you told me to do!”

He cracked her hard across the cheek with the back of his hand and she heard a low hiss from Draco behind her. He grabbed her arm and pulled her backwards.

“Don’t,” he said to Lucius. “She’s mine to punish as I see fit. I’m sorry she spoke out of turn and we’ll fix that behavior, but don’t touch her again.”

Lucius nodded and held his hands up in surrender. Draco took Hermione by both of her shoulders and turned her to face him, his sharply focused and angry, pupils dilated, his fingers digging hard into her skin.

“This acting out has to stop,” Draco said, “you are not the Lady of the Manor and you don’t have the freedom to demand action or answers from anyone, particularly my father, do you understand me?”

No, she didn’t. She didn’t understand any of it. She shook her head slowly and bit the corner of her lip where it was starting to swell. If she attempted to speak at full volume she knew she’d dissolve into hysterical sobbing, so she only whispered while looking at the floor.

“Why are you doing this to me?”

His grip grew impossibly tighter and he shook her to get her to look up again so he could see the tears running down her face, the red blood glistening on her lip.
“This is why we’re going to the guest house,” he said, speaking slowly and in a sing song voice as if she were a child. She tried to look away and he held tight to her jaw, dipping his head down to make sure she could see his eyes. “We can’t have you running around the Manor like this is some sort of drawing room farce.”

She held her breath, her mouth fallen open. His grip on her arms loosened but he didn’t move. And for one tiny, breathless second, shorter than a blink, a snap, a moment smaller than a grain of sand, she saw the corner of his lip turn up before he pulled her from the room.

Chapter End Notes

"Commutatem Dominium“ - Transfer Property
He could feel sweat prickling on his brow as he pulled her through the hallways of the Manor, his hand tight around her wrist as she stumbled behind him trying to keep up with his long, quick strides. She belonged to him now. She followed him.

“Dra…Mr. Malfoy…what…”

“Shhh,” was all he said, and even in the midst of her supreme confusion she felt a tiny shiver down her spine at the sound, at seeing his lips purse, hearing the sound from his mouth, the same sound that had slithered into her ear two nights ago. Had she seen what she thought she saw? Heard what she thought he said? Her heart still pounded with fear as he pulled open the back door off of the coat room and tugged her, barefoot out into the yard.

“Wait!” She said. “It’s freezing out here and I have no shoes.”

He stopped so suddenly that she stumbled into his back, nearly falling onto the flagstones that lead out to the gardens.

“I don’t give a shit about your feet,” he said without turning around. “You’ll get shoes when you earn shoes. Think about what you can do for me to do that.”

The guest house was at least fifty yards from the Manor, down a cold stone path and all she was wearing was a white satin night gown and robe. The wind sent dried leaves scratching across the walkway that crushed into dust under Draco’s heavy soled shoes. Dormant rosebushes covered in thorns, long abandoned to run wild through the garden, reached out from beyond their iron fences and ripped against her ankles.

“Please tell me what you’re doing, Draco.”

He set his jaw, refusing to speak and she wrenched her hand from his grip, refusing to move another step. If he wanted to take her to the guesthouse, he’d have to throw her over his shoulder and carry here there.

“Keep walking, Granger,” he growled through clenched teeth, still keeping his back to her. She could see his hands clenched into tight fists at his sides, and he turned his head enough that she could see the profile of his face, the deep set of his frown. What had gone wrong in the last day? Lucius may be angry with her, but why would it change him? She dropped the leather bag he’d given her to carry and he finally turned around, charging towards her, his eyes cold as the stones she stood on. When he was close enough he grabbed her shoulders, pulling her against him.

“Not a word Granger. Look at me,” he said, when her eyes drifted over his shoulder defiantly. “Fucking look at me! Don’t say another word until we get to the guesthouse. Do you understand me?”

She frowned, hearing a touch of desperation in his hissing threat, but still nodded slowly and he released her. Then, looking over her head back at the manor, he picked up the leather bag at her feet, slipped it back over her shoulder and pulled her forward, his hand around her upper arm.

The guesthouse was small, a tiny kitchen and sitting room with a single bedroom and bath on the first floor and an empty room on the second floor that they’d used to store excess furniture and treasures over the years. A smaller version of the vast iron chandelier from the manor hung from the center of the tall ceiling. He pushed her in the front door and locked it behind them while she
was looking up. With a swish of his wand the fireplace roared to life and he sat her down on a slip covered sofa, throwing a blanket at her.

“Don’t move. Don’t try to leave.” She wrapped the blanket around her shoulders and let the fire warm her, watching Draco race around the tiny house, muttering spells and incantations at doors and windows, altering wards she supposed.

She heard a small crack of apparition and two house elves appeared, carrying two small leather bags. They frowned and tilted their heads at her, growing a little anxious in their confusion.

“Where is Master Draco?” Before she could open her mouth to speak he burst out of the bedroom. “Just leave them. Leave her bags. Is that everything?”

The elves cowered against each other and nodded. Draco’s eyes slid over to Hermione, seeing the simmering rage building in her face, still so angry about the plight of these poor little creatures. She’d be happy to hear he had no plans of using them.

“We won’t need you out here, understand? We’ll take care of our own meals, make our own bed, clean our own house, do you understand?”

Hermione flinched in her seat. *Our* bed. *Our* house. It sounded strange and inappropriate. She wasn’t going to share a bed with Malfoy. The house elves nodded that they understood.

“Thank you,” Draco said. “I’ll inform my father of my plans. Don’t worry about reprimand, you’re fine.”

The two elves nodded and disapparated, leaving the two of them alone again.

Draco, who didn’t even bother to pull the slipcovers off of all the furniture, had made sure the bar was stocked, and poured himself a completely inappropriate amount of vodka for ten o’clock in the morning, downing it in two gulps. Hermione sat primly on the edge of the couch, wrapped in her blanket, holding it closed tightly at her neck.

“I’m sorry,” he said. It came out cracked and breathy, words she barely understood. Then he turned and pulled at his hair, sitting down in the leather chair across from her, but not looking her in the eye. “I’m sorry for what I said to you, how I said it to you. I’m sorry for grabbing your arm,” finally he looked up and she thought it was him. She didn’t want to hope, but she thought it was finally him. “I’m sorry for making you cry, Hermione. I didn’t have any choice.”

“What’s happening? What’s going on?”

“You belong to me now,” he said, his voice dropping low. "That’s what the incantation was. You’re my..." he hesitated, pushing the word out of his mouth, "slave. But not entirely. The collar will always contain charms linking you to my father and to the prison. You can’t transfer ownership entirely. Meaning the prison can track you and my father can track you. But the rules of your day to day life are mine to make.”

When he looked up her face was bright, her tears dried, it almost looked as if she were going to smile and the sight of it broke his heart. She didn’t know. She didn’t know how quickly her hourglass was draining.

“The cuff on my wrist locks you to me. Never more than fifty yards away. If you try to run, if you sneak away, the collar will slowly start to heat until it burns you, heating further and further until you turn back...it won’t...it won’t stop.”
She stood then and crouched beside his chair. She couldn’t understand why he was so agitated, his knee bobbing, a vein throbbing in his neck. It was a prison sentence she could live with for now. She’d never asked him to do anything, but he’d done what he could. He pulled his lip between his teeth and chewed it. When she tried to cover his hand with her own he pulled away, shaking his head. He stood and pulled her up, walking towards the bedroom, the bed still unmade from his stay the night before, clothes and notes and books all over the floor.

“Go get some rest. I’ll get you some better, more…reasonable clothes later. I have to get food and clothes, some things from my lab…”

Still, he was shaking, his eyes darting into the corners of the room, looking out the windows. She reached up and touched his face, her palm so delicate and warm. He closed his eyes and let himself feel it, absorb it. He could. He could do that. His power allowed for it. He could do anything he wanted and she couldn’t protest…he could kiss her, he could pull the blanket from her and take off her nightgown…he could lay her down and spread her legs...

He leapt back and grabbed her shoulders, slamming her into the wall, her eyes going wide with terror as he pinned her wrists down at her sides.

“Dr…Draco…”

“MR. MALfoy,” he growled, louder than was necessary, the reprimand hurting her ears.

He leaned in close nuzzling her neck and then stopped, his mouth near her ear.

“I don’t know what charms are still here. Everything on these grounds is a twisted fucking puzzle. I don’t know if he can watch us through the mirrors or hear us through the walls. Make a noise like I’m hurting you.”

“I don’t…”

He bit down on the tendon in her neck, hard, and she cried out, pulling against his hands to get free. Then he was at her ear again, careful not to let his lips touch her creamy flesh, careful not to breathe in the smell of her hair, to lick at the fear thick on her skin.

“I’m trying to fucking save your life, Granger. If you can’t play along tell me now because I’m not going to put in the effort to have you fuck it up.”

She stilled beneath him, a rush of relief washed over her so strong she could barely stand.

“I’m sorry!” she cried out, “Please! I’ll do whatever you say!”

She felt him smile against her and he pulled back, letting go of her wrists.

“Good girl,” he said, “get some rest like I said, we need to start working right away.”

He tried to walk away from her and she grabbed his hand, her fingers wrapping loosely around his pinky, a small enough gesture that it couldn’t be detected. She looked down at the floor and said, “On what?”

“I’ll tell you my plans for you later, pet,” he said at normal volume. “When I tell you to rest, though, I suggest you do it.”

He pulled free of her grip and locked the door behind him, leaving her alone, more confused than
she had been an hour ago. After a few minutes she started to feel a warmth in her collar. He was in
the Manor, outside the range of their charm leash. It wasn't enough to be uncomfortable, but
enough to assure her that he was telling the truth.

*I'm trying to save your life Granger.*

She sat down on the bed, looking around at the mess littering the room; a mix of clothes, books,
scrolls, an ashtray with a wrinkled joint on the edge, empty beer bottles. Her mind was racing, too
energized and confused to lay down, so she made the bed and folded his clothes, stacking his
books and notes into piles on the dresser, resisting the urge to read through them.

The moment the collar was fastened around her neck in the prison, she’d felt the dampers closing
on her magic, a sort of heavy blanket muffling her mind, dulling her existence, like having your life
drained of color or flavor, a sudden stopping of music. Of course her wand, the wand she’d had
since she’d gotten her letter from Hogwarts, had been taken from her and destroyed while she
screamed as if they were severing her own arm. But the collar also prevented wandless magic,
prevented occulemency, legilimency, leaving her entirely helpless in a world dominated by Dark
Wizards. Finding the library at Malfoy Manor had been like diving into an ocean at the edge of a
desert and she drank from their books until her eyes stung, her body aching with exhaustion. She
couldn’t perform magic, but she could still learn, read about the history of spell creation, the
biography of Merwyn The Malicious, a history of wands and wand building, a heavy leather bound
book on the art of Occulemency. At night, when she slept without the aid of a potion, she would
dream of casting spells, of looking down and finding her wand in her hand. She dreamt of spells
that allowed her to fly, charms to allow her to speak any language, discovering new potions. She
dreamt of Draco pulling her from a burning Manor, carrying her away to safety, holding her tight
against his chest.

She shook her head clear and stood, pulling one of his old t-shirts over her head. It hung down
below her hips, and she held it up to her nose, drinking in the smell of the real Malfoy, the
sandalwood and cedar Malfoy who had come to her, running his tongue up the inside of her thigh.
Catching her reflection in the mirror opposite the bed, she frowned, remembering that he’d said it
may be charmed, a mirror that could be watched from another location. Lucius could be looking at
her right now, watching her going through Draco’s things. She straightened the shirt and went into
the attached bathroom to splash cool water on her face, before sitting on the floor in the bedroom,
out of sight of any mirrors or windows, her arms wrapped tight around her knees. The collar
warmed further, a bit uncomfortable, like bathwater that was a bit too hot. She did her best to
ignore it, praying that he didn’t go any further, the burn just another symbol of how helpless she
truly was.

Draco found her asleep on the floor, her head against the wall, wearing an old faded Slytherin t-
shirt over her satin nightgown, knees pulled up under it. He brushed her hair back from her face and
saw the pinked skin beneath her collar.

"Fuck," he muttered under his breath, casting a healing and cooling charm over her skin. He was no
good at this. He couldn't take care of himself much less anyone else, the thought of throwing a
helpless baby in the mix nearly made him laugh.

She shifted in her sleep, mumbling something, turning her face to the wall. Part of him wanted to
just scoop her up and put her to bed, tucking the blanket up to her chin and leaving her blissfully
unaware for another couple of hours. Except that every hour counted at this point, every minute.

“Granger,” he shook her shoulder and she flinched awake, banging her head against the wall.
“Sorry. Wake up, we need to talk.”
She followed him out to the sitting room where he’d at least pulled off the slip covers, the fire welcoming and warm. On the coffee table were two more leather bags, matching monogrammed luggage of course, that he’d packed full of necessary items. She stood watching as he pulled out old dusty books and scrolls, ancient things she’d never seen in the library, they must have come from some other room. Before sitting he handed her a blue hooded sweatshirt that she gladly pulled on, zipping it to the neck.

“Sit,” he said, throwing the bags on the ground and sitting on the chair across from her putting the coffee table and its mountain of information between them. “First of all, I'm sorry about the burn. I'm still learning this shit and I completely forgot how far away the house is. I...healed it while you were sleeping.”

"Thank you," she said, only now realizing that the burn had faded. "It wasn't so bad."

He ignored her and kept talking.

“You haven’t been out…out in our world for a while,“ he started, and she noticed that he wouldn’t look right at her. In fact his gaze never settled anywhere, like he was eternally on guard. “But it’s not good. It’s...well it’s enough to make you want to go undercover and live as a muggle.”

She forced a laugh but he wasn’t even smiling. The idea of Malfoy living as a muggle was the best joke she’d heard in months but it seemed it was something he'd actually considered.

“Things are getting bad at the Mini—at the Order, and my father is at the heart of it, which is why he…which is why you’re with me now. It’s why he’s been so...hard on you...putting you through…”

She’d never seen him so undone, never seen him at a loss for words or thought, unable to slay an army with his silver tongue and razor wit. It was as if he barely knew the language, couldn’t find the words. Of course she’d seen it in her friends before, when they’d needed a good slap across the face, Ron particularly, but this…it was like he needed to say something and was doing anything he could to avoid it. So she stood and moved closer, sitting at the edge of the coffee table where she put her hand on his bobbing knee to still it.

“Draco, just tell me what’s going on. OK. Whatever it is, if we have to fix it, we’ll fix it,” she said, smiling. “I’ve fixed up some pretty tangled stuff, all before I was fifteen.”

“He’s calling for sacrifices,” he blurted out, finally looking her right in the eye. “Witch sacrifices.”

Her smile froze, her whole body froze, like ice creeping from head to toe, locking her in place, and Draco stood to get himself another drink, pouring one for her as well.

“Not purebloods of course. All enslaved witches under 25, Every three months. It’s a public sacrifice with the Order as witnesses in front of the prison. My father was a witness to the first one two weeks ago. Goyle’s girl…”

“Goyle’s…” Hermione cried out, slapping her hand over her mouth, suddenly unable to breathe. “I was there when he came to claim her. I shared a cell…”

She’d been a slight brunette with green eyes from Surrey. Not even seventeen. She'd actually been touched by how Goyle had looked at her, like she was a coveted china doll, a girl of his very own. Now she was dead.

“Pay attention!” Draco said, his voice sharp, almost angry. "I know that you can’t use your magic, but you KNOW magic, inside and out,” Draco said. “We’ve got less than two months to find a way
to get that collar off of you. But this is old magic, Granger. Ancient. Nothing I’ve ever seen. And once the collar is off, you’re gone, out of London, out of England.”

“Why are we hiding all of this from your father? Certainly he doesn’t support the sacrifices?”

Draco drained his glass, looking for an excuse, for something true or comforting to tell her. The truth was that while no, he didn’t support the sacrifices, he also didn’t support working to undermine the Order, he didn't support Draco trying to undo the Dark Lord's spells, or trying to free her completely. He also wouldn’t support holding back every option from Hermione, hiding the solution he knew she’d never allow. However the third truth was one he could share,

“Because once you’re free, I’m gone too. I’ll clear out my vault, pack up my research and we’ll go somewhere in the middle of nowhere, the only two wizards in town. Somewhere they’ll never look and I can keep you safe.”

“Draco, this is ridiculous. I'm not asking you to leave your family home, your inheritance," she said, pacing the room.

"I don't want my inheritance. I don't want what comes with it, I don't want where it comes from," he said, watching her gears turn, her mind at top speed.

When she could find no solution she finally came over to him, kneeling at his feet, the sight of it making his throat go dry.

"There has to be some other way, something I can do, someone I can plead to. Someone I can...offer...myself to," she said with disgust. "There has to be a way to save your slave from sacrifice.”

He stared down at her desperate face, the bright smile of relief from three hours ago replaced with pure terror. Her cheek was red and swollen, dotted with broken blood vessels and a purpling bruise from his father’s slap, a bit of dried blood in the corner of her mouth. And still her strength showed through and he had to close his eyes to keep from screaming.

Yes! There is something else you can do. You can go to bed with me. We can lock ourselves into that room and fuck for two months and you can sleep on my chest with your hair over my throat. I can pick you up and wrap your legs around my waist and devour your mouth and we can have a baby and live happily in this little cottage and you’ll be safe forever with our little white haired wizard kid and pretend the world is normal, just three wizards playing house.

“Draco,” she said, interrupting his thoughts, bring him back to reality. “Isn’t there any other way?”

He frowned and stood up, moving past her to the pile of books, looking for the best place to start.

“No,” he said, even though his mind was crying out for him to tell her. “There’s no other way.”
Draco soundproofed the sitting room, covered the mirror over the fireplace and pulled the drapes on the front room windows, anything to keep from looking at her, to keep from blurting out something that would send her screaming, never letting him within an inch of her again. This was why they were hiding. This is why he’d not told his father of his plan; that he wasn’t going to even tell her about the breeding option, he wouldn’t even put it in her head. This wasn’t Lucius’ approved plan, but it was the one that would keep them both sane and keep her with a little bit of her dignity intact, something his family had eaten away at for years.

Meanwhile, Hermione dived into the books, talking the whole time about what they needed to look for, tests they could do on the metal of the collar. It was a shame really that they were on such a grim mission, because it was almost comforting to see her in her element, gasping dramatically about dogeared pages on ancient books, correcting his interpretations of old ancient charms. He laughed out loud at one point when she actually raised her hand to speak. There was that same old upturned lip, high eyebrow attitude that she’d had first year, her ambition bursting through the seams. He’d always admired it, which is why he’d picked on her from the start.

“We just have to make a plan and lay out the steps we’re going to take,” she said, shaking her head, scribbling in a notebook he’d given her. “We’ll separate the tasks, so we’re not working on the same thing. First we have to find out what the collar is made of, whether it’s been used before… find out what charms are and how many people are linked…”

“Granger. Granger! Stop,” he yelled, standing behind the sofa. She turned to look at him and he saw the fear on her face, the color draining from her cheeks at being reprimanded. It was a conditioned reaction, one that he would have given anything to block out. “Sorry. I mean, yes, you’re right, but you’re spinning out, darling. Calm yourself. We’ll figure it out.”

He looked down at her, her long, slim legs pulled up on the couch, the edge of her silk gown hiked up almost to her hip. The sight of her feet, blackened from walking the flagstones, shuffling through the manor and the guest house barefoot made him cringe. You’ll get shoes when you earn shoes. He didn’t even know where that had come from, but it sat in his gut like a rock. So he went to the bedroom and dug through the bag of clothes he’d brought over. He found a pair of jeans and slides that he wore around the house sometimes.

“Here,” he said, throwing them on the couch beside her. “I can’t do anything with you dressed like that. Put these on, I’ll shrink them to fit you…sort of.”

“What? Draco we have to…”

“Granger, if you say we have to study I’m going to lock you in a closet,” he said, making sure to keep his tone light. “You haven’t been off these grounds in over two months. Get dressed and try to do something with your hair. We’re going shopping.”

The Order monitored all floos in and around London, and if a slave or prisoner went through one of them, it was noted and the use of it would be questioned later. So to prevent suspicion he flooed her to the flat in Richmond before they went anywhere and from there they traveled around London like muggles, Hermione almost laughing at his disgust at being crammed into a subway car with thirty other people he didn’t know. As more people piled in she could see his discomfort, surprised at how he’d grabbed her hand, lacing his fingers into hers to hold her next to him. He wasn’t one for crowds, or being trapped and it was starting to sour his mood. She squeezed his hand to get his attention.
“The muggles like you,” she said, smiling.

He looked down at her like she was crazy, the movement of the subway car making him sicker than the first time he’d apparated.

“What?”

She nudged him and nodded her head in the direction of three girls at the end of the car, no more than sixteen, all three staring at him, whispering behind their hands.

“Those girls over there, they think you’re cute,” she said.

Draco turned and caught the girls looking, sending them into a fit of giggles as they put their heads together. He grinned and leaned down to speak in Granger’s ear,

“You really think I haven’t tasted that particular forbidden fruit, sweetheart?”

Hermione was still smiling and he liked how it looked on her, but he decided he liked her blushing better.

The first stop they made was to buy a footie scarf from a souvenir shop, wrapping it three times around Hermione’s neck to keep people from staring.

“So where do you want to go, Oxford Street? My mother used to go behind father’s back and shop on Bond Street, do you want to go there?” He asked as they walked back down into the station.

She scrunched her nose up and shook her head.

“I don’t need anything fancy, I just need something to wear besides lingerie, let’s go over to Oxford and walk. I could use the fresh air and people watching.”

The day had turned sunny and warm for Autumn and they walked for hours. Draco had exchanged far too many galleons for pounds and he ended up buying her too many things, things far beyond the basics of shoes and pajamas, warm socks and bras. He jokingly bought her a tortoiseshell hairbrush and she picked out a cozy fleece robe. Nothing was off limits, as if giving her gifts would make up for her life as a slave to the Order. Still, he went along with her excursion willingly because he knew quite well what she was doing. She was trying to live normally. She was trying to forget what he’d told her that morning, that her name was on a kill list, that her life was on the line. She was trying to drag their day out as long as she could, anything to keep from flooing back to Wiltshire, back into the guest house, back to where the scarf would come off and her collar would show, where all the memories would race back and crowd out any of the fun they’d had today, her life reduced to that of an animal once again.

She dragged him into a store filled with a riot of smells, fruits and flowers and spices, and made him smell various body washes and shampoos, spraying perfume on her wrist, asking him which he preferred and he did his best to not think about what she looked like in the shower, applying lotion to her legs. She made him buy candles for the living room and even a beautiful wheat colored cashmere sweater for himself that “brought out that tiny bit of blue in his eyes”. She was nearly manic, her voice going a mile a minute, struggling to stay ahead of her thoughts, her walk quick, her eyes darting around, drinking in as much of London as she could. Eventually he couldn’t take her boundless energy anymore and forced her and her seven shopping bags onto the train, dragging her to a pub he sometimes visited on his trips into the city. They each got a pint and she ordered some soup. In the warmth and dark of the pub she started to decompress.

“Draco, I haven’t had a chance to say it but I’m sorry about your mom,” she said, running her
finger around the top of her pint glass. “We found out about her a few months after it happened. It helped to…put some other things in a better light.”

“You mean like why I was a chickenshit and walked away from you all?”

“I wouldn’t say…”

He waved a hand, not wanting to rehash something he could never justify, and Hermione sighed, sitting back on the upholstered bench.

“But thanks,” he said. “It was hard. It’s still hard to think about. She was the only reason I have any light in me at all.” He said, draining his glass and looking towards the bar as if he could summon another. “I’m…I’m sorry about your parents.”

He didn’t know where the Grangers were exactly, but he knew that all of the imprisoned mudbloods were forced to watch via a charmed mirror within the prison as their families, sometimes their spouses and children were obliviated and sent to be settled in different countries. When he mentioned her family she closed down just like he had, picking up her beer and sipping it slowly, looking out at the gathering night.

“What are you working on in your lab?” She asked, changing the subject as quickly as possible. The subject of having no family, no parents, no one who remembered her childhood was still raw, their obliviation happening less than a year ago. And even though she knew that the Malfoys had had no part of that sentence, they were a part of the Dark Order and served as a symbol, a sort of voodoo doll for her anger.

“I told you, I’m trying to encapsulate potions,” he said. She squirmed in her seat a little and he saw a crooked little smile on her face. “Or have you been snooping?”

Her smile was infectious and her cheeks flushed when she nodded. Only Hermione Granger would get all hot and bothered at having read someone’s research.

“There are a lot of magical healing procedures and cures that are uncomfortable, or even painful,” he said. “So I’m trying to develop an anesthetic potion or maybe charm or something, but one that will leave the recipient awake, able to speak…a full body numbing. Essentially an inside out version of Petrificus Totalus.”

“Everything you do has to do with healing,” she said, finishing her beer. “I would have thought you’d be trying to make money, or influence thought. Climbing the wizarding ladder.”

He snarled at the thought of it, actually recoiling into his chair. He had no need for more money, and he’d climbed fairly high on the wizarding ladder having actually worked for the Dark Lord himself, and found it left a lot to be desired.

“Yeah, well, consider these my reparations.”

She wasn’t sure what to say to comfort him, and wasn’t sure whether she should comfort him at all. She needed to keep reminding herself that Malfoy still had darkness in him. He’d hurt her for years, contributed directly to the deaths of her best friends. He may be trying to be a better person now, but she wasn’t a shoulder for him to cry on, and she’d be best served to remember that.

Back at the guest house Hermione excused herself to unpack her new wardrobe and take a hot bath while Draco settled in to read about different alloys used in ancient wizard torture devices, and the charms that those devices commonly held. Seeing her emerge in pajama pants and a tank top was a relief. She looked like plain old Hermione with her crazy hair and smug little smirk and it finally
put them on level ground.

“Where am I supposed to sleep?” She asked, casually flipping through one of his notebooks as if the question bore no weight, no weight at all, just honest curiosity.

“It’s a king sized bed Granger, we can share it comfortably,” he said, not even looking up.

“I don’t think…” she started to protest but he simply held up his wrist and tapped the iron cuff to remind her that Lucius was still around to some degree.

When they were off the grounds they could talk freely, but for now they had to pretend. He refrained from telling her just how lucky she was that sleeping was all that was required of her anymore. Instead he tore a small piece of paper out of his notebook, scribbled something on it and left it on the table.

*I’ll ask him about the wards and charms tomorrow.*

She frowned, crumpled it up and threw it in the fire.

“Goodnight then sir,” was her only clipped response.

He came to bed long after she’d fallen asleep curled on her side, facing the window. Even in sleep her brow was furrowed in concentration, her lips pursed.

“Granger,” he whispered. She didn’t answer, but it was possible she was faking to avoid talking. “I’m gonna sleep nude OK?” He tried, still nothing.

He stripped down to his boxers and t-shirt and climbed into the bed. He slipped under the covers and turned onto his side to watch the back of her neck, his eyes following the slope of her hip down to her waist outlined in the moonlight, resisting the urge to pull her in against his chest – just to keep her warm.
The Watchers

Hermione woke up alone, but his side of the bed was warm so she knew he’d been there, keeping to his own side like a perfect gentleman. She stood and stretched, making the bed and plumping the pillows, catching her reflection in the mirror with a frown. Walking into the front room she handed Draco a note on her way toward the kitchen to fix a cup of tea.

_What if we ‘fought’ and broke the mirrors? I don’t like your father watching me sleep._

Draco snorted and threw the paper on the table.

“You didn’t mind it for the last two months,” he muttered. “Don’t forget, princess, I was sleeping right down the hall. Or at least trying to,” he said, before turning back to his books. She came back into the room, clearly disappointed and he sighed. “Look, I said I would take care of it and I will. Can you ever trust anyone to do anything right or do you just assume everyone is a fool compared to you?”

She sat down hard in the leather club chair and pouted, remembering quite clearly now why they all hated him in school. It wasn’t necessarily the taunting or the rude nicknames, it was that he turned on a dime. There were days when he sat beside her in potions and worked silently or even helped her gather ingredients and then the next day he’d be calling her a filthy pig and drawing cartoons of her in disgusting situations, laughing with Crabbe and Goyle when she ran from the room crying. She remembered seeing Pansy Parkinson CRYING outside the Great Hall one afternoon because he’d called her low rent whore in cheap shoes, cancelling their date to Hogsmeade that he’d made only a day before. Hermione had actually felt bad for her, and it took a lot to have compassion for Pansy. The fact was that he took out his present emotions on whomever was closest, like they were all dueling dummies lined up for his release. It was as if the whole world were responsible for his shortcomings and he demanded recompense. Obviously he was uncomfortable about something, whether it was going to talk to his father or something else she couldn’t be sure, but she didn’t deserve his abuse, not even for show.

“Does hurting people make you feel better?” She asked, picking up a book and flipping to the index, not even sure of what she was looking for but not wanting him to see her trembling lip.

He’d woken up with Hermione facing him. At some point during the night she’d flopped over onto her stomach, pulling a pillow under her cheek, her tank top twisted up so he could see the pale skin of her stomach. He moved an inch closer, close enough that he could feel her breathing on him, her lips parted and soft. She wriggled and moaned, her leg moving to touch his beneath the blanket. Three nights ago she’d begged him to lick her pussy. Three nights ago she’d let him slip his tongue in her mouth. Now he was afraid to even touch her, and it made no sense. He was a goddamn Death Eater, if he wanted to fuck her, he could and there wouldn’t be a thing she could do about it and yet there he was, tip toeing around, making sure she was ‘comfortable’ in her imprisonment. He’d climbed out of bed in the dark, heading out to the couch to read.

“Sometimes,” he said writing something in his book. “Does assuming I’m an idiot who doesn’t know what he’s doing make you feel smarter?”

“My goodness what a complex you have!” She said, slamming her book shut. “Poor little Malfoy, feels bad about leading the whole school to the slaughter, why can’t we forgive him? Tried to kill our headmaster, but gosh he’s real sorry. Poor little racist, sexist, abusive, selfish Malfoy wishes everyone was just a little bit nicer to him because now he's all grown up.”
He was glaring at her now, and the anger was real, no act, no show for Daddy. She’d hit a sore spot and wasn’t sure how he’d retaliate. Anything he wanted to do to her was completely within his rights, something she kept forgetting. But instead of sending her to the floor in a Crucio induced haze, he simply took a deep breath and closed his eyes, sinking his hands into his hair, nodding in agreement. He didn’t say a word for at least three minutes, but when he spoke again, there were no traces of self pity, only even painful truth.

“You’re right. About all of those things. Probably still, in the back of my mind are quite a few offensive, painful cobwebs working their way to the surface. I did what my parents told me, believed what they taught me, and then when I finally rejected all of it I ended up alone, my mother dead and my father wishing that I was. When I finally tried to make the right choice it was far too late and there was no one there for me. Not quite light enough for the good side and sure as fuck not dark enough for the bad. So what would you have me do, Granger? I don’t want your pity, I don’t expect you to forgive me. But I’m risking...I’m actually risking my life to keep you safe right now, so if I tell you that I’m going to take care of you, just...all I ask is that you believe I’m going to take care of you, OK?”

Hermione nodded and went back to her book, but he could tell she wasn't satisfied.

“Nothing makes me feel better,” he said after a few minutes. She could feel him looking at her, but if she looked up he’d see the tears in her eyes and he’d never let her live it down. “Almost nothing.”

After an hour or so of studying, she got up and excused herself to the bathroom, surprised to find that she’d started her period. One of the first things Lucius had done when she’d been brought to the Manor was cast a contraception charm, essentially shutting down her cycle. She’d been in the clear for two months, why would it be any different now? She opened and closed all the cabinets in the bathroom, but witches dealt with menstruation differently than muggles and she highly doubted Draco kept the guest house stocked with witch supplies.

He was in the kitchen fixing a sandwich.

“So this seems like the wrong day to ask, but I was wondering if you could do me a favor,” she said from the doorway. “Could you... go to Diagon Alley for me,” she remembered the collar charm. “Or we could go together, to the Apothecary? Today?”

“What for?” He asked, his mouth full of food. She resisted the urge to scold him, or get him a napkin, or roll her eyes.

“My contraception charm is gone.”

His stare was blank.

“I got my period this morning.”

Still nothing.

“I was wondering if you could buy me a Proluos Potion? Or maybe two or three to have on hand for the next couple of months?” She hated having to ask him to buy the tiniest things for her, hated having to let him into the most personal, private moments of her existence because she’d been reduced to the status of a pet, not even able to run out the chemist by herself, not allowed to have
money or credit. For some reason asking him to buy her period supplies was more humiliating than anything else Lucius had done to her. It made her look like a helpless little girl.

“Yeah…sure. I…I can actually make it in my lab,” he said, and she was impressed at how calmly he took the news that would have sent Ron running for the hills with his fingers in his ears. “I’ll bring you some painkillers too.”

“Did you take the charm off?” She asked before leaving the room.

He shook his head, not looking at her, praying she didn’t keep walking down this road.

“Why would your father do that? Take the charm off? It makes no sense.”

He put the cheese in the refrigerator and finally looked up.

“Maybe it was a mistake with the property transfer,” he said, shrugging. “Like I said, I’m seeing him today and I’ll ask him. You just…relax and be…comfortable, get some reading done. I’ll get you what you need. I’ll see you this afternoon.”

He was careful to meet Lucius in the back kitchen of the Manor, the closest he could be to the tracking collar. His father poured the both a couple of fingers of firewhiskey and Draco stood at the window, looking out towards the guesthouse.

“You told her, I assume,” Lucius said, leaning against the counter, looking at the bottom of his glass. He wasn’t in his robes, just black dress pants and a button down shirt, his hair pulled loosely back from his face. Perhaps the Order had no need for him today.

“I did,” Draco lied.

Lucius was a lot of things, but he wasn’t a fool, and even though it was a skill Draco had been honing for years, his father could tell when he was lying; maybe not outright deception but withholding the whole of the truth. Because even though his son was well practiced in the act, it still made him uncomfortable…stiff. Of all the sins he enthusiastically committed, deceit was the one that reverted him to a child; darting eyes, chewing his bottom lip, nervous laughter, smiling too wide.

“She seems quite…calm, for Granger I mean. Particularly in the face of being forcibly bred…to you no less.”

Draco never stopped looking out the window, trying to ignore his father’s subtle dig. He thought he caught a glimpse of her bustling around in the sitting room.

“Yes, well I told her that if she behaved herself she could help me with my research. You know what a panty soaker that prospect is for someone like her.”

Both of them laughed, both of them forcing this artificial mirth, this bizarre small talk. But after a few moments, Draco went quiet, finally turning to face him.

“I want to make sure that we’re…alone.”

Lucius nodded. “I’m sure.”

“But the mirrors are charmed, aren’t they?” he asked, pouring another drink for himself. “You can
monitor both of us through them. Every mirror in the guest house.”

Again his father nodded as if there were nothing strange at all about watching to make sure his son bedded a slave.

“Don’t ask me to remove them. The charms were placed around the buildings and grounds by the Order as a condition of bringing her here. In fact I received an owl this morning asking about your little shopping trip.” He lowered his voice, standing very close to his son. “This is precisely why we met in the front parlor. I was allowed one room untouched. It would be better for us to be talking about any of this there.”

“Fucking hell,”

“What are you supposing will happen Draco? That I’m going to set up a chair and watch you impregnate her?”

It honestly wouldn’t have surprised him.

“She’s not going to be…receptive to my…advances if she knows she performing for the Order’s own personal porno. And I’m not particularly into violent persuasion.”

Lucius wondered if his son was actually looking for his own privacy, or if there was some other reason he wanted to cut the two of them off from someone who was on their side. No purpose would be served by lifting the charms, unless he’d deviated from the plan.

“If it makes you feel any better, I can’t hear anything, nor can the Watchers. I’ve seen how the charmed mirrors work and its similar to foe glass. You both appear as shades, nothing more. The temperature of your tether is also indicated in case of attempts at escape.”

Lucius nodded in the direction of the hallway and Draco followed him to a small mirror right outside the kitchens, nondescript in a black wooden frame. It was dark, as if it were covered in grime, giving a shadowy reflection that roiled behind the glass like a swirling fog. In the midst of it he saw the silhouette of her body with a soft yellow glow around her neck indicating that her collar had begun to heat.

“You are her master now, son,” Lucius said, raising his glass as if in a toast. “Tell her the charms will stay in place and punish her if she pouts. You are not here to serve her, no matter how compassionate you may feel.”

Draco’s mind drifted to an image of her pouting, kneeling at his feet, begging him to touch her, tears making her eyes sparkle. He sipped at his whiskey to clear it.

“I went to London myself yesterday,” Lucius said. “I was called in to discussed future plans for the prisoners, how to best reverse the population stall. The breeding program will start at the Academy next month.”

Draco shook his head in disbelief. As a child he’d wondered why they had to keep their world a secret. It wasn’t as if they were covered in scales or had wings bursting from their backs, now he’d rather die than tell people he was part of Wizard England.

“If you want her to come to you willingly, I suggest you start wooing her soon. They draw the name for the next sacrifice in two weeks.”
It took him two hours in the lab to pull together enough Proluos Potion for three months, a little longer than he expected because every half hour or so he would wander down to the hallway outside the kitchen and look at the dark mirror, watching the shadowy ghost curled up in front of the fireplace, most likely reading. Two weeks. The prison was filled with hundreds of mudbloods and criminal halfbreeds, but how many of them were women, and how many were under twenty five? Were the prisoners higher on the list than the slaves? What were the chances of her name coming up as the second sacrifice? His preoccupation made it hard to focus on the task at hand. Before he’d left the guest house that morning she’d suggested he bring a few supplies from the lab for testing the metal, tools to scrape the surface of it, potion ingredients to test reactions. He packed them all up with the Proluos and headed back to the guest house, his head spinning with anxiety.

She was asleep when he got back, propped up in the bed with a book open on her lap.

“Hey Granger,” he said, touching her shoulder. She sighed in a way that gave him goosebumps. “Granger, I got your potion.”

She blinked awake, a tiny smile turning up the corner of her lips. He wasn’t sure he’d ever seen such a thing; Granger happy to see him. Her eyelids were heavy, her cheeks pink and she held her hand up to hide a little yawn as he pulled the three vials of opaque yellow liquid out of his bag.

“Thanks,” she said. “I’ll use it later,” she said, patting the edge of the bed, indicating he should sit. “What did you find out about the charms?”

He thought for a moment before answering, wondering which answer would spare her the most pain, which answer would allow her to forget about the Order and focus on studying, which answer would be easiest, make her the happiest. But he also knew that Hermione had a thing for “the truth”, and would flip her lid if she found out he’d kept something from her.

“He can’t hear us,” he said, pretending to be distracted by his bag of supplies. “You don’t have to worry about the mirrors.” He pulled something from the bag and set it next to her. “I forgot, I brought you this too.” A small chocolate bar wrapped in gold foil with a beautiful purple and gold label in French. “I thought you might…want a treat,” he said, shrugging.

She raised an eyebrow and twisted her lips up into a bit of a sneer. “You know that’s an incredibly sexist stereotype, that we’re all crabby and crying and begging for chocolate?” She grabbed the candy and tore through the wrapper snapping a piece off. “But thank you, it’s delicious.”

“Yeah…” Draco said, “OK. Well, that’ll teach me to do something nice. Come on. Let’s get a scraping from your collar.”

Some of the older and more dangerous potions called for slivers of iron or gold, tiny bits of copper, and the best way to get them was with a coarse file, collecting the curled shavings in a crucible. He’d brought his toughest iron file to the guest house and instructed her to sit in front of him on the coffeetable. She looked so demure, her back so straight, her neck long. Before coming out to the sitting room she’d pinned her hair up high on her head and when she tilted her head back to present her collar to him he could see the space on her throat that he’d sucked on, could remember how she tasted, his tongue flicking out to lick his own lip.

“I remember it too,” she said quietly, when he leaned in closer with the file. “I thought you were going to bite me like the others had,”
“Stop,” he said, closing his eyes. “Sit still.”

“I knew back in school that you’d be a good kisser. All the girls did.” She spread her knees so he could get closer but he didn’t dare look up. He didn’t dare look at her mouth, her eyes. She smelled like sweet milk chocolate.

“Granger, let me get this filing. Please.” The words came out a bit more desperate and pleading than he’d intended, not wanting to show how carefully he walked the knife’s edge. Then her hand was on his cheek, brushing his hair back.

“You really don’t ever want to kiss me again?” she asked.

His eyes flicked up to hers, flashing silver, his mouth set in a hard line of frustration. Kiss her, hold her, fuck her, rescue her. He wanted all of it. He needed to get away.

With a quick, too rough movement he drew the file along the edge of the collar. Hermione screamed, her hands flying up to clutch the metal, her whole body lurching backwards away from him.

“What is it?” He asked, throwing the file to the floor, jumping to help her.

She writhed on the floor, digging her fingers beneath the collar as it seared and squeezed nearly cutting off her breath. Draco could see smoke coming out from underneath as her skin turned bright pink, tiny black veins creeping out like vines as something seeped into her blood.

“Help me Draco, please,” she curled into a ball, tears streaming down her face. It was worse than the Crucio, the worst, deepest, most concentrated pain she’d ever felt, nearly making her vomit with its intensity.

“Stop touching it!” He said, flipping her onto her back. “They think you’re trying to pull it off. Stop!” He straddled her hips, pinning her wrists to the floor. Focusing every ounce of energy and thought that he had on the center of the collar he yelled “Finite! Finite Incantatem!”

She squirmed and whimpered beneath him trying to wrench her hands free, but he held tight, watching the whisper thin veins fade away, the red, irritated skin start to pale. He cast a cooling charm against her skin and immediately pulled off of her, sitting back against the sofa to catch his breath.

“I’m sorry…I didn’t…there was no way I could have known…” He couldn’t look at her, couldn’t look at that tear streaked cheeks, her chest heaving with breath. He’d hurt her again. It’s all he ever did. “I’m sorry.”

“Draco, the scrapings were my idea…” she crawled across the floor to sit beside him, reaching out to take his hand, but he pulled out of her grip, stood up and walked away.
They didn’t talk much for the rest of the day and once again Hermione went to bed long before Draco, her body sore as the Proluos Potion began its process of flushing out her womb overnight along with her neck still aching from the vicious punishment of the collar. How were either of them to know that any attempt to tamper with it would result in such torture? It certainly didn’t come with an instruction manual and Lucius obviously hadn’t revealed all of its devious secrets to his son. So even though Draco had been holding the file she didn’t blame him for her suffering, not for a minute, but she could see on his face and the way he’d withdrawn from her for the rest of the day that he very clearly blamed himself.

She woke in the night to the sound of him whimpering, laying on his back, the moon casting a milky white highlight along the tendons of his neck that were stretched taut with tension. His hands fisted the sheets, his mouth in a deep frown as his brow furrowed.

“Get them out. Take them….” He mumbled, his head thrashing side to side. “Get them away from me.”

“Draco wake up…” she whispered in the dark. He continued to thrash, his words nonsensical, sweat standing out over his forehead. He waved a hand in front of his face.

“NO. Take them away…” he said, his voice going from angry to terrified, childlike almost.

She touched his shoulder and he reached up to grab her wrist, his nails digging into the flesh of her forearm.

“You don’t know what I’ve done,” he mumbled. “Take them all away…make sure,” he said, his body calming, brow smoothing out. “Make sure.”

“OK,” she said, sitting up, watching as he seemed to melt back into the mattress, his body softening, his voice quiet, his hand still holding tight to hers. “OK Draco, I will.”

He woke with her asleep sitting beside him, her back against the headboard, his hand wrapped tight around her wrist. She’d been in his dream. She’d been the one to walk in and see him panicking.

Everything had been so real, the smell of the room, the musty old furniture covered in dust. The light had been the same, filtered through the high windows as he stood in front of the cabinet, and opening it had given the same result. The tiny body of the white bird, lifeless, innocent, lying on the dark wood. He’d killed it. And for no reason. He’d used a life, an innocent life as a ‘test’. Then his dream changed. The windows opened and a gust of wind blew dust around the room in little swirling tornadoes, his hair blowing back from his face. The door banged open and dozens of birds, white, black, brown, finches, owls, magpies, pigeons, peacocks, flew into the room. The larger birds, hawks and eagles, dug their talons into his shoulders, scratched the sides of his face. He tried to wave them off until he realized they were all flying past him into the cabinet, the doors slowly shutting, shutting hundreds of innocent birds inside, more than could possibly fit, more birds than he’d ever seen.

“No, get them out!” He called out to no one. He was the only one who knew how to use it, the only one in the room. He opened the doors. “Take them away, get out! Get them out!”
He was desperate to hold the doors open, his arms waving, tears streaming down his face.

“What have I done? What have I done? You don’t know what I’ve done. You don’t know the things that I’ve done.

And then she was standing behind him, in her jeans and that ridiculous hoodie, her hair pulled back, looking so young, and yet so confident, perfectly calm in the midst of his whirling chaos.

“Take them,” he said to her, holding the doors open as the birds flew out. “Make sure they’re all out… make sure…”

The last things he saw were the birds fluttering in the fading light and Hermione’s face as the doors closed with himself inside.

He let go of her wrist and got out of bed. If her name didn’t come up at the next meeting, he’d tell her. He’d tell her what her choices were and let her decide for herself.

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The weather turned bad over the next couple of days and they settled in to study, sometimes sitting together on the warm king sized bed with mugs of tea, notebooks and scrolls spread out around them; sometimes in the kitchen, thunder rumbling and the sky flashing with lightning as Draco dripped potions on the edge of the collar, testing the reaction. All they knew after four days of experiments was that it wasn’t safely removably by Lucius or Draco, that the cuff around Draco’s wrist held the same properties, and that it was made of an Iron and Cobalt alloy, the same that Draco found in old scrolls detailing the history of ancient muggle slaves, indentured to pureblood wizarding families.

“But that's ridiculous. The collars must come off sometime,” Hermione sighed, rubbing her eyes with the heels of her hands. “Indentured slaves were able to work off their debts and live freely. And it must come off with a charm, a secret word, or perhaps when a task is achieved.”

“Yeah maybe,” Draco said, gathering up the papers.

And what a task it was.

He had scrolls from the prison that he didn’t show her, scrolls from only a month or so earlier that he’d gotten from his father, outlining the breeding program. If she proved to be pregnant by a pureblood wizard her name would be taken off the sacrifice list until the child was born. If it was born healthy she would be safe until the child was proved to be in possession of magical abilities, accidental or otherwise. If she bore a squib, she would be made available for sacrifice. If she had wizard child, she was home free, but still would be enslaved to Draco… which might be a fate worse than death to Hermione.

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She got out of the bath and put on her warmest, softest pajamas, pinning her hair into a knot. They had one week to go and had been working non-stop, partially in an effort to break the collar’s code and partially to forget what the deadline meant, what would happen if her number came up. But it
was never far from mind. Their conversations always seemed to fall into uncomfortable silences when they made any mention of the future...of Christmas or summer...things she may never see. If they were doing research, it kept their topic choices safe.

Draco was stretched out on the couch with his eyes half closed, staring into the fire, a pile of scrolls unfurled on the floor beside him, a joint smoldering in his hand. She shook her head and sighed, grabbing a bottle of water from the kitchen. Her first instinct, as always with Draco, was to scold him, to chastise his behavior, but he’d been working on the history of tracking charms and taboos for days, up before her and awake long after, flipping through books nearly five hundred years old.

“I guess you’re through studying for today,” she said, picking some scrolls up off the floor.

“My eyes were crossing, I needed a break. I’ve been reading for four hours,” he said, not moving. “And yet I’m still no closer to anything.”

He took a long drag and held it deep in his lungs, his eyes squinted shut, letting the cigarette dangle between his long fingers, perilously close to his notes and scrolls.

“Give me that,” she said, pulling it out of his hand. “You’ll burn the whole house down.”

He let the sweet, musky smoke out in a long stream over her head.

“Jesus Granger, it’s like living with McGonagall. Maybe you should take a hit or two, loosen up, escape all this bullshit for a night.”

When he heard no response from her he opened his eyes and sat up, rubbing a hand over his face to wake up fully. It was just like that night nearly two weeks ago, seeing her sitting quietly in the firelight that glowed gold on her skin as she kneeled on the floor at his feet, her lips in a pout of confusion. She was staring at the joint in her hand.

“I was joking Granger,” he said, reaching out for it. “You’re doing just fine over there on the straight and narrow.”

But she pulled her hand out of his reach and looked at him, revealing an exhaustion and fear that she’d been trying so desperately to hide.

“I want to escape all this bullshit, even if it’s just for a night.”

He leaned in to stop her but she’d already put the cigarette between her lips, taking far too deep of a drag.

“Holy shit, Hermione,” he said, pulling the joint from her hand.

After only a second or two she coughed and sputtered, falling against the edge of the couch with a pitiful laugh. He slid down to sit on the floor beside her, his head swimming, his skin hot. It felt like the two of them were wrapped in cotton wool, cocooned together, the rest of the world muffled out. The thought of it made him laugh but she still looked frustrated and sad. That wasn’t right. He didn’t want her to feel sad, no one should feel sad, not someone as beautiful as her with her golden skin.

“Let me help you,” he said.

She nodded and he took another long drag then leaned in and wrapped a hand around the back of her neck to hold her still. Touching his warm lips to hers he blew the smoke in a steady stream deep
into her lungs. She shook her head, squeezing her eyes shut, but he held her against him, his forehead pressed against hers.

“Hold it,” he whispered, their lips still touching. “Just a bit longer.”

But Hermione pulled back, coughing the smoke out in a hazy cloud, her whole body shivering. She smiled shyly, pulling her knees up to her chest.

“I guess I’m destined for the straight and narrow. But thanks,” she said. “I’m not sure I feel any diff-”

He didn’t let her finish, pulling her face to his and kissing her open mouth, dipping his tongue between her lips when she squealed in surprise. Her hands went to his shoulders, fingers digging into his biceps as she melted against his kiss, opening her mouth wider, touching her tongue to his, letting them slip together, warm and sweet tasting. Draco tangled his fingers into her hair, pulling the pins from her knot as he deepened the kiss, pushing her onto her back, laying beside her on the floor, a clutter of scrolls and quills beneath her. When he pulled back to see the look on her face her cheeks were red, eyes sleepy but sparkling in the dark.

She felt cold without him pressed against her, but she also felt so dreamy and soft, blurred at the edges. She was happy just to drink in the sight of his icy grey eyes, the pretty cupids bow of his rosy lips, so pretty. She ran a fingertip over the lashes on his heavily lidded eyes. He smiled and she giggled when he brushed his own fingers over her eyebrows, down her nose, tracing the outline of her mouth with feather light touches.

“I’m cold out here,” she said, pushing his hair out of his face. “We should go to bed.”

Draco froze with his hand on her cheek, not quite believing what she was saying, not quite believing what she actually wanted. He couldn’t be hearing her right, could he? But her hand moved to touch his chest, her palm running down the middle of his stomach, up under his shirt, her fingers warm as they roamed over the ropy scar that slashed across his ribs. He stared deep into her wide, dilated eyes and she smiled, leaning forward to kiss him again, pulling him down to lay on top of her, spreading her legs just enough that he could settle himself between them.

“Hermione…”

“Please,” she said, holding him against her with both of her hands, covering his face with kisses. “Please Draco,” she was squirming and whining beneath him and his body was already responding. “It’s just like you said, I want to forget all of this. I want to not be scared…just for one night.”

He smiled down at her, knowing how powerful that feeling was, that urge to escape. He lived with it all the time, for years. Drowning bad feelings in sex and drugs was his specialty. And he would have done it for her. He would have taken her to bed, he would have given her a night she’d never forget until he bent down to kiss her neck and his lips touched the rough, cold edge of her collar.

He froze. He wasn’t like them. He couldn’t be like them.

“I…Hermione, I can’t.”

She pulled his mouth to hers again, kissing him as hard as she knew how, her fingers digging deep into his back, hard enough that it hurt and he groaned against her, his cock already hard, her heated core grinding up against him. He wanted her so badly…but it wasn’t right. They weren’t the right reasons. Not until he stopped lying to her. Not until he saved her. Not until she was free.

“Please Draco…I want you,” she whispered, but her body had gone still, her hands simply holding
him, her lips soft against his neck.

He could hear the sadness in her words, whether they were true or not. And he knew that this was what she needed, just to be comforted, to be held and protected, someone to hide her from the world.

“Come on,” he said, “get up.”

He stood and pulled her up, sweeping her into his arms to carry her to the bedroom. She was humiliated at her failed seduction, but said nothing, burying her face against his chest. As they walked she listened to his heartbeat, how it kept her feeling calm and even…a steady, comforting rhythm. He set her on the bed and lay down next to her, pulling her over to let her rest on his chest, his arms around her tight, his nose in her hair, the room filled with cold blue moonlight.

"You don't want me anymore?” she asked, when their faces were hidden in the dark. He huffed out a strained laugh.

"You would be terrified if you knew how much I want you, Granger. But you don't want me now,” he said. "It's ok. That day will come."

As if proving his point, she snuggled up closer to him, burrowing deep in the blankets, pressing her whole body into his, her arms tight around his chest.

“I'll get you out, Granger,” he whispered, when he thought she’d fallen asleep. “I promise to get you out.”
Lucius came to the guest house the following Friday unannounced. He knocked politely at the door, scaring Draco and Hermione out of their wits.

“Just a minute!” Draco called out, jerking his head toward the bedroom.

Hermione took the hint and gathered up as many books as she could, slamming the bedroom door behind her as Draco opened the front door with a flick of his hand.

“Thank you for knocking,” Draco said, stacking papers on the coffee table. “I’m not always wearing pants.”

Lucius looked around at the sitting room, littered with empty beer bottles, mugs of cold tea, crumpled papers and books strewn everywhere…a mess.

“Fingston!” he called out and instantly a house elf apparated into the sitting room, looking around at the mess, wide eyed and dumbfounded.

“Father, don’t. Please,” Draco said, gathering up beer bottles and empty crisp bags. “I told the elves not to come over here. I’ll take care of it myself.”

But Fingston was already working feverishly, unable, physically, to handle such discord and Draco was secretly grateful for the help.

“She doesn’t want elves working for her!” Draco snapped.

Lucius wandered the room, looking off into the kitchen, up the stairs to the second floor, everything he saw making his lip curl in distaste.

“They aren’t. They’re working for me. I don’t care what the mudblood wants. Like you said, Draco, she is not the Lady of the Manor.” He kicked at a pair of small brown ballet flats on the floor and lifted his eyes to his son. “Why is it you can’t work on your research project in the lab that I paid for?”

Draco’s move to stand guard in front of the bedroom door did not go unnoticed, but Lucius said nothing.

“She’s not particularly comfortable staying in the Manor anymore,” Draco said, crossing his arms over his chest. “One too many bad memories I suppose.”

“So concerned with the slave’s comfort,” Lucius said, stepping out of Fingston’s way. “Have you fucked her yet?”

“Jesus Father,” he said, stepping away from the door. He dragged Lucius toward the bar and fixed them both a drink. “Why are you talking like this?” Draco asked. “I know you don’t think this badly of her, you said yourself that you wanted her safe and now you sound worse than Goyle!”

“The names will be drawn tonight,” Lucius said. “Perhaps I’m just reminding you not to get attached.”
Both of them were quiet for a moment and the door to the bedroom opened, revealing Hermione in the doorway, shivering but clearly angry.

“You keep thinking your son is just like you when he’s proven time and time again that he’s so much better.”

Draco’s heart fluttered, partially with happiness and gratitude but mostly with terror. She’d never been very good at keeping her mouth shut. But Lucius simply raised an eyebrow in amusement.

“He hasn’t _fucked_ me yet, because he’s not a rapist,” she said.

Lucius looked between the both of them, the amusement on his face melting into confusion, Draco’s happiness freezing over into a hundred percent pure terror.

“I wouldn’t have thought he would need to be,” he said, locking eyes long enough with Draco for the younger Malfoy to know the jig was up. But if his father was planning on bursting the bubble and mentioning the breeding program, he didn’t show it.

“As I’m sure you remember, son, you, as a slave owner are required to be present at the gathering tonight. Obviously with your tether charm your slave will also have to attend.”

“Obviously,” Draco whispered, feeling nauseated.

“Dress appropriately will you?” Lucius said, glancing over at Hermione in her flannel sleeping pants and hooded sweatshirt and slapping Draco lightly on the cheek. “A shave wouldn’t hurt either. This isn’t a quidditch party. Fingston! Back to the manor when you’re finished. These time to get ready.”

She hadn’t apparated anywhere in ages, and she felt a bit dizzy when they arrived at the familiar intersection in the center of London. The Order had quickly dismantled and taken over the Ministry, most of the floors dedicated to interrogation and torture, dungeons and detainment. She followed Draco through the maze of narrow hallways, seeing signs for Muggleborn and Halfblood Registration and Dark Arts Academy Applications. The last door’s sign seemed brand new, the letters sharp and gleaming: Pureblood Breeding Program.

“What is…”

“Shh –” Draco said, holding her hand tightly and pulling her along.

She didn’t like seeing him in his black suit and formal robes and he wore them as if they caused him physical pain, shrugging and twitching, fiddling with his old silver Slytherin cufflinks. He’d been short with her while dressing, rubbing at the serpent on his forearm every time he caught a glimpse of it in the mirror, retying his tie three times. She wore a black satin gown that Lucius had given her and long black robes over it, a chain fastened to her collar that Draco allowed her to hold as he laced their fingers together.

The Dark Lord held court on the lowest levels of the building which now resembled the old Chamber of Secrets at Hogwarts, stone walls and low ceilings, musty and damp, gigantic stone basilisks lining the walls as if standing sentinel. An older Death Eater, one of Lucius’ generation, stood by the door and nodded at Draco when they walked up.
“Well well, the prodigal son returns,” he said. “Left arm.”

Draco reluctantly showed his mark and tugged Hermione closer to his side when he saw the older man eyeing her hungrily.

“I had heard your old man got Granger, but I guess she gets around! Nott says she’s a tight fuck. Do you share her out?”

Draco had his wand out and pressed to the man’s throat in the blink of an eye and Hermione jumped back to cower behind him.

“I have literally nothing to lose, friend,” Draco said. “The Dark Lord could kill me tonight for all the lofty status I have with this bridge club, so please…do me a favor and give me an excuse.”

“Easy Malfoy,” the man said, holding his hands up in surrender. “Just making friendly conversation.”

Draco tucked his wand away and tried to enter the chamber but the man stopped them both again.

“Sorry friend, no special treatment, not even for the Golden Trio.” He pointed his own wand at Hermione and said “Silencio, Muffliato,” before allowing them to enter.

Hermione had gone to church a few times in her youth and walking in to the Death Eater meeting reminded her of those services. The room was filled with long, black benches and drenched in candlelight, the sickly sweet smell of some sort of incense choking her as she sat in her humming silence, watching the room fill with Death Eaters and their slaves. There were some who looked near death, all skin and bones, unhealed bruises, dull, shaggy hair and sunken eyes; and others who looked almost pampered, dressed in gorgeous deep jewel toned gowns and expensive velvet robes, full faces of makeup and well coiffed hair. Unable to hear the opening remarks, she fiddled with the links of her chain leash, wondering how long it would take for the name to be called.

Everyone stood and Draco pulled her to her feet, his face blank. Couldn’t he give her some sort of hint, a sign as to what was happening? The Death Eaters all lifted their arms triggering a huge, swirling, glowing green Dark Mark on the ceiling of the chamber that dissipated after a few moments. She watched as they all repeated back some sort of incantation, Draco’s mouth barely moving. There were others in the room staring at the two of them, whispering behind their hands, raising their eyebrows, but whether they were gossiping about the last of the Golden Trio or the Boy Who Failed, she couldn’t be sure. One thing was certain though, they garnered quite a bit of attention, and she felt far more comfortable staring at the ground.

They all sat again as various men stood up from their places to speak, some receiving applause that she could feel rumbling in the seats and others causing an uproar of disagreement she couldn’t hear. Hermione chewed her nails to the quick, her knee bobbing, heart fluttering erratically behind her ribs. They’d already been there an hour. Draco took her hand and turned it palm up. With the tip of his finger he spelled the words BE CALM on her skin and she frowned at him in disbelief. How dare he ask such a thing of her at such a time? This was his comforting gesture? He squeezed her hand, but before he could do anything more, the feeling in the room had changed.

He was grateful that she couldn’t hear, even more so that she couldn’t speak, since her bleeding heart and big mouth were a deadly combination in these kind of situations. After they all stood and
recited their vow to follow the Dark Lord, the selected pre-speakers talked about the population drop and how perhaps a new marriage law was necessary, or perhaps a mandatory amount of children; a suggestion that quickly divided the room and started a bit of a hubbub. Draco, who’d tried to tune out the ridiculous discussions, was touched by a frail looking man who stood and told the story of his wife who had nearly died in her first childbirth; but because it was a girl she’d gotten pregnant again and the second delivery of her son had killed her. His tale quieted the room until someone stood and said that this was what the mudbloods were for! Who cared what happened to them as long as their offspring were healthy? Draco’s eyes slid over to Hermione then, picturing her belly swollen, her hands folded over her robes as a little wizard kicked and squirmed inside her. He’d never really wanted to be a father, seeing what hell the wizarding world had become, but maybe it was precisely because of that that he wanted a child…a chance at a different generation, maybe another crazy haired maniac like Potter could turn it all around. His mother had told him that one day, when he held his own child in his arms, all this bitterness and pettiness and selfishness would melt away and he’d feel a sort of contentment she couldn’t describe. She knew she wouldn’t live to see it, but she assured Draco that somewhere inside him was a good father. She was probably the only one on earth to believe it.

Hermione was trembling beside him and he took her hand in his, writing BE CALM on her palm with his finger, which was met with a stare so withering he nearly laughed. She wasn’t a big fan of empty platitudes.

“And now we begin the planning for next month’s revel!” Said the Death Eater at the front of the chamber. He was in his full regalia, robe and silver mask, as he stood behind an altar of stone resembling a slab balanced on the head of a serpent. The Dark Lord rarely appeared at these meetings, sending sychophant representatives instead to speak on his behalf. Of course he would be at the revel, when everyone showed up to see blood and rape and swear their loyalty, but until then, Draco knew he didn’t care.

With a wave of his hand a large black leather bound book appeared on the slab between two burning black candles and the room was brought to their feet. Hermione stood and looked up at Draco, her eyes wide and questioning. He nodded at her grimly and held tight to her hand, feeling her whole body trembling against him. He felt as if his breath was trapped in his lungs and he was unable to draw more.

“With the changing of the seasons we offer a sacrifice to our Dark Lord!”

Several men raised their arms, showing off their marks in salute. It was easy to see which slaves were aware of the seriousness of the evening and which had been kept unaware of their potential fate, which owners truly cared for the wellbeing of their slaves and which saw them as nothing but animals.

“The names in this book are the names of blood traitors!”

The room chanted back at him: “SACRIFICE!”

“The names in this book are the names of mudblood scum!”

“SACRIFICE!”

“The names in this book are slaves to the Order, rebels against the Dark Lord, those who fought against him and lost!”

“SACRIFICE!”
The crowd was being riled into a frenzy and it almost felt as if the walls were closing in, as if maybe none of them were going to escape with their lives. Draco caught his father’s eye to see if this was the Amazing Pureblood Wizardkind he had signed up for; this blind allegiance, this blood thirsty mania. He was relieved to see that Lucius too had withdrawn from the crowd, standing silent against the wall, not chanting along with the others and in fact pulling his mask down over his face once his son had seen him.

The leader behind the altar held up his hands and the room fell silent. He waved his wand over the open book, and the pages began to flip back and forth, a pale green mist rising and swirling, as if they were summoning a Patronus, but suddenly, there was a burst of green flame, a scroll appeared and the book slammed shut. The Death Eater snatched the scroll from the air and unrolled it.

“The sacrifice has been chosen! We will offer her blood to the Dark Lord at the Winter Revel. Stand and receive your honor…HAZEL ASHWOOD!”

Draco dropped back into his seat and let his head fall between his knees. Hermione fell to the floor beside him, screaming his name in silence, pulling at his arm. Without thinking about who was watching, what anyone would say, he took her hand in his and pulled it to his lips, kissing her palm, pressing his lips to the inside of her wrist. She nodded at him, cautiously smiling and he nodded back saying,

“You’re safe, Granger. You beautiful bushy haired know it all.”

She couldn’t read his lips but she could see the relief on his face.

Across the room a mute and unhearing slave stood, her whole body shaking, her owner holding tight to the back of her neck. If it were possible he looked even worse, his face pale as death, his eyes shining with tears.

“Friends! We are honored…” he said, his voice shaking, "I present--” he hung his head, unable to speak further.

The slave, a girl younger than Hermione, started sobbing silently with tears streaming down her face. The sight of it frightened Hermione enough that she stayed crumpled on the floor, her face buried in Draco’s robes. He placed his hand on her head, stroking her hair.

“I present my slave Hazel Ashwood,” the man said, renewing his resolve. “A blood traitor and rebel working against the Dark Lord, for sacrifice at the Winter Revel.”

The crowd cheered and clapped, stomping their feet and raising their arms while the slave continued crying, her mouth open in a surreal silent scream. Her owner sat and pulled her down into his lap and into his arms, holding her tightly against his chest, rocking her as the meeting concluded and Death Eaters began to file out.

Was this what the Dark Lord had wanted? For his own followers to be terrified and heart broken, their allegiances torn? Did he know long before he started awarding personal slaves that he would one day call upon each of them to be sacrificed? Making every man second guess who they’d sworn to follow? They all had known he was heartless and cold, murderous in his ambition, but an unrepentant sadist as well? Draco looked up and saw that his father had already left the chamber so he tapped Hermione on the shoulder and pulled her to stand, letting her know it was time to leave.

As they left the room the guard at the door released Hermione’s charms and gave her a wink that
Draco didn’t see.

“Maybe next time, eh Malfoy?” he said, laughing heartily.

The antechamber was filled with Death Eaters talking and greeting one another, so the man on guard knew there was nothing Draco could do to him but snarl, pulling Hermione down the corridor to the lifts.

Once away from the crowds, Draco pulled her into an empty office and into his arms, hugging her tight, almost swallowing her up in his robes.

“I’m sorry you had to see all that. I’m sorry you had to be here.”

He’d expected her to cry, to collapse against him in horror, but when he pulled away she wore the tiniest hint of a smile, her eyes energetic with relief, her cheeks pink. She looked...alive. Being alone with her in this darkened office reminded him of a fantasy he’d had once, fifth year, when he was on the Inquisitorial Squad and his adolescent hormones were off the charts. He saw her while out on one of his patrols and thought about dragging her into an abandoned classroom to “question her”; but when he’d realized that what he’d actually wanted was to get her alone to kiss her, to smell her skin, slip his hand beneath her robes, he’d quickly stuffed the idea deep into his subconscious, taking it out on her viciously the next time they met. And now here they were, in a dark room alone, her face just a breath from his, and she was smiling, her lips so plump and rosy.

She went up on her tip toes and kissed his cheek, pulling him into another innocent hug.

“Thank you. Thank you for being so good to me today. I know you don’t have to be this...nice to me. And I know coming here was hard.”

He nodded and tucked her in against his side to apparate her home. She had no idea how hard it was.

Chapter End Notes

I always said that if I had a butler I would call him Fingston. So here he is.
Draco apparated them to the Manor instead of the guest house and she was surprised to find them in the library. He took her hand and they made their way to the Butler’s pantry where he filled a canvas shopping bag with food from his father’s stores. It struck him just then that he hadn’t eaten in nearly 24 hours and now he felt a renewed sense of energy and purpose, maybe, just maybe a touch of optimism; an emotion he wasn’t familiar with navigating.

“We have nearly three months before we have to worry about another name being pulled,” Draco said, pulling her out into the hall and down a dark flight of stairs. “Three months to get you out of that fucking collar. And we’re going to do it. You’re the smartest witch in the world and there’s no reason why we can’t figure out a stupid charmed piece of metal.”

At the bottom of the staircase he pushed open a heavy wooden door and revealed the biggest wine cellar Hermione had ever seen, racks and racks of dust covered bottles in a what looked like a cold, low lit cave; only two torches on the wall inside the heavy door lit their way. She watched as he ran his hands over the bottles, obviously looking for something in particular, before pulling out two magnums of champagne with old dusty gold labels.

His plan was to lift her mood, to alleviate some of the fear that struck into her at the meeting. They would tell funny stories, he would ask her about her childhood, she could tell him about muggle artifacts, anything but slavery and collars and sacrifices. And then later when they were half drunk and she was feeling more at ease, he would explain to her how she could prevent being in Hazel’s place. He would promise to be kind and gentle with her, and not make her do anything she didn’t want to. The choice was all hers. Hell, if she wanted she could use a turkey baster to get pregnant, whatever made her most comfortable. But he knew from their…encounter…a few nights ago that maybe making a baby the old fashioned way wasn’t necessarily off the table, and the thought made his mouth go dry.

“So tonight we’ll just forget about all of this shit, give our brains a rest and celebrate. Get drunk and eat good food and act…normal.”

After tucking the heavy bottles under his arm he turned to find her standing right behind him between the racks of red wine, their robes brushing together in the narrow passageway.

“Normal,” she said, smiling that smug lopsided smile that used to frustrate him beyond belief. “So you’re going to make fun of my teeth and call me names and I get to punch you in the face?”

He stepped closer, backing her up against the wall of bottles that rattled as she caught her balance. Goosebumps rippled over her skin as she looked up at Draco, his face partially hidden in the shadows of the wine cellar, his grey eyes glittering in the flickering torchlight.

“I guess we could do that,” he said with a smile.

He didn’t want to look anywhere but at her eyes, her lips. He didn’t want to look down at the garish metal around her neck, or the old lettered scar on her arm, the trembling in her fingers and bitten fingernails. If he just looked at her eyes he could pretend, pretend they were innocent kids back in school and he could change the outcome, turn right instead of left, call her beautiful instead of filthy, brilliant instead of swotty. Help instead of hurt.

“I don’t want to punch you in the face,” she said softly, tipping her face up, looking at him through half lidded eyes.
“I don’t want to make fun of your teeth,” he said, rubbing his thumb over her cheek, tucking a lock of her hair behind her ear.

“Draco!” His father was at the doorway to the wine cellar, startling the two of them apart. “I know you’re in here. Take your slave home and come see me in the parlor. We need to talk.”

“I’ll be right there,” Draco said, trying not to whine like a disgruntled teenager. He looked down at Hermione who was already walking away from him, taking the two heavy bottles of champagne from his hands.

“I’ll wait for you at home,” she said, heading up the stairs. “Will you walk me there?”

It tore at his heart to hear her call this place home, as if it were a place where she felt comfortable or safe or welcome. He’d done all he could to provide some semblance of that in the past month but the Manor and its grounds weren’t exactly as comfy cozy as, say, The Burrow had been. And yet, compared to what her life had been on the run and in prison, he supposed it was…a step up.

It was a clear cold night and she could see a few stars coming out in the dark blue evening sky. She loved being outside; even when the air was so cold that it ached in her lungs. So she walked slowly watching bats swoop around the trees, listening to owls hoot in the distance. After allowing her a few minutes to drink in the late Autumn air, Draco unlocked the front door and let her inside, lighting the fire.

“I won’t be long. I’m sure I just have to be yelled at about something,” he said with a smile. When he looked over at Hermione though she had a question in her eyes, words on the tip of her tongue that she was holding back. “What?”

“Was it always like that?” She asked, taking off her robes. “The gatherings?”

Standing in front of him in that black satin nightgown, her face so energetic, her eyes so questioning, she was most certainly a woman, but somehow she looked five years younger, unmarred and innocent. She looked like maybe she hadn’t been in a prison for two years, like maybe she wasn’t a slave, the veteran of a bloody, vicious war. He wished she’d waited until he left to take her robe off. But he knew Lucius was waiting for him, waiting to rip him a new one for something he had or hadn’t done, so he’d have to take care of his want for her later.

“No,” he said, setting down the bag of food inside the doorway. “It was never like that.”

Lucius actually met him at the back door, remembering the distance limits of the tether.

“What?” Draco asked, not even wanting to walk into the house, hoping his father’s lecture would be short so he could get back to what was waiting for him, nice and toasty warm with two bottles of champagne.

But at Lucius’ urging he sat down at the kitchen table with him as if they were entering into some sort of negotiation, and from the look on Lucius’ face, it was entirely possible.

“You and Miss Granger looked particularly…cozy at the meeting tonight,” Lucius said.
“She was rendered deaf and mute in a room full of her enemies and didn’t know if she was going to live or die. Forgive me if I felt she deserved a little reassurance when the word finally came down.”

“You two have grown close in the past couple of weeks. Surprising, given that you’re trying to get her pregnant while you’ve got her closed up in that guest house.” Draco could tell that Lucius didn’t believe a word of what he was saying, he was just trying to out Draco’s lie, twisting the knife. “If I remember correctly, son, we agreed that my gifting her to you would be on the condition that you stuck with the plan. The plan that would be the least detectable and put the two of us at the least amount of risk. The only way to save her is to breed her.”

“Do you even hear yourself?” Draco asked, pushing away from the table and looking at the dusky mirror in the hallway. She was on the couch, her feet tucked beneath her, probably reading. “Breed her…like she’s a fucking cow. When you first told me you were going to bring her home you made these huge magnanimous speeches about saving her from the horrors of the prison, keeping her out of the hands of your fellow Death Eaters, how you’d admired her brilliant witch mind when we’re in school, how she changed your mind about mixed blood wizards, and now you sit here and call her a breeding slave?”

“Draco, it’s the only way to save her.”

“It’s not. It’s actually not the only way. It’s the only way to save her that leaves you in the clear. But if you must know, I was going to tell her tonight. I promised myself that if her name wasn’t called I would give her the…option…to have a baby.”

Lucius went quiet then and Draco wandered over to sit down.

“Good,” Lucius finally said. “Because having your baby is the only way to guarantee you won’t have to lose her.” He stood up and looked out the kitchen window towards the guest house. “Haven’t we lost enough?”

They were up late, having made an extremely solemn vow to each other that no books would be read, no scrolls unfurled, no tests conducted. They sat on the couch and drank champagne right from the bottle and ate cheese and apples and French bread and a whole box of chocolates from Paris while Draco told stories about how ridiculous Crabbe and Goyle were in their youth, wearing the same underwear every day for a week, hoarding tarts in their pillows. When they were well into their bottles and old wounds didn’t hurt, Hermione told him stories about Harry and Ron, about the stupid arguments they would get into, how Ron constantly talked with his mouth full and barely noticed she was a girl until she was just about sitting on top of him. They laughed together about the madness of breeding Blast Ended Skrewts and how Draco had had a crush on Rita Skeeter and thought providing her information would make him look like a big man. The thought of him pursuing her made them both laugh and then they fell silent. Draco shook his head.

“I really…really…wish things hadn’t been…how they were,” he said, unable to find the words to sound eloquent in his half drunk state. “Can you imagine how amazing school would have been without all of that bullshit?” He leaned forward, overcome with a desperate nostalgia, a regret that hurt like a punch to the stomach. “I mean yeah, house rivalries and all that shit, whose banner gets
hung at the end of the year, but when my father was in school kids weren’t getting fucking killed by Basilisks in the basement. Headmasters weren’t being…” he took a long swig out of his bottle. “Murdered.”

Again they were quiet, Draco stewing in his guilt, remembering how terrified he’d been when he stood and pointed that wand in Dumbledore’s face, how cold the wind had felt, how he would have given everything he ever had to not be there.

“He made you fix that cabinet. He made you attempt that assassination,” Hermione said, jostling from his memories. “I never thought I’d see an All Omnipotent Dark Wizard take so much pride in turning a bunch of children into killers. We were all puppets; and we still are. You still are. All in a game where the Dark Lord tries to decide who lives or dies, who lives free and who’s a slave, molding everyone into the perfect little Wizard England,” she said, looking into the fire.

They sat alone with their thoughts for a while, drinking and remembering, trying to keep the celebratory mood going until Hermione decided to bring it to a halt altogether.

“What’s the Pureblood Breeding Program?” She asked.

“What?”

He hated nothing more than when people pretended not to hear an unsavory question, but now she was pushing the issue he’d try to avoid for a month. The issue he’d promised to bring up this very night. And yet after hearing her rant and rave about being the Dark Lord’s puppets he was sure that she wouldn’t quite go for the Happy Family path to freedom.

“I saw a sign at the Order Headquarters. Pureblood Breeding Program. What is that? And don’t say you don’t know. Your dad works there.”

“The Dark Lord is upset with the drop in population growth. Seems people aren’t as eager to bring children into this dystopian hellscape as much as he thought they would.”

“I guess it doesn’t help that he put more than half the population in collars or prison.”

“They’re going to put fertile prisoners in the Dark Arts Academy as…breeders. They’ll live there to serve the older wizarding students, give birth there and hand over their perfectly magical children to be reared by the super cuddly Academy staff.”

He said it all as quickly and simply as he could and when he looked up her face was ashen while her eyes burned with rage. He’d not seen her so angry in years and he was afraid she was about to kill the messenger. Instead she put down her half empty bottle of champagne and sat back hard in the sofa, chewing on her bottom lip.

“Preposterous,” she said. “Disgusting! It’s as if we’re doubly cursed…being mudbloods AND being women, shuttled around like cattle, collared and bred and carefully herded.” She picked up Draco’s cuffed wrist and dropped it. “Kept on a leash, watched by the Almighty at every hour of the day. This is the life I have to look forward to if we don’t figure out this fucking collar? I’m going to be holding my breath every three months waiting for my name to come up or waiting for a knock at the door to tell me I’m going to be shipped off to a life of non-stop rape and forced pregnancy, my child torn from my filthy mudblood arms the moment its born? My Gods I think I’d rather have them kill me right now!”

She was standing then, wavering a bit on her feet as she paced the room, but yelling until her voice was hoarse while Draco sat with his head in his hands, his bottle nearly empty, wishing he could
“What do they even want with my disgusting muggle womb and its dirty dirty eggs? Or are they so desperate for a new generation of soldier children that they’ll deign to call us wizard ENOUGH for their little plan? All of the sudden we’re clean --”

“What do they even want with my disgusting muggle womb and its dirty dirty eggs? Or are they so desperate for a new generation of soldier children that they’ll deign to call us wizard ENOUGH for their little plan? All of the sudden we’re clean --”

“Stop! Enough! It doesn’t matter ok?” He yelled, startling her into silence.

For weeks he’d worked harder than he ever had in his life at controlling his temper, keeping his moods even. But this was too much. He didn’t like hearing her parrot back the names he’d called her, the horrid things he’d said about filthy blood and lower classes. Whether she meant to lump him in with rest of the Death Eaters or not her attack hit him like a series of sharp slaps to the face.

“It doesn’t matter,” he repeated. “Because you’re not a part of the breeding program. So just…just calm the fuck down. You’re getting yourself all worked up for no reason.”

He was dizzy and nauseated. Champagne always made him sick and he was kicking himself for drinking so much of it. She sat down next to him and let her head drop, the two of them sitting side by side, the energy of the moment blown. They were both frustrated and exhausted and there was nothing left to say.

“Merlin, I wish you hadn’t seen that fucking sign,” he finally said, rubbing his eyes with two fingers.

“I’m sorry Draco. I’m sorry. I just,” she turned and looked at him, her face dead serious.

“Sometimes I just get tired of being enslaved.”

He stared. She stared. And then the two of them dissolved into the hardest laugh they’d had in years. They didn’t laugh because it was particularly funny or enjoyable or because they were happy or having a good time. They laughed because there was nothing else to do…because their lives weren’t even their own anymore, they were both prisoners, both slaves, and they could scream and cry and scratch and kick all they wanted and until the collar and cuff came off, nothing would change. It was the most ridiculous, surreal situation anyone could be in, and so they laughed. Hermione fell backwards onto the couch, tears streaming from her eyes as she laughed until her stomach hurt, unable to breathe, unable to speak. Draco slid down onto the floor with his face in his hands, his head spinning as he howled.

“OK,” Hermione said, pulling herself together, wiping the tears from her eyes. “OK, this is definitely a sign that I’ve had too much to drink.” She stood and began cleaning, gathering up cracker boxes and the empty chocolate box. “I’m going to bed. Tomorrow, if our brains still work we start studying again, ok?”

“Yes m’lady,” he said, pulling himself off the floor.

She disappeared into the bedroom and came out ten minutes later in her pajamas, slipping into the bathroom to wash her face, just like nothing had ever happened. Tomorrow he would tell her. When they were sober and she was calm, he would tell her. He would have one more beer and then he’d go to bed, get a good night’s sleep and then he’d tell her the truth.
Chestnut

Hermione woke in the dark and found the bed empty, the fire still crackling, filling the doorway with a golden glow. She threw her legs over the side of the bed and stood, feeling what may have been tiny little drill going right through her left eye and a lurch in her stomach threatening to send the box of chocolates right back up.

“Please don’t tell me you’re still awake,” she said, shuffling out to the couch.

Draco was asleep sitting up, the coffee table covered with six empty beer bottles, one more dangling from his fingers. She took it from his hand and flopped down beside him.

“Come on Malfy, time for bed,” she said, dragging out her old prefect’s voice, preparing to sentence him to a week’s detention for drinking in the common room.

He blinked slowly, his cheeks flush with drunkenness, his pout dramatic and deep set. She couldn’t help but laugh.

“I can put myself to bed,” he slurred, unable to focus on her face, her beautiful face. He loved looking at her in the firelight. This was why electricity was bullshit.

“I’m sure you can, but I’m going to help you anyway,” she said, trying to stand up, but he pulled her back down, his head flopping onto her shoulder with a heavy sigh.

“Granger, all those things I said to you in school, those things I did. You know why, don’t you? You know why you made me so mad.”

“I know, Draco.”

He turned his face so that his lips were on her neck, sending goosebumps up her arms. Why did they both have the worst possible timing with these little bursts of…want?

“After that stupid Yule Ball, with that stupid Viktor Drum…”

“Krum,” she corrected, tracing the veins on the back of his hand. She liked hearing him talk in this small, quiet voice.

“I saw how Ron made you cry, that fucking twat. I saw you crying and I was going to find you. I was going to find you and walk you back to your room and kiss you and tell you that really, your hair wasn’t that bad.”

He touched her cheek and lifted his head to kiss her, so much softer, so much more gentle and tentative than he’d ever kissed her before. And she accepted it, lacing her fingers into his, opening her mouth to him and letting her tongue drag across his lip. It felt good to kiss him. It felt good to feel something good, to feel something soft and kind and comforting. It calmed her soul better than any drug or drink or spell could do. And if her life was going to end before she was twenty five she wanted to feel all of those things while she was alive, feel them intensely and thoroughly as often as she could. But she didn’t want to sleep with him when he was too drunk to remember it. Like he’d said to her before, the time will come.

“You know, Malfoy, maybe someday both of us will be in our right minds for a few minutes at the same time and we can … take care of this,” she said, delicately pulling herself out from underneath him.
He stood and bumped into the table, knocking bottles to the floor. Hermione took his hand and lead him back to the bedroom, surprised when he stopped in the doorway, pressing her against the wall, caging her in with his arms. Her heart sped up, feeling the hard length of his cock against her stomach, his breath hot on her neck.

“I could make you fuck me you know,” he whispered in low and husky voice, his fingers tickling up underneath her shirt. “Don’t forget I’m a fucking Death Eater baby, I can take whatever I want. And you know what? There are no unforgivable curses anymore,” he said, nibbling little kisses along her jawline. “Not for purebloods like me. One little word from me and you do whatever I say.”

He snapped his fingers in front of her face and she closed her eyes and took a deep breath, reminding herself that he was drunk. He was tired and hurt and drunk and he didn’t mean a word of what he said.

“I know that, Draco. And I’m very grateful that you’re not going to do that. I know you wouldn’t do that to me.”

“I could make you strip and let me see that pretty pink pussy again,” he said, his hands tight on her hips. “I could just lay down…”

He stumbled backward from her to sit on the edge of their bed, pulling off his t-shirt while she watched, terrified that he would drunkenly, mistakenly put her under the curse.

“And I could say, come over here my little Chestnut…come over here and ride my cock.”

She couldn’t help the little shiver of arousal that ran between her legs, the heat in her stomach at the thought of doing just that. His bare chest was broad and beautiful, even the old scars that sliced across it adding something, a vulnerability that she found enticing. But it wouldn’t be right to touch him. Not now. He flopped backwards and went quiet. Hermione quickly pulled off his shoes and lifted his legs onto the bed. He looked asleep; so peaceful now, but he’d be sick as a dog in the morning. She tucked him in under the blanket and his hand shot out to grab her arm.

“I wouldn’t do it to hurt you, Chestnut,” he said, his words slurring, his voice soft and dreamy. “But I could do it. I want to. I want you. I want to fuck you every day until it works.”

“What?” She’d only been listening partially until that last phrase. “Draco, what do you mean until it works?”

He rolled over and put his head in her lap, kissing the tops of her thighs.

“It’ll work and we’ll all be safe. I promise,” he said, his hand rubbing her stomach for a moment until his hand fell limp, down beside his face. She shook him, pulled at his hair, slapped his cheek, but by then he’d passed out completely.

“What will work? Who’s all of us? Draco?”

But her only answer was his soft, drunken snore.
In the morning it was his turn to wake up alone, his mouth sticky and dry, his hair damp with sweat. When he sat up to get out of bed he was sure he was going to vomit so he just flopped back down, watching the room tilt and sway back and forth.

“Granger…I’m dying. Can you bring me some water if you’re up?” He stopped moving to listen for her response and realized the guest house was unnaturally silent. “Please?” No shuffling feet, no one yelling back at him to get the water himself. “Granger!”

He got out of bed dragging the duvet behind him and very slowly made his way to the living room, expecting to find her on the couch, but instead he found a note scribbled on a piece of parchment.

*I've gone to the Manor for Hangover Potion. Back before too long. Please don’t throw up in the bed.*

He put the note down and dropped onto the couch, looking up at the ceiling and praying that his father was still asleep.

She knocked at the back door to the Manor and waited, knowing Fingston wouldn’t be able to resist playing butler.

“Yes Miss?” He said, holding the door open no more than an inch.

“Hi Fingston, I need to get something from Master Draco’s lab. May I come in?”

“Fingston should fetch Master Lucius…he will…”

“No, there’s no need for that. I won’t event be a moment. You know me, come on,” she said, shivering a bit in the early morning cold. “Fingston, please open the door.”

The elf gave her a harsh look with one watery, wary eye and then disapparted, leaving the door ajar and she slid inside, making her way to the staircase on the other side of the Manor. As soon as she left the kitchens she felt the heat building around her neck, not necessarily painful, but steadily increasing. She wondered if the heating charm was controlled by the tracker, by whomever watched their movements, or if it just happened automatically depending on her distance from her owner. Either way, it made her stomach churn.

Actually, she could use a hangover cure herself, but this mission was solely motivated by doing something nice for Draco, who seemed to be at constant war with himself ever since she arrived at the Manor and doubly so since he took over her ownership. She knew from talking to him that he’d secluded himself here and in his lab ever since the Fall of Hogwarts, trying to ‘pay reparations’ as he called his work. She knew that he felt guilty for partially contributing to the deaths of Harry and Ron, Neville and Luna and the rest, and that just having her around served as a constant reminder of what his stupid Vanishing Cabinet had set into motion. He’d told her about the birds, about how he’d shook so hard when he tried to curse Dumbledore that he’d nearly pissed himself. His father and the Dark Lord and the Death Eaters had all twisted his young mind so thoroughly that he still considered himself a failure for not being able to commit murder, for not being able to torture the innocent, for not hurting a slave.

“Miss Granger, how lovely to have you back in the house,” Lucius said, cracking into view right beside her.
She lowered her eyes reflexively, holding her hands folded behind her back, the collar growing hotter as she made her way up the stairs.

“I’m just getting something from Mr. Malfoy’s lab,” she said. “He isn’t feeling well.”

“No need to keep up the pretense of formality, Miss Granger,” he said, sweeping down the hallway ahead of her and opening up the lab door. “I know that his ‘ownership’ of you is all an act. He’s told me as much.”

She looked up then, trying to read the look on his face, whether he was trying to catch her in a lie, confirm a suspicion or if he was simply making conversation and truly attempting to make her comfortable, she couldn’t tell. When she moved to the potions cabinets on the side wall he made no attempt to stop her or prevent her from touching ‘his things’ and she decided he may actually be sincere. He walked around the lab himself, picking things up to examine them up close, his face twisted in confusion at the elaborate formulas and notes scribbled on parchments, scattered across the tables and vials of different colored capsules lining the cabinets.

“He’s much smarter and more ambitious than you give him credit for,” she said, finally finding the hangover cure. Not surprisingly he had a drawer full and she gratefully took a few of them for herself and him. “Even in school he was always…well, he kept up with me. In fact we challenged each other in potions class to see who could finish first and with better success. We kept each other motivated with how much we hated each other,” she said, smiling.

“If you think he hated you Miss Granger,” Lucius said with a conspiratorial smile, “you severely misread his signals.”

At his words she felt her cheeks flushing red, remembering what Draco had said to her last night, about having unspoken feelings for her for years.

“Please, he flirted with everyone,” she said. “Quite the little wolf.”

“Ah yes, not unlike his father,” Lucius said, coming to stand beside her, looking at the other supplies she was assembling. “But when he came back home all he could talk about was you. It vexed him greatly to be so taken by…”

“A mudblood,” Hermione finished for him. “I’m sure it vexed you as well.”

“Sometimes, Miss Granger, we are raised in a bubble of our own kind, and we have it drummed into our brains from a young age how the ‘others’ are so monumentally different and wrong and it’s easier to just believe it…until you actually find yourself in the same room with those ‘others’ and realize that they’re…” he rubbed a lock of her hair between his fingertips. “quite magnificent.”

She shrugged herself away from him, trying to cut this conversation short, feeling a familiar energy emanating from him, a dark and hungry look in his eye.

“He could learn a lot from a brilliant witch like yourself,” Lucius said, staring around at the cluttered lab.

“I’ve learned an incredible amount from him,” Hermione said, feeling particularly defensive on Draco’s behalf. “He actually has a heart buried under all that anger and sarcasm and bitterness. He wants to make a difference in the world he nearly destroyed.”

Lucius nodded tightly and continued exploring the lab as if it were the first time he’d been in it, and for all Hermione knew, it was. Thinking of a few other tests she wanted to try on her collar she walked to the far end of the room and felt it heat up by a few more degrees. Lucius watched her
wincing, touching her fingers to the metal and drawing them back in pain, yet still she focused on her work, packing up books and vials and tools, fighting through the torture.

“What is it he’s trying to achieve?” He asked, “with these pills and powders?”

She walked closer to the door to grant herself a bit of relief and explained the difference of convenience between vials of horrible tasting liquid and a bottle of tasteless pills. Her eyes lit up with excitement as she declared it a giant step forward for healers or aurors or anyone who used potions, letting them carry dozens of cures and charms with them at any given time.

“He’s spent so much time in pain, and causing other people pain, that his only focus now is to stop it,” she said, and Lucius was sure that he’d never seen her eyes so bright, so energized. “In fact… he’s working on an anesthetic…”

She stopped, froze in place so suddenly and completely that he was sure someone had cast a spell on her until she blinked and shook her head, covering her mouth with her hand in surprise. Overtaken by a burst of speed she gathered up everything she’d been collecting into her arms and headed for the door.

“I have to go Mr. Malfoy. I just…I want you to know that your son isn’t as lost as you think he is. It’s just that he isn’t going to be where you’re looking.”

Lucius stood in the lab long after she left, amazed that he’d known nothing of what his son had accomplished.

Draco was waiting for her on the couch, huddled over a cup of tea and a piece of toast he’d been nursing for half an hour. While she was away he’d been trying piece together how he’d gotten into bed. He remembered her walking him from the couch, his arm around her shoulder, but he prayed that what he’d dreamt about hadn’t actually been real, that he hadn’t pinned her to the wall or charmingly asked her to ‘ride his cock’. It all seemed distant and surreal, enveloped in a sort of soft focus fog, and knowing that she’d been a little tipsy herself, he decided not to bring up, knowing he had no excuse.

What he WAS going to bring up was the baby. He was going to tell her that he hadn’t told her everything about the breeding program, that there was one little detail he’d left…

“Draco, I have an idea!” She yelled, bursting through the door.

As she dropped her collection of supplies onto the coffee table he could see the red, irritated skin around the edge of her collar where the metal had heated. He stood and pulled his wand from the mantle above the fireplace and cast a healing charm over her neck.

“Why didn’t you wake me up instead of marching over there yourself? You put yourself in unnecessary pain,” he said in the clipped, irritated tone of someone in a bit of unnecessary pain himself.

“Here, Cheers!” she said, throwing him a hangover draught. She held up her own vial and tipped it towards him before downing it in one gulp. “Now listen to me, I have an idea,” she said, shuffling through the papers and supplies on the coffeetable. “I brought over all of the notebooks I could find on that mess of desk of yours. How far away are you from completing the anesthesia potion?”
“The wh…” her enthusiasm and energy startled him and he was unable to think straight. He just wanted a couple of minutes to let the potion work, to get the cotton out of his skull.

“The anesthetic! If it works as a full body numbing potion, I could take it and you could destroy the collar. You could melt it or file it off and I wouldn’t feel it!”

“Hermione, no…it would…you wouldn’t feel it but your skin would be destroyed. You’d be scarred for life,” he was reluctant, but the gears had started turning. He wasn’t that far from being ready to test the potion. He could try it on himself first and if it worked, they could see how the collar reacted.

“I’d rather be free and carry a scar than be trapped in a collar,” she said, staring into his eyes with such longing and such earnestness that he couldn’t deny her. “Skin can be fixed, Draco.”

“I need a few weeks. And…I’ll need…we’ll need to go to my lab in London, but we’ll do it. We’ll try it. But Hermione,” he said, holding tight to her shoulders, “if I think for a minute that it’s going to do irreparable damage, I’m stopping it. I’ll undo the whole thing. I promise you that.”

“Thank you,” she said, crushing him into a hug. “It’s going to work. I know it. We worked on a solution and we found it!”

She was so excited at the prospect of her new plan that he didn’t dare speak a word about his own.
With a week until the Winter Revel, Draco took Hermione to London so he could work on the anesthetic potion in the Bobbins Lab with its access to a wider array of ingredients. They stayed in the flat in Richmond, which was far more spacious and modern than the guest house with three bedrooms and a small balcony that looked out over the river. It was filled with windows and drenched with light, a polar opposite to life at the Manor. She could see why Draco would prefer it there.

“You can have a room to yourself for a whole week, fold your clothes, make the bed and everything,” he said while flicking on lights and warming the air. “A respite from the slob.”

“Right,” she said with a hesitant smile. “Thank goodness.” She took her small overnight bag into one of the guest rooms to start unpacking.

She really shouldn’t have expected to sleep with Draco while they were at the flat, there was no reason for it. Both of them were trying their hardest to avoid tipping over the edge of their unspoken desire, keeping their relationship relatively platonic until the timing was better or they came to their senses. After all, what did she think was going to happen? That she’d sleep with him once, blow him away with her incredible sex skills and he’d sweep her away on a white horse, the two one time enemies lighting the world on fire with their true love?

“What’s that face?” he asked, standing in the doorway to her room.

She’d been frozen in front of the vanity table for too long, thinking about why she was so upset that Draco hadn’t invited her to stay in his room, and he’d caught her in her daydreaming, fingers tapping against her collar.

“It’s nothing. I was…I’m just worried about the Revel.”

Just like the gathering at Order headquarters, Draco was required to be at the Revel and because of her slave status, she needed to be there with him. If she was taken aback by the blind madness of the fairly ordinary meeting of the Death Eaters she was sure to be horrified by the Revel, particularly because they were all required to witness the sacrifice of Hazel Ashwood.

“I know,” he said, coming in to stand beside her, to look at her sad and confused reflection in the mirror. She looked so much smaller than her remembered, having lost her confidence, her pride… and her magic. “But you won’t be there alone. I promise I’ll be right beside you the whole time. No one will touch you.”

The words came out a bit more angry and possessive than he’d intended, but she didn’t shrink away from him. He wanted to comfort her in some other way, to stroke her hair or hug her, take her hand, but it didn’t seem right, so he stepped back and headed for the door.

“We’ll go to the lab this afternoon. I should have something to test by the end of the week with
your help. Then we can go get something to eat or…for a walk along the river or something. It’s
cold out but I thought you would…”

“I’d like it very much,” she said. “Whenever you’re ready, let’s go.”

He’d paid a handsome fee to work at the Bobbins Potions Labs, to use their equipment and storage
and the knowledge of the other wizards in his research, and such he’d thought he had a bit of cache
with the company. But as they flooed to the main lobby of the building downtown, he immediately
felt the eyes of everyone there following them. Obviously he was well known in the community
and Hermione was near legend status amongst war veterans and students, but it was the way they
looked at them, at her, that bothered him. He took her hand and they made their way to the second
floor, Hermione fiddling with the scarf she’d tied around her collar. Luckily the actual lab wasn’t
very busy and he was able to get to work quickly, handing books and vials and cauldrons to
Hermione while he gathered ingredients.

“You put the ingredients for the first formulation in here,” he said, “and I’ll do the second one over
here…that one will need to be heated for longer so…”

“Mr. Malfoy,” a smooth female voice interrupted.

They looked up to see a very well put together, sharp looking witch in a white lab coat staring
down at them. Draco had seen her around and assumed she was some sort of supervisor, although
they’d never met formally. It didn’t matter who she was, he was there at the blessing of Melinda
Bobbin, who promised to not make a big deal out of the massive donation that the Malfoy family
had made in order to give him the privilege.

“Yes? Can I help you?” He asked, glancing up then looking back at his work almost instantly. “We
happen to be in the middle of something.”

Hermione was always shocked at how quickly he could revert back into his old self, the ice cold,
stuck up Malfoy that thought the world revolved on his axis. It made her uncomfortable but she
just adjusted her scarf and went back to her work.

“As you know, we operate here at the pleasure of the Order,” she said, undeterred by his brush off.
“They routinely inspect our work and outcomes and our labs are constantly inspected and
monitored.”

“I’m not surprised. Half of Wizard London wouldn’t piss with their pants on fire without The Dark
Lord’s approval, but what’s that got to do with me? Surely you know that I’m a Death Eater
in….good standing.” He nearly choked on the last words, and Hermione kept her eyes on her
cauldron, hoping the woman didn’t recognize her.

“Of course Mr. Malfoy, but we have rules to uphold, and one of those rules is to prevent
contamination. We can’t have…certain kinds…interfering in the lab.”

Hermione’s head snapped up then, but before she could give the woman a piece of her mind, Draco
grabbed her wrist beneath the table and squeezed it hard.

“Slaves do you mean? Or do you mean mudbloods? Halfbloods? Muggles?” Draco asked, the
distaste clear in his voice. “Just how small is the acceptable population these days? I mean, my
family is one of the purest around so I’m not worried, but what about your background?”
“Mudblood slaves, Mr. Malfoy. Prisoners. Ms. Granger’s name is…very high…on the monitor list. She’s not to have access to magic or potions. I’ll have to ask her to leave.”

Draco let go of Hermione and went back to his work, continuing to put ingredients in his cauldron while he held up his cuffed wrist.

“She can’t. We’re tethered.”

“We have a safe holding room within fifty yards of the lab, I’d be happy to escort her there. Otherwise I’ll have to ask you both to leave. I’m afraid there’s no wiggle room on this.”

Hermione could feel Draco tensing beside her, see his eyes flashing silver with anger, ready to snap. But she knew how important the work in this lab was, and delaying that work just to argue a point wasn’t worth it. She’d given up her pride and the joy of being on the side of right a long time ago. She put down the ingredients she’d been holding, scribbling a short note on the spiral bound book between them before standing up.

“It’s fine Mr. Malfoy,” she said, adopting her good submissive slave tone, flicking her eyes towards the note and bowing her head. “I’ll wait for you there.”

Draco glanced down at the notebook as she moved from the table.

_You don’t need me but I need you. Take your time._

She moved to follow the lab supervisor from the room, noticing how the woman stepped away from her, as if her blood status were catching. Something cracked inside her as she followed her out the door, staring at the hexagonal pattern of the white tiles on the floor. It was easier than trying to ignore the stares and whispers, the people who dramatically stepped out of her way, the man who muttered ‘fucking mudblood’ as she passed him on the stairs. The collar was heavy and its sentence a painful burden that she lived with every day, but until that moment, Hermione had never felt dirtier. She’d never felt more like a slave.

The day of the Revel was windy with some of the first flurries of the season swirling through the steely sky. Draco woke up alone and angry, unhappy with how the first two anesthetic formulations had failed, rendering the body relaxed and tranquil but still sensitive to pain past the first layers of skin. They’d tested the potions at home with her drawing a knife across the meat of his biceps, and his deafening scream announced their failure…and need for more work. He didn’t want to bring Hermione back to the lab more than he needed to. Closing her into that windowless, but otherwise comfortable cell filled him with an unbelievable guilt that she did her best to assuage when they walked the streets in the evening, taking her to dinner or shopping, just walking along the river.

“It’s fine,” she’d told him, shrugging as the looked out over the water, watching the sunset. “I’m telling you it’s amazing, they have books and plain tap water and everything!” She was trying to joke with him but he didn’t laugh.
“Well I don’t like how they look at you,” he said, turning up the collar of his coat against the wind. “You’re smarter than anyone there and they look at you like you’re a mud covered rat.”

“I don’t care about that. You know very well that I’ve never cared what people think of me, or at least I try not to care. And none of it matters as long as you get this thing off my neck.”

They were quiet then, and when the sun sunk below the horizon hundreds of white fairy lights lit up the trees on the riverwalk behind them. She smiled, watching a two children jump and laugh, running between the tree trunks.

“We’ll have to do something for Christmas,” she said. “Something happy.”

He offered her his arm and she took it. They walked slowly beneath the twinkling trees, making their way back to the flat.

“It’s time to go,” he said, knocking on her bedroom door.

She’d locked herself in seclusion for the day, sleeping in late, taking a hot bath and reading, doing anything but thinking about what she’d have to witness later on. But now she finally opened the door and came out wearing the same black satin gown she’d worn to the meeting, her hair in a low knot at the nape of her neck. Draco gave her plain black robes and took her hand.

“It’s going to be ok. I promise,” he said, before pulling her in against his side.

They apparated to Hogwarts Prison where the Revel would take place on the old Quidditch Pitch, the tall spectator’s stands now hung with silver and black banners showing the Dark Mark three stories high, giant stone basilisk heads with razor sharp fangs and curled tongues arched over the entrance.

It always broke Hermione’s heart to see what a shambles the school had become, some of the towers and turrets crumbling, most of the windows blown out of the great hall. The burns and cracks on the walls from vicious duels were never repaired, letting the entire school serve as a monument to the war, a reminder of their failure. The lawns and shrubs were overgrown, ivy crawling the stone walls and eating away at the mortar, piles of broken stone and brick laying around the grounds. She was grateful to not have to go inside, to relive her prisoner status in the months after the war, to see who was still left there to rot, who had died, who’d been captured. She squeezed Draco’s hand, who was looking sadly at the disintegrating castle himself. He’d said awful things about the place as a child, his father’s hate filtered through his mouth, unwilling to accept anything different. When he was small he’d gobbled up everything Lucius told him about the almighty Salazar, bumbling Dumbledore and the filthy mudbloods that were ruining Wizardkind, that Harry Potter wanted to take what was rightfully theirs, to reduce Wizard England to jumbled writhing mass of impurity and weak magic. And yet here beside him stood the smartest, brightest girl he had ever known, now the strongest woman, still proud and unbroken, still unashamed and unwilling to hide, even when surrounded by her enemies.

They approached the pitch together triggering memories of matches under bright blue skies, chasing the snitch over the grounds, flying faster than he’d ever thought possible, the freest he’d ever been. Now the dark winter sky was filled with bright, swirling green skulls and twisting serpents, suspended in light against the low hanging clouds. On the pitch itself crowds of people drank firewhiskey and danced and laughed around bonfires, masks flashing silver in the low light.
He felt Hermione pressing against him, her arm intertwined with his.

“Oi Malfoy!” someone yelled, clapping a hand on Draco’s shoulder. “That’s Granger, isn’t it!”

It was Goyle and he knew damn well that Granger was with him. Hermione looked up at the bully, now much taller and broader than in his youth, his neck thick with muscle. He looked her over slowly, chewing on his bottom lip.

“What do you want, Greg?” Draco asked through clenched teeth.

“Bad news love, no clothes for slaves tonight,” Goyle said, and with a flick of his wand he vanished her robes, leaving her chattering in the December cold, wearing nothing but the black satin gown. Her old school mate raised his wand to relieve her of the last of her dignity but Draco stopped him, grabbing his wrist and wrenching it backwards.

“Another move and I cut your dick off,” he hissed, and Hermione very nearly laughed at the surprise and fear that swept over Goyle. “And you’ll be paying for those robes you just vanished.”

He lowered his wand but still Goyle reached out to grab a lock of her hair and lift it to his nose. She jumped away and cowered behind Draco; not accustomed to playing the damsel in distress, but knowing that she was outskilled and outnumbered with only her owner willing to protect her.

“Don’t be shy, Granger, it’s nothing I haven’t fucked before,” he said, laughing and flicking his tongue at her. But when Draco pulled out his wand and pressed it to his neck in warning he threw his hands in the air in surrender. “Suit yourself mate, but if they see her dressed you’re going to draw attention to yourselves. And I don’t think your bird’s interested in drawing attention.”

Goyle walked away with a smile on his face and she looked around the rest of the crowd to confirm his point. Every woman there wore a collar and they were all naked, some horribly scarred, branded and pierced, chains hanging from rings in their nipples, lash marks across the flesh of their backs. A few huddled close to their owners, others taking much more “active” roles in the reveling while groups of masked men gathered around them, hooting and whistling, nothing like the stoic and regal posture she’d seen purebloods adopt in public.

Draco looked down at her and frowned, knowing what had to happen. Her face was pale, even in the cold and in the light of the bonfires he could see her eyes brimming with tears. The crowd grew louder and he bent down to her ear.

“As soon as….when the sacrifice is over, we’ll leave. You can stand behind me, I’ll…”

“Don’t,” she said, slipping the straps of the gown off her shoulders. “Just let’s get this over with.”

The gown puddled at her feet and he gathered it up, stuffing it into a pocket inside his robes. He tried not to look at her body, so much healthier looking than a month ago, no bruises, no burns or bite marks, no whip lashes. She’d gotten more sleep and gained a bit of weight, smoothing out her soft curves. She unpinned her hair and pulled it forward to cover her breasts, crossing her arms over her stomach.

He started walking towards the fires, his hand on her back, but she stood stock still, suddenly too terrified to move. She could feel him there, like she could sense a thunderstorm in the air. In front of her up on a high platform, the Dark Lord stood in his black robes, surveying the crowd. His eyes were nearly glowing red and when his gaze stopped she could feel them on her even though she was one of dozens of naked, shivering slaves at the Revel. She felt like her breath was being sucked from her lungs, like her feet were sinking into the frozen mud.
“Granger,” Draco said, pulling at her wrist. “Granger!”

She shook her head to clear it and looked up, her stomach roiling with nausea.

“Listen, Goyle was right. We can’t draw attention. Let’s go stand somewhere else, in the dark, in the back,” he said, but she didn’t move. “Should I…do you…do you want me to Imperius you?”

“Draco Malfoy don’t you dare!” she nearly shrieked, her voice brimming over with fury.

“I won’t. I won’t! It’s why I asked,” he said, taking a step back from her. “I’m trying to make this easier for you.”

“No. I don’t want it to be easy to watch someone die. If I have to be here, I want to see it. I want to remember it.” She looked back at the platform. Up on the black dais a small group of Death Eaters that had gathered around Voldemort, lighting candles and placing chairs in an elaborate ceremony. With her voice calmer than before she touched Draco’s hand. “Don’t ever suggest that again. Please.”

She was shaking, and whether it was from the cold or her anger or her fear he wasn’t sure, but he felt guilt settling around him like a fog. Pulling out his wand he cast a warming charm around her and took her hand.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry I frightened you, I’m sorry I suggested it. OK? Granger?”

But her eyes were locked again. Hazel Ashwood stood on the dais, her honey colored hair combed back from her face, naked except for her collar. Her wrists were shackled to chains bolted to the floor, her legs held open by a heavy iron spreader bar shackled to her ankles.

“Friends! Welcome to the Winter Revel!” The Dark Lord spoke, standing from the black throne like chair he’d been lounging in. “And I thank you for this glorious, beautiful….” He stroked Hazel’s cheek with one long finger, “Sacrifice.”

Holding her chin tight in his hand, he kissed her on the mouth.

“She has been in my company for the last couple of days and has proven quite obedient. And now, now she…willingly presents herself as a sacrifice to keep our England, Wizard England, safe. She sacrifices her…tainted blood in the name of keeping our blood pure!”

The crowd erupted in a cheer, sparks flying from wands, rounds of hearty applause. Draco offered a few claps of his hands to save face, but otherwise he stood close to Hermione, fighting the urge to wrap his robe around her, to hide her in his arms. The thought of that fucking snake touching her, hurting her, made him dizzy with rage. And yet Hermione simply stood, her eyes glazed over, her mouth hanging open, arms wrapped tightly around herself.

“We no longer live in a world where our magic is threatened by muggles,” he said. His face turned in their direction and she could feel his stare. “Or by mudbloods and half breeds. And with our dedication and with great sacrifice, one day soon, our blood will once again be pure. Ms. Ashwood…tell us if you will, what taints your family line.”

“I…my great grandmother was half vampire.”

The crowd went mad with hissing and rage, shouting at Hazel, decrying the existence of half breeds and the horrors of dirty blood. In his ears Draco could only hear his own voice hissing at an innocent girl, ‘no one asked your opinion, you filthy little mudblood.’ He looked over at Hermione whose eyes were still focused straight ahead.
“Granger,” he called to her under his breath. “Are you ok?”

He took her hand and she clutched at him tightly, her face unchanged, but holding onto him as if she’d fall from the face of the earth if he let go.

Suddenly flames shot up from the corners of dais shooting showers of green and gold sparks into the air. Hazel flinched and squirmed in her bonds, tears streaming down her face. The crowd began their chant of “Sacrifice….Sacrifice….,” as the Dark Lord stalked around the tiny girl shivering and sobbing with fright. With his wand balanced delicately over his fingers he pointed at her and cried out,

“IMPERIUS!”

Hazel went still, her tears stopping, no longer shivering as Voldemort stared into her eyes and gave quiet instruction. She stood tall, her eyes wide, her face blank.

Sacrifice!

Hermione remembered to breathe, digging her fingers deep into Draco’s palm, unable to tear her eyes away.

Sacrifice!

“Close your eyes Granger!”

She heard the voice as if it were a hundred miles away, as if she were alone on an island, waves crashing around her, her legs stuck in wet sand.

“GRANGER DON’T WATCH”

Sacrifice!

The Dark Lord stepped away from the girl standing naked in the cold, calmly awaiting her death.

“SECTUMSEMPRA”

The crowd cheered and gasped as her chest bloomed with bright red slashes, blood instantly pouring from the wounds. Draco grabbed his own chest, feeling a bit faint, cold sweat prickling his forehead, memories of laying half dead in a cold puddle of water washing over him. Again Voldemort pointed his wand.

“SECTUMSEMPRA”

Further wounds opened across her legs, her arms, a bright line running from her forehead to her chin, slicing through her left eye. She stood silent and still as her life drained, blood puddling at her feet, streaking down her legs. Draco went down to one knee, bowing his head to keep from passing out, breathing deep, his hands trembling. Hermione let go of him and he looked up at her shaking body, the pulse throbbing wildly in her neck. Her face was gray, her eyelids fluttering and Draco knew she was going to go down. But it still wasn’t over.

“SECTUMSEMPRA!”

A final slice slashed across Hazel’s throat and her broken body finally fell, her blood running in rivulets down off the platform, steaming in the cold air as if releasing her soul. Draco closed his eyes as the crowd went wild, jumping and screaming and firing off charms. He felt like the non-
existent walls were closing in on him, like his heart was beating too fast, ready to explode. And then he heard it, a sound like nothing he’d heard before, a high keening wail that vibrated through his chest, the sound of it so despondent and terrified that he knew right away who it was. Both of them had had enough.

He pulled himself to stand on shaking legs and grabbed a still screaming Hermione around her waist, yanking her against his side.

“It's over Hermione. It's over. We’re going home.”
Another Way

He’d never seen her so still, so quiet, nearly catatonic with her eyes glazed over, staring at nothing once they arrived back at the flat in Richmond. At first he worried that something had happened in their apparition, some sort of mental splinching or a punishing effect of the collar. But after a few minutes she shook her head clear and shuffled over to the sofa, staring out over the river, unaware or not caring about her nudity, not caring about anything. She’d stopped screaming when he pulled her in to apparate but hadn’t said a word or even made a noise since.

Draco put a blanket around her shoulders and went to his room to change out of his robes. He tried to think of something comforting he could say to her, something that would fix it all, soothe her, but there weren’t enough words, there weren’t any right words. When he came out of the bedroom she hadn’t moved, not even to pull the blanket closed.

“Hermione,” he said, sitting down beside her, doing his best to speak calmly, not to startle her. “Hey, come on. You’ve got to snap out of it.. It’s over. Let’s…let’s get you into a hot bath.”

He went to the bathroom without her and started the water, adding lavender oil to it to fill the room with fragrant steam. When he came out she’d at least moved to stand, but was still staring at nothing, a blank space on the wall. For a moment she tried closing her eyes, but instead of darkness she saw red. She saw blood pouring from open wounds. When she closed her eyes she saw Hazel, saw that moment when the life went out of her face, went her eyes went dark and she fell.

“Granger!” He snapped at her. “Come here. Now.” His voice was dark, almost angry as he attempted to shake her from her trance with his ‘owner voice’.

She shook her head clear and wrapped her arms around herself, two fat tears rolling down her cheeks. He stepped in close to her,

“Come on,” he whispered, his voice softer as he picked her up. She laced her hands around his neck, her head on his shoulder as he walked her to the bath. He set her down in the warm, scented water and she dropped her chin to her chest, her arms wrapped around her knees.

“Tooh hot?” he asked, and she shook her head. He gave her a flannel and soap, crouching over the tub to brush her hair back from her face. “I’ll...I’ll go get you some pajamas…make some tea…”

He stood to leave and she grabbed his wrist, holding it as tightly as she had at the Revel, with as much desperation.

“Don’t leave,” she said. “Don’t leave me alone. I’m so scared.”

There was nothing for her to be scared of in a London flat surrounded by muggles, far from Hogwarts, far from the Manor, but instead of telling her that he just slid down to the floor and sat beside her, leaning his back against the clawfoot tub. And when he sat there, alone with his thoughts for a few minutes, he realized that he was scared too. The reach of the Order was terrifying, their powers and their rules making them both claustrophobic, as if the whole of London were watching them, walls closing in. He was terrified of the possibility of Hermione dying the way Hazel did, of being violated by that half snake mutant and then having to watch her blood, her life drained out in front him. He wouldn’t be able to bear the weight of another life on his conscience. If they took her there was no question he’d die too.

“I don’t want to die Draco,” she said, her voice small and childlike. “If we can’t get this collar off,
if we can’t figure out the anesthetic potion or some other…I saw him looking at me. I could feel his eyes on me. He knew who I was and that I was still alive. It was like he was touching me! I can’t. I can’t. I’m trying so hard to be strong and to fight and be brave and I can’t. I’m so scared!” She pulled herself in tighter, rocking back and forth, her voice hysterical, cracking as her throat went dry. She reached down for his hand again. “You have to save me Draco. You have to save me. I don’t have the strength I used to have. They took it from me. They snapped my wand in front of my eyes and locked my magic…I’m nothing now…I’m,” she dissolved into sobs, her words broken and breathy. "I know you said you weren’t my knight in shining armor but I need you to rescue me! I can’t do anything for myself. I don’t have my magic! I don’t have my freedom! I’m completely helpless. I’ve never felt so helpless. We have to find a way, another way. There has to be a way to escape.”

He was quiet for a long time, letting her cry before he finally said,

“‘There is.’”

“What?” She leant over the side of the tub. “What did you say?”

“There’s a way to save you, to keep you alive for good,” he said, rubbing his wet eyes with the heels of his hands. “But you won’t like it.”

“Draco what is it?”

“You would still be a slave. We would still be tethered. None of that would change, but you would be safe because…you would be a mother.”

“I don’t…”

“Remember what I told you about the population stall? The drop off? If the Order finds out you’re pregnant by a pureblood wizard you’re safe until the child proves magical. If it’s not a squib – your life is secure.” He stood then, digging his hands deep in his pockets, unable to look her in the eye. “I didn’t tell you this before because I knew. I know you. I knew that this whole thing would be…abhorrent to you; the forced breeding program, the idea of bringing a child into this broken…fucking…world. Not only that but…”

“What?”

He sighed, running his fingers over the grain of the wood on the doorjam. “To bring it into the world with me.”

She said nothing, staring down at her open palms floating beneath the surface of the water.

“I’ll go get you some pajamas,” he said, closing the bathroom door behind him.

He was right. She’d never really wanted children. It wasn’t because she didn’t love children or family or because she didn’t feel that nurturing spirit. She didn’t feel motherhood was beneath her or not worth her time. It was just that any child she bore would be thrust into this world of darkness, danger and secrecy and violence. The poor thing would suffer all of the slings and arrows of humanity but with the nightmare of life under the Dark Lord’s rule thrown in.

But did refusing to have a child mean she’d given up hope, for herself, for Wizard England? After all it was a child that nearly defeated him before. It was a child that nearly saved the world. Maybe it could happen again. Perhaps, once again, they would have to rely on the next generation to save
them. Or maybe they could both say fuck it and it could just be like Malfoy had said in his drunken stupor…they could just go somewhere and be safe, the three of them hidden away in some safe part of the world with new names, new lives, a clean slate. After all, there was nothing for her in London anymore, nothing for her in England…nothing in the world. She blinked hard at the stinging tears in her eyes when she realized that Draco was all she had. And who did Draco have? She looked over at the closed door, remembering a selfish little git with his slicked back hair and fancy broomstick snarling at her in school. It was the same little boy that was now going to find her warm pajamas, who had run her a bath and kept her safe in the den of her enemies, letting her hide behind his back when the wolves started circling. He’d assured her from the beginning that he couldn’t be her knight in shining armor and yet he’d done everything in his power to do just that. And still his father thought him a failure, a disappointment. So he was stuck, like he said, too dark for one side, too light for the other.

“Hey, can I come in?” He knocked on the door, shaking her from her thoughts.

“Y-yeah. Sorry. Yes,” she called out, splashing water on her face. “Let me just grab my towel.”

She stepped out of the bath and wrapped a towel around her body before twisting one into her hair. Draco walked in with her neatly folded flannel pajamas in his arms, his face pale and tired. It was as if the Revel had aged him ten years.

“Thanks,” she said, giving him a smile that he just barely returned.

When he tried to leave she grabbed his arm and pulled him against her, wrapping her arms tight around his back, her head on his chest, comforted by the steady rhythm of his heartbeat, his slow breathing. He hugged her back, saying nothing, resting his chin on her head, his hands rubbing up and down her back.

“Thank you for protecting me tonight and for telling off Goyle and making sure I was comfortable and feeling as safe as could be expected.”

He shrugged and pulled away. “Anyone would have done that for you Granger,” he said. “Any reasonable wizard at least.”

“You’re wrong,” she said. “You try so hard to wear this mantle of evil, Draco, but it doesn’t fit you anymore.” She held his face in both of her hands, forcing him to look her in the eye. “You’re a good man now. You don’t have to bear all this weight.” He tried to break away but she wouldn’t allow it. “And of all the reasons I would be afraid to bring a child into the world…the fact that it would be with you…isn’t one of them.”

She felt him relax, his whole body softening and loosening beneath her fingertips. He lowered his eyes to the floor and held her wrists, wondering if it were possible to sleep like this, just standing there with her warm soft hands on his face.

“Thank you,” he said, finally able to pull away from her touch. “I’m going to make some tea and then I think we need to get some sleep. I can…if you want…I can knock you out with a potion so you don’t dream.”

“No, that’s ok. I have a lot to think about tonight. We only have eight weeks until the next name is drawn.”

They drank their tea in silence and Hermione went to her room to try and rest. Like a child warding off monsters she left the lights on and pulled the drapes closed tightly, tucking the blanket in up to her neck, but for a long time sleep wouldn’t come. She stared at the ceiling and it swirled with
Dark Marks, the serpent emerging from the skull’s mouth, baring its fangs and fluttering its tongue in her face.

“Hhhhhhermione Graaaangerrrrr,” it hissed, calling out her name for sacrifice.

She got up and grabbed a random book of the shelf, but the words on the pages swirled into images of a girl covered in red slashes, her body limp, her neck encircled with choker of blood. Throwing the book aside she sat and stared at the wall, willing herself to not run to his room, to not hide beneath his covers and curl up against his back. In their weeks of living in close quarters she’d grown accustomed to the smell of his skin, his soap, his sweat. She’d fallen asleep to the rhythm of his breathing, the tiny murmurs and moans of his dreams. And of course sleeping in the same bed there had been a number of times that they’d woken up closer than how they’d gone to sleep. Sometimes his arm would be thrown over her stomach, or his leg brushed up against hers. Sometimes she woke with her head against his shoulder or a hand in his hair, always pulling away in embarrassment as soon as she realized what had happened, moving quickly to her side of the massive bed.

It was silly really when he’d just been sitting with her while she was naked in the bath, seen her naked and put on display for his father’s parties. He’d seen every part of her, touched her, kissed her. She knew deep down that he wouldn’t mind having her curled up in his arms, but there was something about the intimacy of sleeping beside him, of seeing him so vulnerable and soft that made it seem like a boundary she shouldn’t yet cross. Besides, he was going to take a sleeping draught and he wouldn’t have even noticed she was there.

Instead her mind wandered to thoughts of walking along the river with him, memories of walking around London, shopping and eating, Draco haughtily judging the lowly muggles. After a while, she realized that they weren’t really memories, they were things that hadn’t happened yet. Because she was free in these visions, these daydreams; she had no collar, they were smiling. She was imagining what could be. She saw Draco’s strong hand resting on her rounded belly, leaning in to whisper something into her ear, making her laugh. These were the thoughts that gave her comfort. These were the thoughts that soothed her soul, washing away the blood and fire and smoke twisting through the cold winter night. Her eyes grew heavy and she lay back against the pillows, finally falling asleep to the thought of a happy, milky white skinned little boy with wild brown hair and icy grey eyes.

She was awake long before the sun came up, unable to keep her thoughts from intruding on her dreams. In the pre-dawn darkness she made tea and toast and cut up apples and oranges and a banana for breakfast. Her decision had filled her with a sort of nervous excitement, an energizing anxiety for what lay ahead.

Draco shuffled in and sat at the kitchen table, watching her in silence as he tried to gauge her mood, her decision. After her near breakdown the night before, he had almost offered to sleep with her… in her bed, or at least to hold her until she fell asleep. Of course she would have probably taken his proposition the wrong way as he was, to her, something of a wolf in sheep’s clothing. He was a part of the group of men who put her in this situation, who thrust her into this darkness and on top of all that, he was a Malfoy, a villain, certainly not accustomed to giving comfort. He’d never been asked to.

“I’ll do it,” she said, sitting down in the chair beside him. She smiled at how quickly his head snapped up, his eyes wide. “I can’t lie to you, I’d much rather that we find a different solution. I’d
rather remove the collar, to really be free of it.”

“Of course,” he said, shaking his head, the happy surprise and sudden light in his face fading a bit as he reached for the kettle and sugar bowl and she reached for his hand, taking it in both of hers.

“But not because I want to get away from you.” He looked down at her thumb rubbing over the back of his hand, her knee brushing against his knee. “Just because I wouldn’t ever be able to relax or be happy until I was really…truly safe.” Her voice was a soft, intimate whisper, buttery and soothing like a lullaby as she continued to stroke his fingers, tracing her fingertips over the veins on the back of his hand. "Even though I always feel safe when I'm with you."

He let out a short, barking laugh, but quickly swallowed it, feeling like a child...like an embarrassed little boy asking a girl to dance. So instead he just kept his eyes on their hands, linked together, warm.

“It’s no secret that there’s...something…pulling us together, Draco,” she said, looking up at him through her lashes, a little touch of pink in her cheeks. “I feel something for you and I think…”

“Yes,” he said, but the word barely made a noise, cracking on his strained breath. “I do.”

Their faces were so close, her hair resting on his forearm, her knee trapped between his legs.

“You were right when you said that this is a broken, dark world and it would be...hard to subject an innocent child to it. It would be selfish, and cruel,” she said, finally turning her face up to look him in the eye. “But the world will never change unless we do. Unless we don’t give up hope that one of these generations will change it all. I haven’t given up hope yet, Draco. And if you promise to help me, to really be there like you’re meant to, like a father, and if you want to, I’ll...have a baby with – ”

He leaned forward and kissed her, a soft, chaste and tender kiss, but one that he held onto, just sitting quietly with his closed lips pressed to hers, their hands clasped together beneath the kitchen table. It was as if they’d made a promise to each other without a word. He would be there. He would keep them safe. But when he broke the kiss to see her smiling, he moved his hands and pulled her into his lap wrapping his arms around her to pull her into a very different, much more urgent kiss meant to lead to different promises. She laughed and pushed him away, getting up from the chair.

“I didn’t mean right this minute Malfoy,” she said, her touch gentle and her smile kind. “I want...I want it to be special OK? I don’t want it to be like how my life has been. I want it to be...like some kind of...I don’t know, I just want to wait. I want to anticipate it.” She winked and stepped away from him and went to get milk from the refrigerator. “We’ll go to the lab today so you can work on the anesthetic. And then tonight...I’ll...” she suddenly felt very shy and very awkward, uncomfortable with the sly, confident smile he was giving her, how he was very clearly entertained at how she squirmed with this sort of thing, scheduling a seduction. It wasn’t quite like pulling together a report on cultivating bowtruckles. “I’ll invite you to my room.”

He stood up then and grabbed a piece of toast and an apple, letting her off the hook.

“Let’s get going then, Granger. I’ve got to get out of that lab on time,” he said, leaning down to kiss her forehead. “I’ve got a date.”
While she waited for him in the silent holding cell at the labs she replayed her amazing seduction skills in the kitchen that morning. Nothing in the world screamed confident, sexy woman of the world like scheduling sex for seven o’clock. But it was true, she DID want their…first time to be special, it was just hard to specify how, or for what reason. All she knew was that when he’d pulled her in for a kiss, his hands roaming up beneath her shirt, she’d suddenly felt nervous, as if they were on their first date, as if they hadn’t been working towards this for weeks. But at eight o’clock in the morning in the breakfast nook; it just didn’t seem right. Of course she’d wanted to say that their…joining…would be like a wedding night or a honeymoon, but it seemed too monumental a statement, something sure to scare Malfoy off. After all, they weren’t trying to get pregnant out of some undying love or a life long desire to start a family together. They were trying to get Hermione pregnant to keep her alive, a motive so selfish and impure that she was overcome with a physically sickening wave of guilt that took nearly an hour to abate. But the truth was that they weren’t just…procreating either. The tension had been building between them for months, and if she believed Draco, he’d wanted her for years although she’d have hardly believed him if he’d made that declaration while they were in school. It wasn’t until she realized that he was the man who had kissed her, who had run his hands over her thighs and sucked at her collarbone that she believed he really wanted to be with her, even if it was only for physical pleasure, a base, carnal need. She had those same needs, although women weren’t supposed to admit it. They were supposed to be soft and romantic and desperate for love. She didn’t want love anymore and she very nearly had ceased believing in it. Now, in addition to getting pregnant…she just wanted to feel alive. She wanted to feel like she’d felt when he’d come to her at the Manor, aching for his touch, for the release he could give her, the few moments of bliss in a hideous world.

When they apparated back from the lab Hermione pulled away from his side and kissed him on the cheek, giving him a shy smile.

“I want to jump into the shower first, ok?” She said. “You can come and see me in half an hour.”

Draco watched her slink away, wondering if she was aware of how beautifully her hips swayed, how strong and determined she looked when she held her head up, her neck long, defying the collar that tried to hold her down. He went to his own room and changed out of the dress pants and shirt he’d worn to the lab. Hearing the shower turn on across the hall he felt his body start to respond, thinking of her naked under the hot water, her wet hair slicked back, eyes closed, fragrant, sapphire colored shower gel bubbling over her skin. His prick was hard already but he slipped into a pair of boxer briefs and adjusted it, doing his best to talk himself down, picking up an old scroll regarding pureblood torture of mudblood criminals. Across the hall the water stopped and his mind wandered again.

It was the longest half hour of his life.

“Hermione?”

The bedroom door was halfway closed, a warm, golden light spilling out from the opening. As he walked the five steps to go inside he realized he was sweating, his hands shaking. It was ridiculous.
He’d slept with twenty times the people Granger had. She was just another one on the list, right? He was just trying to knock her up. They were just passing the time. He could tell himself that, right?

He’d never been good at lying.

Opening the door completely he felt his heart drop. There she was, on her knees on the bed, wearing nothing but a black blindfold, her hands on her thighs palms up. Her hair, usually swept back in a tight ponytail, was curly and wild, damp from her shower. Everything was the same, except this time she wasn’t crying. This time she wasn’t burnt and bruised and smeared with another man’s semen. Her skin was creamy smooth, flawless, even the letters carved into her arm seemed small and faded, inconsequential compared to the rest of her perfection. And yet just like before he froze in the doorway, unable to speak, to move closer. A better man wouldn’t want to see her like this, wouldn’t be getting hard at the sight of her kneeling on the bed.

At the squeak of the door opening she’d lifted her face to the sound.

“Draco? Are you there?”

And this time her cheeks weren’t stained with tears, or her voice laced with terror. In fact her lips were turned up at the corners; that pretty crooked smile. She tilted her head, trying to guess where he might be. And as he stood in the doorway she started to tilt and roll her hips, twisting and lengthening her spine like a cobra, like a belly dancer, agonizingly slow, indicating her desire, showing him her want.

“I know you’re there,” she said. “And I know you don’t want to come in. You feel guilty, just like when you touched my collar. You feel guilty because you think this makes you cruel. Don't do that. Come closer.”

She heard his footsteps, the little snap of the joint in his knee from an old Quidditch injury. He came close enough that she could hear him breathe, the wetness when he parted his lips, but still he didn’t touch her.

“I’ve wanted you since the first time you kissed me,” she said, her voice a buttery purr. “Even before I knew who you were. The way you touched me and licked at my wounds and pulled me down to your lips. Hard and soft…it was so good. ”

She brought her knees together, squeezing her thighs as if trying to get herself off and he was mesmerized by how she moved, her whole body thrumming with tension and want. He reached out with one finger and touched the skin above her knee, making her sigh in relief, her tongue flicking out over her bottom lip as she continued to writhe, her legs tight together. He ran his hand up over her leg, touching her ankle, once again pulling her to sit on the edge of the bed, pulling her thighs apart and standing between them.

“I wanted you long before then,” he whispered, tipping her face back to kiss her throat, licking at the pulse in her neck, tugging her earlobe between his teeth. “But I didn’t think you’d believe it.” His hands held tight to her jaw as he kissed her face, her eyes through the blindfold, the tip of her nose. “And I didn’t deserve you anyway.”

She whimpered with need as he finally lowered his mouth to hers, brushing over her lips so gently, so light she could barely feel it before pulling away. She chased his mouth with open lips; it wasn’t enough. But he came back, his hands sunk deep in her hair, pushing her lips open with his own and dipping his tongue inside to stroke over hers, holding her firmly against him.
“I’m yours now,” she said, when he broke the kiss. “Do whatever you want, I’m yours.”

She inched forward on the bed so that she could lock her legs around his, grinding her warmth, her wetness against his thigh.

“Hermione…” he groaned, his lips against hers. He pulled her hair lightly and she whined. “…wanted you for so long.”

“Harder,” she said, bucking against him, rutting like an animal. She wanted him to crack, to break open and take her like she knew he wanted to, liked he wanted to before when he’d growled and pinned her to the wall, when his voice was low and growling, his words a hissed threat, whispering filth in her ear.

“I… I don’t want to hurt you,” he said, but his fingers closed a bit tighter around her hair, close to the scalp, his other hand finding her nipple and twisting it beneath his fingertips.

She wrapped her hands around his neck and crushed her lips against his, driving her tongue into his mouth to tangle around his, nipping hard at his bottom lip to provoke him. “Don’t treat me like that,” she said. ”I’m not made of glass. Show me. Show me how badly you want you wanted to take me.” She ran her tongue around the shell of his ear. ”I’m begging you for it.”

His hand on her breast stopped and she closed her own hand over it, forcing him to pinch her, hard, gasping at the lightning bolt of arousal that shot through her. The sight of her back arching, pressing into him, the feeling of her wet pussy grinding against his leg had him harder than he’d been in months, maybe years. He very nearly hurt with need for her.

But before...in the past...she’d been so frightened. She’d been so hurt, abused, tricked and manipulated. He didn’t want her to remember him along with those men, the men who took her while she was chained down, the men who’d left marks. Instead he kissed her gently, his hand massaging her breast where the nipple stood out, swollen and pink from his pinch, before bending down to suck, swirling his tongue around the rough, rosy skin. He wanted to show her that he could be soft. He knew how to be gentle when it was needed. And yet when he pulled back she was frowning. She lifted both of her hands to his chest and pushed him away from her hard, out from between her thighs, making him stumble back a few steps.

“I can’t even feel that! Don’t you understand that I can’t feel that anymore?” she said. Her voice was angry. It was strong, forceful, not sad, not regretful. She didn’t want to feel it that way. “I know you can be harder than that. You can be darker than that.” Her voice went low and sultry again, her lips twisted up making her still blindfolded face look cruel and hard. “You want to fuck me harder than that. Where’s the dragon?”

He looked up at her, his face heating with something like embarrassment, and yet there she sat with her legs still spread wide, leaning back on the palms of her hands, inviting him in.

“Nothing?” She said. “No response? C’mon Malfoy, no comeback? You give up?”

He watched as she listened for his response, his heart hammering against his chest. What was she doing? Why was she saying these things? His fists clenched at his sides.

“I thought you’d know how I needed you. Guess you’re not quite as clever as I thought.” Her lip twitched up at the corner and she spread her legs a bit wider, pushing her tits up and out, waiting for his reaction. It wasn’t until she frowned pitifully and sat up straight, dropping all pretense and saying,
“Draco?” in that quiet, questioning voice that he realized what she’d been doing, what her game was, and how badly she needed him to play.

This was her escape. He remembered what she’d told him so long ago when they’d met in the kitchen, that she’d always wanted these things, had these darker fantasies. He understood what she meant when she said she couldn’t feel it, that her life had been so filled with sharp and rough and hard that gentle didn’t even register, whether she wanted it to or not. Her frown deepened as she sat in silence, thinking he’d rejected her, that she’d offended him, scared him off, as if she ever could. She shook her head in defeat.

"I was just trying--"

He grabbed her wrists and pinned them down at her sides.

“Maybe if you’d just shut your smart mouth for minute you’d get what you need,” he hissed, grabbing her hard by the back of the neck. He could feel her whole body react as her frowning mouth dropped open, her chest flushed pink. She fisted the blankets and brought her knees together tightly as if trying to get herself off again. So he leaned in spread them apart roughly, his fingers digging into her thighs as he whispered in her ear, “Oh no, not yet you don’t, you sneaky little witch. You don’t come without me.”

She grabbed for his shoulders, pulling his mouth to hers and he let her devour him, every hair on his body standing on end as she fell onto her back, pulling him on top of her, wrapping her legs around his hips as her nails dug into his shoulder.

“We’re not here anymore are we, Draco,” she said, her lips on his ear. “There’s no flat in London, no guest house and no collar, no program..” She kissed him hard as he cradled her head between his forearms, grinding up between her legs. “Don’t make me wait any longer. I want you to fuck me Draco. I want you to fill me up and don’t hold back.”

“Fucking hell Hermione,” he said, sliding down her body, covering her breasts and belly with kisses. “You’re going to be the death of me.”

Now he knew for sure that no matter how they’d started out, no matter how dark and hurtful their past, she was made for him. He knew that in this broken rubble of their destroyed lives they were meant to find each other. Like him she had no interest in ‘making love’, no interested in pretending that what they had was sweet and pretty, set to beautiful music, all soft touches and tender kisses. She wanted to be taken hard, to feel it in her bones, to ache from the it the next day. She wanted to sweat and scratch and gasp and bite. And whether it was a function of her life in this newly created hell or if she’d been born with those urges he’d never know, but it didn’t matter. They were together in this darkness and it didn’t mean that he didn’t care about her, or that he didn’t want her to feel pleasure at his hand. It didn’t mean that he couldn’t be soft or gentle or affectionate with her or that he wouldn’t protect her from harm for the rest of her life, but right now, he just wanted to tear her apart. He wanted her to feel how much he needed her.

He knelt between her thighs and spread her open, his long fingers stroking the insides of her legs as she squirmed. She felt his breath, so close, just like it was before, just an inch away, then his lips brushing over the soft skin of her thighs, the tip of his tongue teasing her at the end of each touch of his mouth, until finally he bit her on the tender flesh on the back of her knee, just hard enough to grab her attention.

“Take that fucking blindfold off and watch me lick you,” he growled, his voice rasping, harsh with need.
She did as he asked and sat up, running her fingers through his hair, pulling him in closer, and finally, finally he touched his tongue to the slick warmth between her legs. Her eyes locked on him as he worked between her thighs, his lips soft and warm, his tongue sweeping deep within her folds, just like he kissed her mouth; the same plunging languid strokes, the same quiet purring moans coming from deep in his throat as he drank her in, rubbing his nose against her clit to make her whine and buck her hips against his face. She threw her legs over his shoulders and leaned back on her palms, her legs trembling as her orgasm started to coil tightly in her belly, the heat spreading out like a blooming flower, her lust hot and insatiable.

“Oh God Draco, oh my God,” her voice cracked on stuttered breath, her mind unable to find better words.

He stopped to look at her and found her crying, tears streaming down her cheeks, her eyes shining and red. She sniffed and looked down at him, smiling, her fingers combing through his hair.

“No, don’t stop, please don’t stop. It feels so good. You make me feel so good,” she said, running a hand over his cheek, her thumb over his wet, shining lips. “I haven’t felt this good in a long time.”

He pulled his shirt over his head and stepped out of his underwear, pushing her back onto the bed and crawling up to lay beside her, kissing the tears from her cheeks before going back to her lips, letting her taste her own delicious nectar, her arousal, shivering at how she sighed contentedly beneath him. He twirled a curly lock of her hair around his fingers and pulled hard, her eyes flying open.

“Don’t go all dreamy on me now, Granger,” he whispered, pressing his hard cock against her hip, “I’m nowhere near done with you yet.”

Running her hands over his hard, scarred chest she blushed furiously, realizing that for as close as they’d been, she was seeing him naked for the first time. For all the times she’d been exposed to him, willingly and unwillingly, he’d never been bare in front of her and seeing all of him now was more beautiful than she expected. She drew a fingertip along the lines of lean muscle in his arms, the tendons standing out strong in his neck. Her hands smoothed over the light hair on his chest and crouched over him to trace her tongue along the twisting rough skinned scar that slashed down to his hard stomach, the v of muscles at his waist and thin trail of hair below his navel. He groaned and pulled her back up to his mouth.

"So hungry for my cock," he crooned between kisses. "Not yet pretty girl."

He pushed her against the pillows and flattened himself over her as she wrapped her arms around him to feel the strength of his back, arching her back up to rub against the thick length of his cock, hot and hard against her leg. She couldn’t help but pull him closer, pressing every bit of their exposed flesh together, as if she could melt into him, hide inside him forever. He slid the back of his hand down her chest and over her side, his knuckles brushing along her ribs and stomach and down between her legs, his finger circling her clit as he kissed her deeply, his tongue twisting over hers.

“I’ve dreamt of watching you come a hundred times,” he whispered against her lips as she spread her legs, reaching down to cover his hand with her own. His finger pushed deep and he moved to purr in her ear. “Even back then, when I said that I hated you, I was in bed fucking my fist just dreaming of holding you underneath me, watching you spread your legs for me, eating that pretty pussy for hours…” His tongue flicked out over her ear as he worked his hand faster, now two fingers deep inside her heat as she buried her face against his neck, her whole body shaking as she whined and twisted, holding tight to his arm. “I imagined making you scream for me. Will you do
that?” He asked, sliding a third finger along side the others, twisting and scissoring within her heat. “Will you scream for me, little witch?”

“Oh fuck Draco…please. Draco I need…” she wrapped her arms around him, her fingers digging into his back as he stroked her mercilessly, bringing her right to the edge of complete bliss before pulling away to kiss her, to stroke her hair, to tease her with a wicked smile on his lips. “Don’t stop, dammit!” She reached down and pulled his hand back between her legs, unashamed at how badly she wanted it “Draco I need you…”

“But you’re not answering me, darling. Will you scream for me? If I let you come? Scream my name like you’ve always wanted to?” When finally she nodded his fingers sunk deep between her folds again, his thumb circling and pressing her clit until she was nearly blinded by the pulsing waves of pleasure, her whole body clenching and trembling around his hand, her breath caught in her lungs as she burst apart at the seams, the promised cry of his name muffled by her face buried in his chest, her open lips against his skin.

“Thank you…thank you…fuck yes…” she breathed, holding tight to his back, wrapping her leg around his, kissing the dip of his collarbone, the hollow of his throat, her body jerking with afterschocks as she came down.

He sighed and rolled onto his back, pulling her alongside him and she pulled his fingers up to her mouth to lick them clean, her tongue twisting and teasing over and between them as she locked her eyes on his molten silver gaze. While she worked he looked down at her hair spread out over his skin, the softest, most luxurious thing he’d ever worn, and she moved her delicious mouth down his chest, licking over the length of his scars, dipping her tongue into his navet, making him shiver and moan. With her hands on his legs she settled herself between them and looked up, those beautiful eyes, sparkling with energy, her cheeks still flushed pink from her climax.

“Beautiful,” he said, pushing her hair back from her face.

She smiled and took him into her mouth, her tongue swirling and lapping at his length as he groaned, his eyes closed, hands in her hair. It turned her on all over again to see him in such ecstasy, so vulnerable, to know that she was the one making him gasp for breath and growl with pleasure. She took him deeper, hollowing her cheeks as she sucked, her hand at the base of his shaft, squeezing as he thrust up, touching the back of her throat.

He suddenly bucked hard and pushed her off, flipping her onto her back, his mouth finding hers as he spread her legs with his own.

“That was hotter than hell, Granger but it’s not going to get you pregnant,” he said, his smile wide and wicked in the dark.

She laughed out loud and he pushed into her in one slow thrust, her eyes rolling back as she pressed up against him, her laugh turning into a blissful sigh at how perfectly he filled and stretched her, the perfect little pinch of pain as her body adjusted. He pulled back and thrust forward again, bracing himself on his hands so he could look into her eyes, watch her face as he sunk into her, snapping his hips between her spread legs.

“Drac…Dra…” she threw her arms around his back, her fingers digging into the tight muscles of his ass. “Harder…harder.”

He pushed deeper, faster, one hand on the headboard as it slammed into the wall. Their skin was slick with sweat and she arched up to kiss him on the mouth, biting his lip hard enough to draw blood.
“Harder. Fuck harder,” she growled into his mouth.

“You asked for it. Don’t come crying to me when you can’t walk tomorrow, witch,” he hissed.

She yelped in surprise as he pulled out and easily flipped her onto her belly, yanking her up by her hips. She moaned as he thrust inside her to the hilt, fucking into her at a furious pace, and she screamed when he grabbed her hair to pull her up and back against his chest, his hand moving down to close around her collar.

“Yes, yes…keep going,” she felt lightheaded and throbbing with desire, a ball of lightning, ready to explode.

“Suck,” he said, roughly shoving two of his fingers in her mouth as he continued to pound into her. She did what he asked, her tongue twisting around his hot, wet hand, bracing herself on the headboard.

“Every night,” he said, his pace fast and erratic as he neared his own climax. “Fuck you every night like its my fucking job,” he growled in her ear, feeling her slick walls clenching around him, the muscles rippling as her second orgasm hit, sending her wailing around the fingers in her mouth.

“You’re mine now, witch. All mine. You understand me? No one will touch you again. Not ever.”

With two more hard, punishing thrusts he collapsed forward, pushing her down onto the mattress and folding himself over her as they both rode out the rippling waves of bliss, his forehead pressed between her shoulders. He could feel her heart pounding behind her ribs, she felt his breath in hot bursts against her back. When she could focus again, find words and breath and thought, she reached back to stroke his hair.

“Well that was certainly something worth waiting for,” she said, and he pressed his lips to her shoulder, laughing.

They’d barely made it to eight o’clock, but didn’t move from the bed. Draco extinguished the candles with wave of his hand and the room fell into peaceful darkness, lit only by the moon. They said nothing more, their hearts still pounding and their spent limbs tangled, skin damp with sweat as Hermione fell into a deep and restful sleep with Draco still inside her.
Draco woke up unusually well rested and with the full intention of showering and looking over his notes. He’d fallen asleep telling himself that this was not going to be an every day occurrence like he’d sworn to her in his mid-fuck madness. He was not going to be having the best, most mind-blowing sex of his life every night. She’d said herself that she’d rather they found another way, she’d prefer they took the collar off, and he had to honor that preference. But then there she was, Hermione Granger laying right next to him, stretched out on her side, her arms bent out in front of her as if reaching for him, a beam of winter sunlight slanting across her cheek, turning her hair the color of melted caramel. He hadn’t been able to believe she actually agreed to this ridiculous arrangement, willing to sign her life away to him with only a couple of hours thought. She was willing to create life with him, a life they’d be responsible for together, forever.

In the months before her death, Narcissa had used most of her strength to beg him not to hide away alone, withering away in the darkness, punishing himself for crimes he was forced to commit. She begged him to forgive himself, to find someone who would make him feel forgiven. Then, when she was days away from dying she’d given him her wand, transferring its allegiance via inheritance.

“Maybe your daughter could carry it one day…a bit flowery for a son,” she’d said, closing his fingers around the delicate Aspen wood. “I know it’s not right to say things like that anymore, but it really is more of girl’s wand.” She’d made him promise, no matter how hollow and empty the words, that he would have children; that he wouldn’t deny the light that she knew was still inside him. “Find someone who sees that light.”

Holding Hermione as she fell asleep, Draco felt it. He felt that bit of warmth and contentment that came so naturally to other people. He felt optimism and the hope that their plan would work. Of course, last night had proved to him that getting pregnant had only been part of her motivation. In their world of slavery and torture, ownership and sacrifice, treating witches and wizards like objects, currency to be traded, she’d wanted to feel a connection…intimacy. Yes, they were linked by a charmed collar and cuff, sentenced to life no more than fifty yards away from one another, but that wasn’t real intimacy; it wasn’t the feeling of skin on skin, of having someone inside you, someone who cared. She wanted to feel the throbbing pulse of creation versus destruction. She wanted to sweat and scream and cry out in ecstasy instead of fear. The baby would just be a manifestation of that.

He’d be lying if he said he’d never thought of what it would be like, to see a little kid that looked like him, sounded like him. What would it be like to have a child and raise it with kindness, without bigotry or secrecy or the eyes of five generations following a toddler around the house? What would it be like to raise a child telling him he could be whatever he wanted, that he didn’t carry the baggage of everyone before him demanding he take a predetermined course. Like every bitter, angry son in the world, he knew he could do better than his own father, making sure his child felt safe and loved and confident. And Hermione…well, she’d make sure it was the smartest wizard to ever waltz into a school, one who knew what they wanted and wasn’t afraid to take it, one who wouldn’t be bullied, who wouldn’t be cowed. He looked at the dark collar around her neck. One who wouldn’t be taken prisoner.

He pulled the sheet back to reveal her naked body, her skin that he finally knew the taste of, the smell, the feel of. She murmured and rolled onto her back, her arm thrown over her head, her whole body stretched out lean and long. For the first time he noticed a little brown beauty mark on her stomach…like a speck of melted chocolate. He traced his finger along the soft swell of her breast,
the ladder of ribs running down her side. He stroked his palm over her stomach and through the thatch of dark hair between her legs. Looking down at her he felt a proprietary sort of pride, knowing that he was free to touch her body, to kiss her lips, to fall asleep with her head on his chest, to run his fingers through her hair, to tell her he wanted her again. Of course he wanted her again. He’d never grow tired of her, how could he?

Her legs opened a bit as she switched positions and whimpered out a sigh. If he didn’t leave now he wouldn’t be able to handle the temptation, but when he looked up at her face he caught her eyes fluttering closed, a childlike smile on her face. She should have known not to hustle a hustler.

Settling down beside her on the bed he let his fingers slide over the insides of her thighs. She claimed she couldn’t feel gentleness, that her body wouldn’t respond to his softer touches, but he knew it wasn’t true. He’d felt her shiver when he brushed his hand over the back of her neck, seen her eyes flutter when he leaned in close to study the etchings in her collar, his breath playing over her skin. It wasn’t cruelty she wanted. It wasn’t hardness or force. It was dominance. She wanted to give up control, relinquish her power. A strange request from someone who was already enslaved, but he figured it was something engrained, or conditioned.

He continued drawing little patterns on her skin, his initials, her name, five pointed stars and twisted snakes, his touch whisper light and perilously close to her pussy. Again she twisted and adjusted, her legs opening wider in silent supplication, but he only sighed and rested his head on her hip, hiding her view of his face and his fingers. After a few more moments of teasing he let one finger slide between her slick, waiting lips, just to open her a bit, to see how wet she’d gotten…she was very wet.

“What could my horny little witch be dreaming of that’s got her so wet?” he asked quietly, sucking at the skin on her hip bone, pulling a bruise to the surface and a groan from her mouth.

Draco sat up and pressed two fingers between her legs, sliding up and down with slow, agonizing strokes, avoiding her clit and pulling away entirely when she pushed her hips against his hand.

“I thought you were pretending to be sleeping,” he mumbled, returning to his slow, tantalizing work, spreading her open with two fingers, watching her squirm in anticipation. Settling himself between her thighs he set a trail of kisses up her leg, and over her hips. He buried his nose in her warmth but didn’t lick, teasing her with little puffs of his warm breath, nipping kisses. She pushed forward but he held her wrists down tight at her sides, laughing when she huffed out a frustrated sigh.

“Malfroy!”

“Oh good morning, my little Chestnut. Can I get you some tea?” he asked, kissing the smooth, velvet soft skin just above her mound of dark curls.

“No,” she squirmed beneath his touch. “Don’t tease,” she said, narrowing her eyes

“Tease? Me?” He asked, his fingers barely a feather’s touch over her pussy. “Don’t know the meaning of the word. Then again, I thought you couldn’t even feel this, darling.” He looked up at her, arching one eyebrow.

The sleepy contented smile on her face faded a bit and she tried to scoot away from him, out of his grip, but he held tight to her wrists.

“Don’t be a smart ass,” she said, the frustration in her voice now directed at him, and not her need for release.
“Lay still, witch,” he said, his voice low and even. “If you and I are going to be together for any length of time, I’m not going to leave you stuck in that world of hard words and sharp edges.” She wriggled beneath his hands and he whispered his magic word, “Shhh.” It ran through her every time he used it, the way his lips looked as it hissed from between his teeth, it sunk right down to her bones. “Now listen to me, Granger. I don’t mind being rough with you…a little slap and tickle is definitely my cup of tea, love. But I don’t believe that you can’t have it soft. Not for one minute.”

She whined and twisted. He bent down, still holding her wrists and ran his tongue between her legs once, just one slow stroke from bottom to top. Hermione huffed a sigh of relief and started pushing against his face, but he wouldn’t allow it.

“Why else would you be so…fucking…wet…for me?” he said, punctuating each word with a deep, warm lick. “I want you to lay still and keep your legs open and your hands at your sides. You hear me?”

She nodded and spread her legs, one of them sliding off the side of the bed, her hands not moving from where he’d placed them.

“Good girl,” he said, rubbing her clit with this thumb. “You don’t want pain. You don’t want cruelty, you just want to stop thinking for a while, don’t you Chestnut?” With his thumb still circling the hardened pearl of nerves, he slipped two fingers deep into her slippery core and she bit her bottom lip, her eyes squeezed shut. “Open your eyes and answer me, girl. You want to surrender to someone for a while, don’t you? To not have to worry about being safe, or staying alive or who’s going to hurt you or whether you’re in danger? You just want to lay back like a good girl and do what you’re told.”

“Yes,” she said, and he let her grind against him, the heel of his hand, her earthy cream coating his fingers. “Please.”

“And you want to come, hard, don’t you?” He asked, pumping deeper, his cock like steel at the sight of her grinding madly against him, her whole body writhing and twisting, her hands fisted in the sheets, chest flushed with arousal as her teeth dug deep into her bottom lip.

“Yes sir,” she said, and he immediately pulled away, smacking the flesh of her hip with his wet hand.

“No, none of that shit,” he said, his voice a bit darker than he’d intended. “Open your eyes. Hermione look at me.”

He crawled up to lay on her, to feel the heat of her flushed skin against his, kissing her hard to let her taste herself on his tongue. She kept her eyes focused on him as he positioned himself against her waiting pussy.

“I’m Draco,” he said, holding her face firmly in one hand as he slid inside her, groaning at the way her slick walls gripped him, tight and hot. “Just Draco.”

She wrapped her arms around his back and her legs around his hips, her heels digging into the backs of his thighs. They kissed as he began his slow, torturous rhythm, pulling back all the way and then thrusting forward to the hilt, pushing against her clit with every hard pump.

“Draco,” his name stuttered on her breath. “H…Harder. Harder…”

“No,” he grunted, withdrawing and sinking deep again. “You’ll come soon enough. I want to feel
your cunt pulling me in. So wet, so silky.”

She bucked up against him and he swept his hot tongue into her open mouth, humming through his deep and decadent kiss, his hips grinding into her clit. She couldn’t lay still, her hands running up and down his back, her legs trembling as she exposed her throat for him to lick, to mark. With one hand around her waist he flipped over to sit and pulled her into his lap, bending down to suck the deep pink nipples that stood out hard and tight from her creamy white breasts before moving back to her mouth, those lips he couldn’t stay away from.

“Go on then, darling,” he said, holding tight to her hips. “But I want you to keep your eyes open when you go over, yeah?” He thrust up hard into her heat and she cried out, squeezing her eyes shut. Draco sighed and smacked her ass. “What did I just tell you, love?”

“K…keep my eyes open,” she said, rolling her hips against his, her whole body melting with the delicious feel of his cock filling her sliding against her with every movement.

And so she moved faster, harder, her arms loose around his neck, her fingers in his hair, their eyes locked. His mouth fell open and she kissed it, thrusting over his tongue as she rode his cock, still staring, watching his silver eyes dilate and darken, watching his lids flutter as his climax approached.

“You’re going to come,” she said, moving faster, her body shaking, her muscles twitching andclenching around him.

“Fuck yes I’m going to come,” he said, wrapping an arm tight around her waist, his hips matching every downward thrust of hers, his cheeks splashed with pink, his breath hot on her face. She’d never seen him so beautiful, so raw, like something inhuman. “Ah fuck Hermione…look, look at me. Feel…f..feel…”

He couldn’t speak, couldn’t finish his request as he burst inside her, pulling her against his chest with both arms wrapped around her waist. She moaned and growled as her own orgasm hit, milking the hot seed from his shaft, her hands tight in his silky white hair.

“Thank you,” she said, as he pulled her down to lay beside him. She put her head on his chest and tickled her fingers through the light covering of hair. “Feel free to say I told you so.”

“Granger,” he said, making sure the faux hurt was clear. “I would never be so cruel as to hold something like my masterful playing of your beautiful body like a fine instrument over your head right after we’d had sex.”

She sighed contentedly and snuggled in deeper to his side and he kissed the top of her head, his fingers combing through her hair.

“I’ll just make sure to bring it up during an argument later,” he whispered, happy to hear the sound of her laugh.

They’d planned to work in the lab for another week after the Revel and return to the Manor for Christmas.

“Not that we’re having a big caroling party around the tree or anything,” he said as they strolled through Liberty looking at decorations. “But mum liked Christmas so I make a point of being
home for it, just…in her honor.”

“I don’t hold a grudge against your father,” she said, running her hand over a sumptuous red velvet pillow. “Or I guess I should say that I don’t want to hold a grudge against him. I believed him when he said he thought I was bright and caring and beautiful. I…think he did want to save me.”

“Well,” Draco said, still not willing to forgive Lucius for opening her up to be attacked by complete strangers. “He sure went about it wrong. Gang rape isn’t my idea of saving someone.”

“Someday, when this is all over, and I’m free…I want you to fix what’s between you,” she said as they left, heading for the lab. “He’s all you have, and he’s not perfect, and he’s been a shitty parent, but at least he’s there. I don’t have anyone anymore,” she said, quietly. “You can’t imagine what that’s like.”

“You have me, Hermione,” he said, stopping on the sidewalk to make sure she heard him. “Collar or no collar, you always have me. And I won’t let anything happen to you. I promise.”

He kissed her forehead and pulled her into his arms. The wind whipped around them and it started to snow.

Hermione woke up in a cold sweat, her mind racing from the dream she’d had. It was like she’d been watching a movie, the details exaggerated in hyper color and screeching sharp sound. In the dream she was closer to the dais, watching Hazel suffer, watching her skin split open, the blood more red, more shiny and thick than she remembered. She watched her face as he called out the final curse, the life fading from her eyes and the slice across her throat.

The slice across her throat.

The collar wasn’t there.

“Draco! Wake up!” She shook him, pulling the blankets off his naked body. “Did you watch? Did you watch the whole thing?”

“What the fuck are…” he rubbed his eyes and sat up, nearly dizzy from being woken so suddenly. “What’s wrong? Are you ok?” He brushed her wild hair away from her face and attempted to pull her into his arms, assuming she’d woken from a nightmare, but she pushed away, holding him at arm’s length.

“Did you watch the whole sacrifice? To the end?”

He frowned and lowered his eyes. As much as he’d wanted to look away, and even though he’d told her to close her eyes, he’d watched every curse, every cut. Hermione was right. It shouldn’t be easy to witness someone dying, and so he’d forced himself to watch as a punishment, knowing that somehow, in some small way, every one of these deaths led back to him, to his cabinet, to his impossible task, to his failure, his cowardice.

“I did,” he said, pinching the bridge of his nose. “And yes, I still see it in my dreams. Do we have to…”

“Her collar. The last cut was across her throat and her collar was gone. It was there when they brought her up, when they chained her down, I saw it. She was naked except for her collar. Right?”
He thought back, closed his eyes and pictured it. She was right. The final cut had been across her bare throat.

“When did it disappear?” He asked, more to himself than to her. His mind whirled with speculation.

“That’s the answer,” she said. “Whatever made it vanish is what we have to do.”

“Cut your body open and drain your blood? I don’t think so.” He said, getting out of bed and pulling on a pair of jeans. “Come on, pack up your stuff. We have to go talk to my dad.”
Lucius was in the library, drink in hand, eyes staring at something just above the fireplace...or maybe at nothing...just looking fixedly out into space. When they apparated in, Hermione nearly gasped at his appearance but felt Draco’s hand squeeze her waist and saw the small shake of his head. Lucius very obviously hadn’t slept, his skin even more pale and drawn than usual, dark circles beneath his piercing eyes. Instead of tied back in a black ribbon or strip of leather, his hair was wild and dull, hanging down his back like a wilted mane. His usual crisp white silk shirt was wrinkled and untucked, unbuttoned halfway, and he made no move to greet them, not even a blink of his eyes.

“We need some answers,” Draco said, finally stepping forward. “…about the collar…Hermi---”

“Do you know,” Lucius said, interrupting him, “anything about charms or glamours or potions or any of the innumerable things a witch or wizard could use to hide their mood or appearance or otherwise make themselves less conspicuous?”

Hermione didn’t like the sound of his voice, a bit crazed and off kilter, hoarse as if he’d been screaming, she was reminded of the Mad Hatter. Was he drunk? Draco gripped her wrist and very casually pulled her to stand behind him.

“Father what---“

“Of all the slaves at the sacrifice on Friday, your little…bitch was the only one to scream, do you know why?”

Draco let go of her wrist and she stayed hidden, her heart jumping into her throat at the sound of Lucius' name calling.

“Watch it –” Draco said, and for the first time Hermione noticed the wand in his hand. Would he hex his own father? Curse him? And yet Lucius gave the weapon no regard.

“Watch it? Watch it? Do you know why she was the only one screaming? Its because every other slave there was either silenced or imperioused, trained to behave themselves so as not to attract attention.”

Hermione felt sick to her stomach. She was lightheaded, remembering how she’d felt the eyes of Voldemort on her throughout the sacrifice, his stare almost holding her in a trance.

“Well it isn’t like she could hide,” Draco spat. “Everyone knows she’s the slave of the great Lucius Malfoy. It’s no secret she’s alive and well.”

“Well being the operative word, Draco,” Lucius said, his voice a bit calmer as he seemed to have brought himself under control. “The other slaves I’ve…encountered,” he continued, clearing his throat, “are nowhere near as bold or outspoken as Miss Granger. It’s painfully clear that they live a life of suffering, pain and punishment. They’ve been broken and put in their place. It was a vow I promised to uphold when I brought her home. She’s still a prisoner after all.”

No longer able to hold her bold and outspoken tongue, Hermione stepped out from behind Draco, her lip curled up in disgust.

“You vowed to keep me suffering and in pain? I thought you brought me home because you were so lonely and loved my perfect little tits,” she said, and Draco almost choked trying not to laugh.
“Of course I wasn’t going to keep you suffering… but I’m a smart enough wizard to make it appear to others as though you were… even while in the throes of extreme pleasure,” Lucius said, holding her gaze, completely unperturbed by her statement. His eyes slid back up to meet Draco’s, “rather than letting her run around like the Lady of the Manor, holding your arm, cowering in your cloak.”

“Fine, I understand. I don’t beat her enough for your particular tastes. So why are you angry about it now, what has the effect been since the sacrifice?” Draco said through gritted teeth.

“Seeing her looking so healthy and… robust… arguing openly with other Death Eaters at the Revel, why, she was nearly back to her old self again! Obviously He is anxious to get his hands on Miss Granger. He wants to exercise his own personal vengeance, but He knows that as he is the clear victor in this situation it would be untoward to flaunt such a selfish and obnoxious desire in everyone’s face.”

“How very fucking English of him.”

“Instead He’s changed the rules of the sacrifice. If next her name is drawn she will be sent to him within a week. Hazel, you remember, was only sent to him for four days before the sacrifice. He’s now decided that he needs more time with these… muggleborn women to ‘cleanse’ their blood. And as for the names being randomly drawn –”

“What if I’m pregnant?” Hermione interrupted, a great deal of her bravado having faded into terror. There was a moment of electric silence where Lucius looked quickly between the two of them.

“Are you pregnant?” He grabbed her jaw and turned her face from side to side as if he could see the truth in her eyes or the tone of her skin. “I didn’t realize you’d finally been made aware of that… path.”

“No, not yet,” she said, stepping back from him. "I’m just wondering… if that would still save me.”

He nodded to himself and walked back to the settee, staring into the fire.

“It may. It may at least give you time to…” he thought before speaking. “It may. At the very least it would save you from immediate sacrifice, but nothing ever stops Him from changing the rules.”

Lucius looked up at his son and his… lover, friend, slave? He watched as the two of them held each other’s hands so tightly, her eyes filled with fear as she stood so close, her arm pressed to his side, trusting him entirely to keep her safe. It was clear they were both afraid and yet he saw something else in his son, a fierceness he hadn’t seen in years, the fire behind his cold silver eyes that they’d hoped for when they gave him his name; the strength, the power and pride that they wanted him to carry, the heart of a dragon. Finally, he’d found his purpose. He needed to save her. A certain tightness that Lucius had unknowingly carried in his chest for years, even before he’d lost his beloved, seemed to loosen and lighten as he was filled with the knowledge that his son wasn’t lost.

“What was your question about the collar?” Lucius asked, remembering how they’d burst into the room.

“We’re trying to break it,” Hermione said, before Draco could stop her. He looked around the library, waiting for lightning to strike, but nothing happened.

“Perhaps we should go to the parlour,” he said to his father pointedly, pulling Hermione’s arm, but Lucius only waved his hand.

“They know she’s not living in the Manor anymore,” he said. "They don’t need the mirror or
window wards to track her. They’re well aware of the flat in London and the Guest House as well.”

Lucius stood and made his way back to the bar, his second firewhiskey before noon. “As I’m sure you’ve learned from trying to tamper with the collar its something of a taboo, by nature of being around her living neck, they know where she is and that she is still alive. They know when her pulse is racing, they know when she’s gone outside the limits of Draco’s tether. I’ve even received an urgent notice that you tried to damage the collar with tools, but I assume you learned your lesson, harsh as it may have been. There’s not much more information they need about you anymore I suppose.”

“Her living neck,” Draco repeated. “Is that why Hazel’s collar disappeared during the sacrifice? Because she was dying?”

Lucius nodded, his face going white at the thought of Hazel’s blood pouring out, the thought that his own son had suffered a similar torture. He threw back his drink in one gulp.

“Yes. Her pulse rate was so low as to indicate she was dead, and as a result the collar vanished as she no longer needed to be tracked. It’s the only way to remove it. She’s a prisoner for life.”

Lucius left them both standing agape in the middle of the library, suddenly feeling much older and carrying a much heavier heart.

“We can move back to the Manor, if you’re comfortable with it,” he said as they rifled through the kitchen for something to eat, Fingston hovering around at their knees to clean up crumbs and scraps of food. “That way we wouldn’t have to worry about you getting burnt while I’m working.”

“You working? What am I, a hat stand? I can help you now too, if you tell me what we’re doing,” she said, reaching over his shoulder to grab a bunch of red grapes.

They ate their lunch at the island in the middle of the kitchen, sandwiches and dark beer and leftover apple crumble. Hermione asked him if he knew how to balance a spoon on his nose and he screwed up his eyebrows as if it were an absurdly easy request, levitating the utensil on its end on the tip of his nose. She laughed until she couldn’t breathe and explained that she meant without magic and showed him how to slip the concave surface onto his nose and hold it there. He liked having her face so close, even if they weren’t kissing, just knowing that she felt comfortable enough to touch his face, to breathe against his mouth, to be that near, close enough to feel his stare. The spoon dropped between them and quick pulled her into a kiss before getting up to clear their dishes.

Outside the snow had frosted most of the Manor grounds as if wiping the slate clean, leaving everything looking pure and flawless. The eaves were all dripping with crystalline icicles, branches and bushes frosted like cakes. Draco looked out towards the swan pond surrounded by willows just past the guesthouse.

“Want to go skating?” He asked, still looking out the window. “My mother and I used to skate when I came home for Christmas. We can wait until it's dark. I wonder if the light charms are still under the ice.”

Her eyes lit up so brightly that his heart ached, fairly confident that he’d never made a girl smile that broadly in his life, skills in the bedroom notwithstanding. It was pure happiness, and he swore to himself that he wouldn’t ruin it. That afternoon Draco dug through his mother’s closet and found
an old fur lined cloak and matching hat made of sleek black mink.

“Are you sure this OK?” She asked, seeing that he’d withdrawn from her for a moment, his eyes dark, mouth tight. “I can wear something else.”

“No,” he said, shaking off the tears that pricked at the edges of his eyes. “I want you to have them.” They’d left his mother’s wardrobe untouched since she passed, a sort of shrine or desperate wish that she’d return. But it was a ridiculous exercise; they were just things and his mother would want them to be used.

After he’d fastened the cloak around her neck, Hermione swept through the woman’s bedroom, running her fingers over the heavy silk draperies, the beautiful steel grey bed linens. An shining black brush and comb sat on the vanity with a selection of jeweled hair combs and clips laid out next to a silver powder jar and a selection of red lipsticks.

“I brushed her hair for her when she was sick,” he said, coming over to stand behind her, his chin on her shoulder. He ran his fingers through her thick hair and she couldn’t help but sigh at the feeling, his beautiful, talented fingers brushing over her scalp, carding through her hair from root to tip. He quickly pulled it into a tight twist, expertly tucking in the stray tendrils that sprang free. “She always wanted her hair to look perfect for father.” He picked up one of the combs, a snake of diamonds and black jet gems, and tucked it into the twist of hair, miraculously holding it all in place on the first try, smiling with pride at the result.

"Finally we've got that mess under control," he teased.

“Draco Malfoy,” she said, in mock amazement. “Wait until I tell the Prophet that you’re a hairdresser!”

He smiled and arched an eyebrow at her. “Ah…and it will be the last tale you ever tell!”

Her wide, toothy smile faded a bit at the corners and he frowned at her reflection. He wasn’t supposed to ruin it.

“No,” he said, stepping back from her as if burnt. “God, fuck, I’m sorry. That was…”

“Don’t,” she said, turning to hold his face in her hands. He’d come to crave this gesture as a drug, the way her warm palms felt against his cheeks. The way her eyes focused on his and locked there when she really wanted him to listen, when she felt he needed to hear what she said. “I’m not a fool, Draco. I know when you’re joking. It just caught me off guard. Listen, I’m not going to die. OK? I promise.”

“OK,” he said, his head lowered to rest in the cradle of her shoulder. Lifting his eyes he saw his mother’s wand laying beside her jewelry chest, untouched since the day she died, nestled safely in its black velvet box.

The pond wasn’t much bigger than the front parlor of the Manor, but the ice was clear and smooth and when Draco charmed their boots to have skates on the bottom, she could see a muted green blue glow swirling beneath the surface. As they skated in lazy circles, the glow became a waving, twisted ribbon of color, growing and fading, following the path of their blades.

“The Northern Lights,” he said, taking her hands and turning around to skate backwards, pulling
her along. “We went to the Isle of Skye once when I was little and saw the lights. I couldn’t understand how it wasn’t magic…how the world actually had those lights for all to see, muggles and animals and wizards and giants…anyone. They were breathtaking.” He made a little turn and skated beside her, holding her slim cold hand. They hadn't been able to find gloves. “And so my father charmed the pond to show the lights we saw every time it froze over. But I don’t think it’s the same seeing it trapped down there. Sometimes nature beats magic.”

They skated for a while in silence under the bright star filled sky, no sound but the scrape of their blades on the glowing ice or the occasional giggle when stumbled against him. When his knuckles started to ache, the tip of his nose tender to the touch he guided her off the pond, their skates vanishing as they took their first steps into the snow. He’d thought she would be happier out in the fresh air, taking a break from thoughts of being a prisoner, a slave, but something clearly was weighing heavily on her mind. He took her hand and pulled her close to give her a bit of his warmth as they walked.

“Nature is beautiful,” she said sadly, “But once you've felt it, nothing beats magic.” She sniffed, but whether it was from the cold or tears he couldn’t tell. “You can’t imagine what it’s like to be without your magic…it’s like they took away one of my senses, cut off my arm. I can’t tell you how deeply I felt it in my soul when they snapped my wand in front of me and threw it into the fire. And just when I caught my breath back from that, they put this collar around my neck and it was like…pouring water on a fire. I felt my…life…force fading away, snuffing out a candle.”

“But it’s still there,” Draco said, stopping her on the flagstone path. “They didn’t destroy your magic, they just restricted you from using it. It's dormant. We’re going to get the collar off and your magic will come back.”

She nodded and started walking again. “It'll be weak. I’ll have to learn everything all over again, the feel of a wand, how to swish and flick and duel. It’s like I’ll be a back in first year, racing to catch up.”

“Well If anyone can do it Granger, it's you.” He wrapped her arm in his and they made their way back to the Manor.
Bubblebaths and Fairy Tales

He let her in the back door of the Manor and she stomped her feet clear of snow while pulling off the cloak. He pulled her trembling icy hands up to his mouth and blew into them, his eyes stuck on hers, how bright they were, her cheeks and even the tip of her nose red from the cold, her hair dusted with snowflakes. She tried to pull her hands back and he raised an eyebrow, pressing a kiss to the center of her palm. After having pounced on her every day for the last week he’d told himself he was going to back off. He wasn’t going to come at her full force with how much he wanted her or for how long he’d suppressed that want. But then every day he realized something else that drove him wild, every conversation stirred up a memory of something she did or said that had gotten him hard in the past and he’d had to ignore. They were tiny, ridiculous things that no one else would understand: the way she sighed at the end of her laugh like she did when he touched her. Or the way she chewed on the corner of her lip when she was thinking, how she drank from a beer bottle, always leaving a drop glistening on her bottom lip. It was how she walked, how she ran her fingers over the spines of books or closed her lips around a slice of orange. It was how she stared back at him when he held her cold hands after coming in from the snow. He pulled her wrist to his lips and sucked at her pulse, his eyes still holding her gaze, smiling at how her mouth had fallen open, her eyelids fluttering.

"Warming up?" He asked, tracing a finger up the inside of her arm.

"Y-yes," she whispered. "A little. But I think we should go upstairs. You have a very nice bathtub in your suite. That would help."

They sat in the sunken bathtub with Draco stretched out, his back against her chest as she washed his hair. He liked the way her breasts pressed into him, how he could feel the tender points of her nipples, her legs wrapped tight around his waist. His eyes were closed and she stared openly at his lean, beautiful body, like a lounging god in the Roman baths, his arm draped over the side, little drops of water at the tip of each long finger. Finished with his hair, she soaped her hands and ran her fingers over the scars on his chest, through the golden dusting of hair that lead her to his stomach, the trail of darker hair below his navel.

“Careful there, Granger,” he purred, his eyes still closed, his hand closing over hers, lacing their fingers together. “Don’t start something you don’t want to finish,” although it was already evident something had started.

She smiled and brought his left arm up, kissing the back of his hand, then his wrist, then the mark, the worst of his scars that was always a deep and garish black now, standing out harshly from his skin as if it were charred. He flinched at her touch and she watched the tension creep into his features, so taking a page from his book she leaned into his ear and said,

“Shhhhh,” before bringing her lips to the mark again, tracing the outline of it with her tongue, laying tiny kisses along the way. He groaned, his brow still furrowed in frustration. “I can’t hide my shame from you with clothes or glamours,” she said quietly, “My collar is always in the way. I see your face every time your eyes fall on it. You said before that all my marks and scars and injuries made me beautiful. The same is true for you, Draco.”

He pulled her around to lay on top of him, pressing his wet mouth to her neck as she slowly slid down over his length, his hands digging deep into her wet hair.
“You make me feel forgiven, Granger,” he said, pushing up against her with languid, slow strokes.

“You make me remember my magic, Malfoy,” she whispered back, closing her eyes to feel his heat inside her.

Hermione went straight to bed when they were finished, claiming to want to read but he found her sound asleep after ten minutes. It was only a bit after ten and he was never able to sit still when his mind was in overdrive, so he walked down the hall with the intention of going to his lab but instead he found light spilling out from his childhood nursery, unused since the day he left for school first year. Lucius stood alone in the baby blue room, staring at the old photo of him standing in front of the Manor…off to Hogwarts.

“How different would you be, I wonder, if we’d sent you to Durmstrang?” He said, not looking up, running his fingers over the waving image.

“Probably have better upper body strength at least…less prone to motion sickness on the Underground,” Draco offered, bracing his hands against the doorjamb. His father looked older than he had even this morning, like an actor aged with makeup.

“How have you been working this task from the beginning? To break the collar?” Lucius asked, standing casually with one hand in his dressing robe, placing the picture back on the shelf.

“My plan all along has been to save her,” Draco said, stepping further into the room. It always made him feel gigantic walking in there, remembering how he used to have to ask someone to get his toys from the top shelf, how the painted sky ceiling seemed miles away, now he could touch it with his finger tips. “This slavery bullshit is wrong. You have to know that. I know you do. Putting her in prison, anyone in prison for being muggleborn is outrageous. I want to let her choose her own future, to take that fucking collar off her and set her free,” he said, surprised at how his father barely reacted to the news. “And now with what you’ve told us we have no choice. Her life is literally on the line. We’ve got a few weeks time to find a solution, but whether it works or not…we’re leaving. The further we run, the more time we buy.”

The decision had come into his head almost as he was speaking it, but now that it was out he was sure. They couldn’t stay in Wiltshire. Still, he looked away from Lucius to avoid seeing his reaction, choosing instead to run his hand over the shelves with his old school books and pictures, his tiny dragons that he’d played with for hours, imagining himself the hero of some epic tale.

“I’m not asking you to cover for us,” Draco said. “I’m not asking you to help, or to give me money. I’m just asking you to…to wake up one day and realize that we’re not here…and…let that be the end. The end of me…and her and both of us. We’re just…out of your mind. We’re gone.”

He looked up and found his father staring at him with tears in his eyes and admittedly, the words had come hard for Draco as well. For as much as they didn’t get along, Hermione was right, Lucius was all he had. The Malfoys weren’t a particularly cozy cuddly bunch, but it was always a comfort to know there was someone out there who was on your side, who would fight for you, speak up for you, take care of you, someone who would remember you.

“I knew the moment I sent you off to school I would lose you,” Lucius said, his eyes wet, rimmed red. “You were such a stubborn, proud little man. I knew you’d go off and see the world for yourself, see that maybe the things we’d taught you weren’t true, that we were actually an ancient,
dying breed struggling to remain significant.” He smoothed his hands over the back of the rocking chair where Narcissa had nursed him, his hair shining in the sunlight. “You came home so filled with stories of how smart and brilliant and wonderful this…this Granger girl was…how she was so brave and proud and how frustrated it made you when she stood up to you…I had to laugh. Of course my son would be enthralled with a…mu-muggleborn girl.” He smiled at Draco as he moved around the tiny room. It wasn’t so long ago that she still made him want to pull his hair out with her stubbornness and pride. But he was old enough now to know he wouldn’t want her any other way. “So in my desperation to keep you, my only son, I filled your head with the ridiculous rhetoric of our ancestors, they’re all exaggerations if not outright lies I know now, but then…I just wanted…I didn’t want the world to steal you away, and then…then He came back and things tumbled out of control and…I ended up destroying you.”

“I’m not a robot, I’m not mindless. I had choices to make in all of those things you claimed to have done,” Draco said, his voice soft as his throat tightened with emotion. “I made the choice to be an asshole at school to everyone who crossed my path, to be a tattletale, to call people terrible names in order to hide how lonely I was. I made the choice to cheat on homework, to steal Christmas gifts, read other people’s owls. I was…not…a good person,” he said, almost laughing at the absurdity of it all. “I made the choice to take on the tasks put before me because I believed they’d make me a good person. I could try to be a hero, to ingratiate myself to the worst of humanity. I took this stupid mark with pride and I’ll never be rid of it now. I’ve accepted my role in those mistakes, in the deaths I’ve caused…but she won’t be another. I’ll make sure of it.”

Lucius smiled and pulled his son into his arms for an awkward but earnest hug, the first they’d shared since Narcissa passed. Draco couldn’t help but think that this conversation would make Hermione proud, this outpouring of emotion. Lucius pulled away after a moment and straightened himself to full height and proper attitude.

“How do you know where I’ve always wanted to visit one day?” he said, walking to the window and looking out over the grounds. “Bournemouth. A beautiful little seaside town, and a part of our family’s history, too. Not a grand and glorious part, but there is a little shack of a house…nothing like this…not even suitable for a true Malfoy, but it’s part of our family just the same. I’m not sure anyone even knows it exists since it isn’t warded and it isn’t in our name. If I remember correctly it even has a well-stocked wine cellar…If you looked down there I bet it would have anything you could ever need…” He shouldered past his son and left the room saying, “if you ever were inclined to visit.”

Hermione woke up in Draco’s bedroom alone. Since coming back to the Manor they’d settled in to a frantic research routine after their meeting with Lucius and Draco was often in the library or the lab without her, claiming he had no need for sleep…until he fell asleep for three hours after lunch. She pulled on her robe and shuffled down to the lab finding it empty.

“Malfoy?”

There was no answer. But turning to go down the main staircase she was quickly reminded that it was Christmas. In all of their madness and panic she’d completely forgotten. They tried not to look at calendars or clocks, not wanting to think of how quickly time was passing. The Manor had become a world unto itself, in its own universe, population of three. Of course one of the benefits of being magical was that decorating could happen in the blink of an eye. When she’d gone to bed
the Manor was just as dark and ominous as usual, more haunted house than winter wonderland, but
this morning the bannisters were wrapped with pine boughs and holly, dotted with sparkling
baubles. There were white candles in the windows and little bunches of greens tied to the sconces
on the walls. As beautiful as the décor was, it had an air of detached sadness about it, no music, no
laughter…no big family gathering with a tree full of gifts. It was more like a well-appointed hotel.
Still she appreciated the effort, as any bit of light or happiness was like a life buoy these past
couple of years. Last Christmas she’d been in prison and they had tortured the prisoners by holding
a raucous, drunken party just above their cells, letting them hear the horrors of their “celebration”
while they sat chained to the walls of their old classrooms.

“Happy Christmas Granger,” Draco said, shaking her out of her reverie. “I told you I’d make it
nice.”

He stood at the foot of the staircase already dressed for the day in jeans and the sweater she’d
insisted he buy on their first shopping trip together.

“It’s beautiful,” she said, coming down the last few steps. “But you didn’t have to do all this for
me.”

He turned and walked on ahead of her towards the less formal dining room off of the kitchens, his
hands in his pockets, looking like the old self assured prefect Malfoy, a sneaky grin on his face.

“I didn’t. Not entirely. I told you before that I love Christmas,” he said before pulling out her chair.

Lucius was already eating his breakfast, a full fry up affair on the finest family china, their tea in
beautiful white cups with tiny green leaves around the rim. Once she sat down, Lucius lifted his
wand and with a small gesture each of their plates held a gold Christmas cracker. The sight of it
brought a tears to her eyes remembering her Christmases at home, reading the awful jokes and
wearing the paper crowns at dinner. One year she remembered getting a little plastic diamond ring
in her cracker and she thought it was the most beautiful treasure in the world. These, however,
were magic crackers and when she pulled hers open a shower of gold and silver sparks flew up and
glittered back down onto the table leaving a green velvet box (much bigger than the original
cracker) sitting on her plate.

“No paper crown?” She asked Draco with a smile.

Lucius stood and cleared his throat, obviously not in the mood for such raucous festivities.

“I'll leave you two to your celebration. Merry Christmas Miss Granger, Draco. If you’ll excuse me
I need to get down to the Order for a meeting,” he said. But before leaving the room he placed a
light hand on Draco’s shoulder. “Don’t forget your own cracker. I’ll be home this afternoon.”

“Go on,” Draco said, watching her stare at the unopened box. He moved over to her side of the
table and sat next to her. She ran her fingers over the velvet, the gold hinge that held it closed.

“I didn’t get you anything, or even make you anything,” she said, more disappointed in herself than
anyone else could be. She was smart enough to remember these sorts of things. She knew
Christmas had been coming and she had to have known that Draco would give her a gift.

“I don’t think it’s proper etiquette for a slave to give her master a gift,” he said with his usual
wicked smile, “but if you feel that badly about it I’ve got several ideas of what you can do
instead.” He kissed her neck, the little hollow in her collarbone, his hand running up the inside of
her leg.
“Don’t you have your own cracker to open?” She asked, rolling her eyes and pushing him away.

“You first,” he said, sitting back in his chair, arms crossed, pleased as punch.

She flipped open the gold hinge and opened the velvet box. Inside was a beautiful necklace, obviously an heirloom, with old burnished gold settings holding little five petal flowers made of diamond, topaz and peridot. It was cool and heavy in her hand, sparkling in the candlelight from the centerpiece. She’d never held something so valuable in her life. It nearly frightened her.

“Draco…this is beautiful. I…” He reached out and clamped his hand over her mouth.

“Don’t,” he said. “Don’t say you can’t accept it, don’t say it’s too much or that you don’t deserve it. If you don’t wear it, it will sit in a vault rotting away, unseen, unappreciated.”

He pulled his hand back and she closed her mouth, looking down at the necklace that now represented herself, her own imprisonment, her need to be seen, her fear of being forgotten. In truth, she actually wasn’t going to protest the expense of the gift. Money meant nothing to the Malfoys, it may as well be the plastic ring she pulled out when she was six. But the fact was that she couldn’t wear it. Not while the thick iron ring was welded to her neck.

“It’s for after,” he said quietly. “For when we take it off.”

“Thank you,” she said, giving him a quick kiss. “Lucius said to open yours. What do you think it is? A Nimbus 2001?”

"You obviously don't keep up with your brooms, Granger."

He reached across the table and pulled the cracker, but this time there was no shower of sparks or glitter. All that fell out was a small glass vial filled with a pale green liquid and a piece of parchment wrapped around it. They both stared at it sitting on the table and Draco snatched it up, unwrapping the parchment.

“It’s a story. A bedtime story I used to hear from my mother,” he said, skimming the parchment to make sure of the details. “There was an old hag, she was jealous of the beauty of a local princess and decided to curse her by poisoning her spinning wheel.”

“With what?” Hermione asked, tipping her head to look at the label free vial. Unsure of why Lucius would give his son poison for Christmas.

“Draught of Living Death. She fell into a deep sleep and appeared…dead.” Draco paused here and looked at Hermione, his eyes wide with realization. “A prince who loved her, a Wizard Prince, coated his lips with...Wiggenweld Potion…” he held up the vial, turning it in the light. “And woke her with a kiss.”

They stared at each other and then back at the parchment.

“I guess you’re not my Knight in Shining Armor after all,” she said, her face breaking into a smile. “You’re my handsome Wizard Prince.”
Hello friends and happy December. Is anything worse than not updating a fic in a timely manner? Murder? Maybe murder is worse. But I just wanted to let you know that I’m going to the hospital to have some elective surgery this week and will be unable to write or post for a couple of days. Fret not, I have the next/final three chapters almost entirely written so I won’t leave you hanging. This story will definitely be over before Christmas. Thank you so so so much for reading and commenting and inspiring my work every day. And now… back to the show…

“No! No. Hermione, no.” Draco had stormed away from her in no particular direction but ended up in the library, staring at ancient potion books although for what he didn’t know, but he made himself look busy.

“The Draught of Living Death is a SLEEPING potion, not a poison. It won’t kill me,” she insisted as she followed him, holding the parchment and potion in her hand, acutely familiar with the feeling of men never trusting her ideas. “Look, your father gave us the answer. He HANDED us the answer Draco.”

He whirled around on her, sure that she’d gone off the deep end. Or maybe she really was ready to end it all given her willingness to put her life in the hands of an old myth, a myth with no concrete proof of its veracity. They may as well be looking for seven little gnomes to build her a glass coffin or perfectly fitting shoe.

“Maybe you don’t remember trying to concoct that potion in school, but I do. I remember because my life would have been made a thousand times easier had I been able to do it. I followed that recipe to. The. Letter. Your beloved Potter made the potion correctly and the rest of us nearly destroyed the classroom with our various noxious poisons. Neither you nor I could get it right and you know that’s saying something.”

He abandoned the books and looked for answers at the bar instead, pouring an absurdly tall glass of straight vodka and downing half of it while staring out at the snow. This hadn’t been his plan for Christmas. In fact he had wanted to stay away from this topic completely, just for one day.

“Draco! That was nearly six years ago. And we had, what? An hour to get it right? Now we have weeks. Months maybe! Harry told me that there were notes in his potions book, he said to crush the beans instead of cut them. We have weeks to try different formulations. We can perfect it.”

“And what if it is perfect?” He was very nearly yelling at her now and did his best to pull back, to lower his voice, his words sliding out between clenched teeth. “What if it’s so perfect that you fall into this endless sleep and the pretty little fairy tale potion doesn’t work to wake you up? What am I supposed to do then, knowing that I’ve essentially murdered you?”

His head dropped between his shoulders as he slammed his empty drink down on the bar. Hermione grabbed his arm, turning him around to face her, careful to keep her voice low.

“Murder? Draco, everything we do to destroy this collar is going to be done together. Every
responsibility taken will be both of ours. It’s my life, it’s my future. You said you’d do anything you had to in order to save me.” He wouldn’t look her in the eye so she ducked down to look into his. “I’ve trusted you every minute that I’ve been with you, Malfoy. I wouldn’t trust anyone to make this potion but you.”

“Granger…” her name sounded like the growl of a wounded animal as he looked up to the ceiling.

“Listen, we’re not going to do this today, right? It’s Christmas. We don’t have the ingredients; I haven’t even showered yet. So I’m just telling you to trust yourself as much as I do. I know we can do this.” She held his jaw in her hands and stroked his frowning lips with her thumb. “And then we’ll both be free.”

They spent the rest of the morning by the fire. Draco pulled a bottle of champagne from the cellar and they snuggled on the Edwardian sofa, which she still declared painfully uncomfortable. In her perusals of the library earlier in the week she’d found a thick photo album of Draco’s youth and demanded that he look at it with her, explaining each photo, defending the little blue and white sailor suit he was in for a family picture out by one of the willow trees.

“I was a bloody angel and I won’t hear any different,” he said when she laughed at one of his baby photos, his little round face in a white bonnet. “I don’t hear you complaining about my beautiful alabaster skin these days, Granger,” he said, nudging her with his elbow. “You can thank my mother for keeping me hidden from the sun.”

She snorted and flipped the pages of the book, the pictures in the middle far more familiar; little Draco with his slicked back hair and black Hogwarts robes, arms around Crabbe and Goyle, Draco in his Quidditch Robes on the morning of his first game.

“Now this hair,” she said, unable to resist teasing him. “Is this why you were late for breakfast every morning?”

“I will have you know, you sassy swot, that my mother thought I was very handsome like this. She said it was dignified…and it was a spell.” He raised his eyebrow at her, looking at her hair warily. “I don’t trust the performance of your muggle products.”

Hermione hit him with a pillow and he easily wrestled it away from her, flipping her onto her back. “Fine. You win. You were very handsome like that,” she said, and he laughed that she blushed at the admission. “There were at least six Gryffindor girls looking to…snare the dragon back then,” she said, squirming out from his grip and sitting up again.

“Oh really…” he said, leaning in to leer at her. “Who were they? Was one of them Angelina? I bet it was Angelina.”

“Oh really…” she asked, thinking she’d challenged him.

He told her all about their family trips through wizard Europe; the catacombs below Paris, the family house up in Scotland on the isle of Skye, the gorgeous wizard resort of Pripyat, Ukraine where he’d actually had his first kiss from a pretty blue eyed witch from Norway.

“Do you even remember her name?” She asked, thinking she’d challenged him.

“Excuse me, I’m not that much of a cad. Her name was Eisa. And she hated Quidditch and loved black licorice.” He frowned at her. “I know you’re joking but you really did think the worst of me
didn’t you? You didn’t believe me when I told you all of my partners were fully consenting. You didn’t believe me when I told you I’d keep you safe from my father, from the rest of the Death Eaters, that I wouldn’t hurt you.”

She pulled her lip between her teeth, her stomach filled with an acid guilt.

“I’ve...I was a prisoner of war for two years and sold into slavery… I don’t believe anyone. I’m skeptical by nature. But even you have to admit that you hadn’t given us...me...much reason to believe in you before now.” He nodded weakly and she kissed his forehead. “None of that matters anymore. We’re all different people now.”

“That’s for sure,” he said, flipping to the last page, Draco, Lucius and Narcissa in his fifth year, proudly wearing his prefect badge. It was taken in the Fall, long before Umbridge upended the school.

“I wish I had a book like this, anything that had my memories in it, my childhood,” she said, closing the heavy, leather bound album and smoothing her hands over the cover. “When they obliviated my parents they may as well have erased me. They took all my possessions, threw me in prison. There’s no one in the world to say they remember when I was a baby, a little girl.”

“We could find them you know,” he said, twirling her hair around his fingers. “Obliviate can be reversed.”

“No,” she said, shaking her head, her smile sad but resigned. “It’s better actually, that they don’t know. I would never want them to know what happened to me, what I’ve been through.” They were quiet together for a moment and then she finally turned to look at him. “First of all, I’d never be able to explain you.”

He smiled. “Ah...no one can, darling.”

She put the book aside and stretched her legs out across his lap, her head on his shoulder.

“We’ll have to go back to London for the ingredients,” he said after a moment, his fingers tracing little swirls up and down her legs, staring into the fire. “I want to make sure everything we put into it is the best quality. The Bobbins have a greenhouse where they grow Sopophorous and Asphodel in sterile conditions. The rest...the rest, we’ll go all the way up to the apothecary in Glasgow if we have to, but I’m not even attempting this potion on you unless it’s flawless.”

“Thank you,” she said. “I’m not worried. I know it will be.”

“You were an amazing little girl, I’m sure of it,” he said. “I didn't know you until you were eleven, and even then you already blew my mind.”

In the end it took three weeks. After the holiday they went back to the flat in London and Hermione sat quietly and obediently in the slave holding cell at the labs, smiling at the blank walls, knowing that she and Malfoy were going to win. They were going to solve the puzzle and break out of the system. Ingredients in hand, they walked out through the main lobby and she happily endured the sneering remarks of how far she’d fallen, the portraits on the walls telling her she was right where she deserved to be. She smiled at the sideways glances from the pureblood scientists and potion masters, knowing that soon enough they’d be whispering about the mudblood who escaped. But nothing brought her greater joy than knowing how angry Voldemort would be,
how his icy blood would finally boil at the thought of Draco and Hermione slipping out of his clutches, such delicious betrayal. She’d hadn’t felt so hopeful in years.

Within a week he had enough ingredients for six batches. The first two were a complete wash, bubbling over the cauldron in a deep, inky color that smelled like the dead rat he’d once found in the corner of the Slytherin common room. The third batch was close. He dropped a red rose into it and it crisped and dried, but the center remained red, clearly alive. He gave a dose to a small white mouse and it was simply sleepy, doddering around its cage, bumping into walls and occasionally snoozing for an hour or so.

It was nearly February, the days short and bitter cold, the nights feeling endless. Even sleeping with Hermione curled around his side, her legs tangled around his, her hair fanned out over his chest, he found himself overwhelmed with thoughts of the potion. The choice to even use it still tore at him even though Lucius and Hermione clearly thought it was the best course of action, the idea of sending her into an eternal abyss of nothingness churned his stomach. Yet he knew that her name would be drawn before too long and she’d suffer a worse fate if they didn’t do something. And so, unable to sleep without seeing her suffering in some horrible way, he worked in the lab in the dead of night. The fourth batch was the charm. The red rose shriveled and dried almost instantly, the mouse fell onto its side, his heart rate and breathing quickly slowing until it was only detectable with a scan of his wand. After five minutes he poured a few drops of the Wiggenweld into his mouth and he blinked awake, seemingly no worse for wear, although appearing a bit drunk for a few minutes. For a while Draco simply sat and watched the mouse running around the cage, its energy building with each passing moment. It worked. He’d done it. The Draught of Living Death and he’d perfected it. He was ecstatic. He poured the clear potion into a vial but found himself unable to slip it into his pocket. It sat in his hand, still warm through the glass of the vial. The Draught of Living Death. It could never be perfect, there was always a chance it would put her down forever, no matter how remote. Still finding himself unable to leave the lab, unable to go wake her and let her know, he sat at the table and watched the mouse curl up to sleep. The sun was coming up on a bright winter day. On the table beside the mouse cage was the dried and faded rose, forever hovering between life and death. The vial had cooled in his hand. He was terrified.
Draco found her in the bedroom, passing the time by running her fingers over the old school trinkets and souvenirs he’d amassed over the years; a striped Slytherin scarf folded up with his worn Quidditch gloves on top, a photograph of Draco, Pansy and Blaise waving and doing elaborate bows and curtsies at the Yule Ball. He even had one of the old Potter Stinks badges (now unblinking). She picked it up and found a bent and battered S.P.E.W. badge beneath it, making her smile. On the highest shelf in small glass box was a slowly fluttering, dented and tarnished snitch.

“Only one I ever caught in a game,” he said, picking up the box and examining it.

She turned around with a beautiful smile on her face until she saw the vial in his hand. Then her face went deadly serious, her heart leaping into her suddenly dry, tight throat.

“It’s ready,” he said, looking almost as sick as she felt.

When she reached out to touch the vial he pulled his arm back.

“Listen, we can go somewhere else, far, hide out like I said before. I’ll empty the vault and we can go anywhere. Hell, we could go to America and live our lives on the beach in California! Anything!”

“You don't really strike me as the beach bum type, Malfoy,” she said, trying to joke with him.

But his voice was shaking and desperate and she saw that he was as frightened as she was. He needed her to be strong, to be calm. He needed her. This was how the two of them worked so well. There were times when they needed to trade off their strengths, to hold the other up as they kept struggling forward. As hard as it was, right now she had to hide her fear to soothe his.

“It’s going to work,” she said, slowly prying the vial loose from his hand. I wouldn’t trust anyone’s potion but yours. It’s going to work perfectly.”

She took his hand and lead him over to the bed, patting the mattress to encourage him to sit beside her and they both lay back against the pillows.

“So...did you ever think you’d be sneaking Hermione Granger into your bedroom at the Manor?” She asked, trying to lighten the mood, her hand running over this stomach beneath his shirt. He'd never let anyone touch his scars, much less worship and revere them like she did, her fingers so soft and warm against the silvery taut skin, as if she could read some truth in them, as if she could feel the pain they'd caused him. It slowed his breath. He smiled and kissed her, his thumb brushing over her cheek.

“I imagined it quite a bit, but I didn’t think it would ever actually happen.”

“I see. Well, when I wake up I want you to tell me all about the things you imagined about me,” she said, nuzzling his neck, the spot behind his ear that made him shiver.

For a while they just lay together, looking at the ceiling above his bed. Just like in his nursery, it was a beautifully charmed sky of stars, but this one a bit more advanced, like a mariner’s map, with drawings of each constellation laid over the stars. He told her that it was charmed to change with the seasons, revealing the different constellations.

“But Draco is circumpolar,” he said, “it’s always visible above the horizon. Always there.”
He felt her staring at him, heard her nails clicking against the side of the vial.

“How long does it take to work?” she asked, a great deal of the bravado absent from her voice.

“I’ve never seen it used on a human. A few minutes I suspect? Maybe less? It took half a minute for the mouse.”

“So if I have any big speeches I should make them now,” she said with a nervous laugh that he didn’t return.

“If the collar doesn’t vanish in ten minutes I’m reversing it with the Wiggleneweld and we return to our regularly scheduled sex program,” he said, with such earnest seriousness that it made her laugh. “I mean it.”

She’d tried to demand he leave her under for an hour the day before, but he’d refused to even continue crushing Sopophorous beans until she relented. Hazel’s sacrifice had only taken fifteen minutes total and the collar disappeared completely.

“And if…if you don’t wake up…fuck,” he said, his voice trembling. “If you don’t wake up, well I’ll see you on the other side directly, Juliet. I mean it, save me a seat near the band.”

She sat bolt upright then, her eyes fiery with anger.

“Don’t you dare. If something happens to me Malfoy, I want you to keep fighting. I’m alive right now because you wouldn’t let me give up. You don’t get to lay down and die because your… because your…girl…”

“Are you my girl, Granger?” he asked, pressing his forehead to hers, his lips curved into a crooked smile.

“Well I would hope so,” she said. “We are sleeping together.”

“You know sex means nothing to a scoundrel like me,” he purred, kissing her softly.

She uncorked the bottle. Her plan was to soak up his smell, to look at his eyes, to feel his skin, absorb his kiss…to make sure that he was the last thing in her brain, the last sensations she felt, her five senses saturated with Draco Malfoy. Before drinking she touched her fingers to his lips and kissed them, knowing they wouldn’t be able to touch again once she had the poison potion on her lips.

“Whether you wanted to be or not, you’ve been my knight in shining armor, Draco Malfoy.”

He kissed her hard, sniffing back tears he’d been trying to hide, memorizing the taste of her tongue, the way she whimpered when he made her feel good, his mind flashing back to the very first time he saw her on the train to Hogwarts.

As she tipped the vial back into her mouth, shivering at the bitter taste, he found himself thinking about all the times he’d wanted to tell her, to kiss her, to show her how he felt. The stupid Yule Ball when she’d been crying, or at the prefect’s meeting fifth year when they’d been caught alone before anyone else arrived…he could have told her. The day he watched her writhing and screaming beneath his aunt’s torture, how he’d ached to rescue her then, to save her. When he’d seen her in the dark of his kitchen and she touched his arm and assured him he wasn’t a lost cause; or the first time he’d been inside her, their bodies fit so perfectly, their warmth melting them together, he should have said it then. But this was maybe his last chance. He could feel the heat going out of her skin, her eyes closing. So he pulled her tight against him and kissed the crown of
“I love you Hermione,” he said, the words tumbling out fast and frantic, louder than he intended. “I’ve loved you for so long.”

She smiled, happy that in her cold, gathering darkness she could hear those last words, that she knew they were true.

“I love you t---“ her hand fell from its grip around his neck.

And she was gone.

He pulled away, not liking the feeling of holding her cold, stiffening body. Instead he lay her head back on the pillows, doing his best to make her comfortable, placing her arms at her sides, pulling off her shoes. Every five or ten seconds her chest would rise and fall, inflating so slowly as to be nearly undetectable. He put his fingers to her wrist and felt her pulse slowing with every second – seventy, fifty, forty…still, the collar sat solid around her neck, cool to the touch. Only three minutes had gone by. The potions analysis he’d read said that a minimum pulse rate between ten and twenty would be reached at five minutes in, with a breathing rate of six per minute. The Wiggenweld potion was in his pocket and he worried it between his fingers as the seconds counted down.

In everything he’d read it was time that made the difference between life or death. The good old Sleeping Beauty story that Wiggenweld told was touching and romantic but probably not true unless the princess had only been sleeping for under two hours. Since that tale had spread the books were filled with stories of wizards hoping to shrewdly escape debts or arranged marriages of even Hogwarts’ exams – all with tragic results due to bad timing and imprecise potions. But if Draco had one skill in his whole miserable life it was potions, and he promised himself that this would work.

At the five minute mark her lips had gone dark, the thin skin around her eyes turned a purplish brown, her cheeks pale as her blood receded from the surface of her skin. Her pulse was at eighteen.

“Please come back,” he whispered, laying down beside her, watching her parted lips, her dark, feathering eyelashes, holding tight to her hand, trying to keep it warm with his own.

Ten minutes passed. Her skin looked like alabaster, just as smooth and cool to the touch, her lips blue at the edges. He pulled the potion from his pocket, unwilling to wait a minute longer – until he smelled it.

It was an earthy, smoky iron smell, the smell of metal heating, like a furnace bursting to life. He looked down at her neck and saw the M insignia glowing with green light, the other etchings in the collar swirling to life along with it. Around his wrist the iron cuff began to heat and glow, becoming thinner as it got hotter, burning his skin. Hermione’s neck was painfully red, blisters blooming around the edges, but the collar itself was definitely shrinking, thinning. The cuff around his wrist vanished, leaving tender, red skin behind. The sickly smell of Hermione’s skin burning
made him gag, but his heart was pounding with excitement as the last bit of the hideous metal vanished in a puff of green smoke. Draco tipped her head up and poured the Wiggenweld Potion into her mouth, coated his lips with the last drops and kissed her cold lips.

“C’mon now love,” he said, holding her tight. “Come on back. We won. You can come back.”

His hand shook as he pulled out his wand to heal the burns on her neck and on his wrist. Still she didn’t move. There was a pounding on the bedroom door.

“Draco!” Lucius sounded as if he would break the door down, the pounding echoing through the room. “DRACO, let me in!”

“No! Wait!” He gently slapped Hermione’s face, feeling tears well up in his eyes. He’d failed. Just like every other task he’d been set with, he’d failed. Another innocent life, another white bird. “Please Hermione, I love you. I need you to come back.” He was begging like a child, his voice shaking, terrified. He’d never felt so helpless, so weak. There was nothing he could do except hope.

He held his wand out to the door and yelled “Colloportus,” although he knew it was easily undone. Right now he didn’t want Lucius to see, he didn’t want anyone near him, anyone near her. He moved furniture in front of the door but his father kept pounding.

“DRACO ANSWER ME. I’m being summoned! He knows! He knows.”

The blood drained from Draco’s face as he let his wand drop and his tears fall, clutching Hermione’s limp body to his chest, rocking back and forth.

Limp.

She was limp. She was warm. Her head lolled backwards when he sat her up, and he saw that the blue outline of her lips was fading.

“Hermione! Hermione! Please! Do you hear me?”

Beneath her closed eyes he saw a flutter of movement, a flicker of her lids. The furniture screeched across the hardwood floor and the door of his suite flew open, Lucius standing there, heaving with rage.

“D—draco?” In the commotion he heard her voice, so tiny, as if emerging from a cave deep inside her, her lips barely parted. “Draco…are you there?” He could feel the cool puffs of air from her words against his skin.

Lucius stepped into the room, his eyes wide, looking at the bare exposed skin of Hermione’s neck, the empty space on his son’s wrist. On his own left arm the Mark seared with pain, like nothing he’d felt before, deep and to the bone.

“Draco,” Lucius said, doing his best to keep his voice even. “What have you done?”
Lucius rushed to Draco’s side, touching his fingers to Hermione’s throat, examining the scarred skin that wouldn’t heal, a collar she’d wear forever. Her forehead was clammy, like a child emerging from a long fever, her eyes glassy and unfocused.

“Do you think she can apparate?” Draco asked, still holding her tightly, as if he couldn’t believe she was real, if he let go she’d dissolve into thin air. His voice was small and childlike, so desperate for help. The mark on Draco’s arm started to burn, the skin around it pink and angry, like his father’s.

“Draco? Is it gone?” Her voice was still weak, hoarse. It was as if she’d been asleep a thousand years and not fifteen minutes. She lifted her fingers to her neck and felt the tender skin.

“It’s gone!” He said, smiling through his agony. “It’s gone. Can you stand? We have to leave, now.”

“Draco, He’s going to try and find you,” Lucius said. “He’s going to want to know what happened. He won’t take her escape lightly.”

Both men hissed in agony as their marks burned again, being summoned for a third time. The sudden urgency of the situation woke Hermione fully and although she felt weak she pulled herself off the bed.

“Draco, is He coming? Are you saying He’s coming?”

“No,” said Lucius, his brow prickling with sweat, his face nearly gray with pain. “It takes more than this to get him to actually show his face. Before I came up I sent a message indicating that I was taking care of it, that I suspected something had gone wrong between the two of you.”

“Then we have to go,” Draco said, standing and pulling Hermione into his arms. “What will you tell him?”

Lucius pulled a shining blade from his waistcoat and held it in front of him, shaking in the weak grip of his hand. Hermione’s eyes went wide, adrenaline pumping through her newly awakened veins. And for the first time she realized there was something else. There was something besides blood, besides adrenaline. There was magic. She didn’t know how it would help them now or if she could even use it properly, but she felt stronger knowing it was still there, just like Draco had said.

“Do you trust me?” Lucius asked, bent over in pain but locking eyes with his son. “You have no reason to, neither of you, I know. But I’m telling you that I can put some distance between you and Him. I can…I can give you a chance. But it won’t be without pain.”

“What is it then?” Hermione asked, suddenly feeling ferociously protective of Draco. He’d suffered and sacrificed enough for her. How much more pain was he expected to endure?

“You know the Mark can’t be removed. But we found during the war that if it’s damaged, if the lines are broken…it can’t be traced until it heals.”

Draco looked down at his Mark, ran his fingers over it while his father explained further.

“I’ll tell him that you got…too rough with her. That she attacked and the two of you fought and
she…lost. He’ll no doubt send Death Eaters to investigate.”

Lucius stood and overturned the chair behind him, tore the curtains down from the window. Hermione, understanding, followed suit, pulling the sheets and pillows from the bed and throwing them on the ground, knocking the bedside table on its side.

“The blood is the evidence,” she said, and Lucius nodded. “He won’t believe it forever, but enough for us to get somewhere else.” She looked at Draco who was silent, but nodding in agreement.

“You can’t ever come back,” Lucius said, knowing quite well why his son was so quiet. The time had come for them to sever ties. As dark and cold and unwelcoming as the Manor seemed, it was Draco’s home. He was born there. It's where he learned to walk, to read, discovered his magic. He’d watched is mother die there. He’d fallen in love there; milestones he’d never forget. And just like the missing scrapbooks of Hermione’s youth, it was time to let all this history go. “I will do everything in my power to convince him that she is dead,” Lucius said softly, kindly. “I will tell him that you were…wracked with grief and left with her body. I will do everything I can to make you two disappear.”

“I know,” Draco said, stretching his left arm out over the tangled bedding. Lucius grabbed his wrist and held it down, looking into his son’s eyes, so similar to his own, but seeing the world so differently.

“I want you to finally be happy. To know what it’s like to be happy,” Lucius said, holding the knife over his arm, hesitating. “She makes you whole. She makes you happy.”

“More than anyone in the world,” Draco said.

Lucius nodded tightly and dragged the knife over the mark twice in a long narrow X. The cut was deep enough that Hermione could see the pink meat of his forearm beneath the skin, and held her hand over her mouth to keep from vomiting. Draco’s eyes rolled back in pain and he swore and writhed, sliding down to the floor as the blood splattered onto the wall and the bed. She immediately went to him, pulling her sweater over her head and holding it to the wound, pressing down with all her strength.

“It’s ok,” she said slowly, wiping smears of blood from his face and throat. “It’s going to be ok. It hurts right now but I’ll help you fix it. We’ll fix it. You and me. Look at me, look at me. Breathe…”

She felt Lucius grab her, pulling her away from Draco, stretching her arm out over the carpet.

“It won’t need to be as deep,” Lucius said, holding her gaze. “Hermione, I’m sorry. I can’t say enough…”

“Don’t,” she said, her hand on his shoulder. “We don’t have time. But I know.”

He nodded and slashed at her forearm, the dark blood from her nicked artery spraying in an arc over the floor. She cried out in agony and fell to her hands and knees.

“Heal her,” Draco growled through clenched teeth, sitting on the floor, slumped against the wall with the sweater pressed to his wound. If it were even possible, his skin was paler, his forehead dotted with sweat, his t-shirt stained with blood. “Heal her now!”

Lucius closed his hand over her wrist and pulled out his wand, reversing the wound, leaving nothing but a fresh pink scar. She ran to Draco’s side and pulled him to his feet.
“Go now,” Lucius said, dropping the knife in the middle of the scene. “Go and start over.”

Neither man said goodbye. Neither of them said I love you or I’m sorry, but why would they? It wasn’t who they were, it wasn’t what they were raised to say or feel. They wouldn’t be Malfoys if they weren’t stoic and proud, feelings packed away neatly in a box lest they ever sustain damage. Yet both of them knew. They didn’t know how long it would be or how difficult. They didn’t know that they wouldn’t see each other for another seventeen years, but they knew that they had each other and when it was needed they would find each other. They knew they were family. They wouldn’t be forgotten.

Draco weakly pulled Hermione against his chest, barely able to focus through his pain; but they only needed to get to the place where he’d hidden the muggle car that Hermione insisted she could drive. It was only a few miles away, packed with the barest of necessities and ready to head for the coast. Nodding to his father, he closed his eyes to the Manor and they disapparated somewhere new.

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The house in Bournemouth had a southern facing view of the sea and windows that flooded the entire first floor with light. Draco walked around the house ahead of her, vanishing slipcovers and dust, starting fires, lighting candles. His arm still ached from where they’d done a strange, crude surgery on his arm in a muggle hotel room the day before, not quite sewing it together, since the longer the mark was broken the safer they were, but she’d managed to stop the bleeding and wrap it in clean bandages and after a couple of drinks he could manage. Hermione was silent, walking behind him with her hands clasped behind her back, admiring the fixtures and finishes, the crown moulding and carpets. One or two portraits in the front foyer blinked and yawned, narrowing their pale eyes, awake and prepared to pass judgment.

“One word and you’re in the basement,” Draco said, placing a protective hand on the small of her back.

“So this is the ‘shack’ your father told you about?” she asked, laughing at the white marble entryway and curving staircase.

“Well it IS only five bedrooms,” he said, rolling his eyes. “And no elves. It’s charmed so that muggles see a condemned building here, all roped off and dangerous.”

“It’s beautiful,” she said, taking the first two steps of the grand staircase and turning to hold her hand out to him. “Show me the master suite?”

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When the sun started to set, Draco suggested a drink out on the balcony.

“We can wrap up in blankets and feel the sea air,” he said, as he reluctantly unwound himself from her arms. “Lucius said there’s an excellent wine cellar. Besides, I have a present for you.”
“I love presents!” she said, bouncing up on her knees, her face breaking into that beautiful bright smile he’d missed for so long.

She had been the one to initiate their sex after their tour of the second floor. She silently pulled him down onto the bed, kissing his crisp, white bandages and carefully pulled off his shirt. They touched each other with a torturous slowness, aching tenderness…a silent acknowledgment that they had time now. They had time for her to stroke over the lines of his muscles, the thick tendons in his neck and the veins in his forearms. They had time for him to place a kiss on each little bump of her spine, the hills of her hipbones, to trace his tongue over the shape of her ear. It wasn’t a frantic, desperate passion, it wasn’t sex to fulfill a task or to meet a goal. They were together freely now and by their own choice. The magical tether between them was gone but the pale, permanent marks on his wrist and her neck were almost like wedding rings. If they left each other tomorrow, they’d still wear the scars of this time together until the day they died. No matter who they loved after, no matter who they married or fucked or tolerated, the mark of their love right now was permanent. They laughed and tickled, talking between touches, nibbles and licks. He covered her face with kisses and told her the exact color of her eyes, how he loved the flecks of gold and copper running through. She ran her fingers over his chest hair, swirling her tongue over his nipple and told him how she’d always loved the shape of his lips, how soft and kissable they’d always been, even first year. She’d had a disturbing dream of him being her first kiss that made them both laugh. They kissed, deep and slow, their tongues warm and eager, but in no hurry; and she made him promise not to treat her like a porcelain doll. In answer he forcefully spread her legs and made her promise that she’d never call him Sir before sliding down to lick and suck at the slick heat between her thighs, using his masterful tongue to bring her to an orgasm that caught the breath in her lungs, her whole body shaking. He covered her neck with kisses; hungry to taste the parts of her that had been kept from him, the smooth column of her throat; the very top of her spine while her fingernails raked over the warm skin of his back. She pressed him against the mattress and sunk down onto his thick cock, guiding his hands to her breasts, riding him at a slow, seductive pace, rolling her hips against him as he stared into her eyes, his own bucking climax triggered by the look on her flushed face when she came again, her slippery walls clenching and holding him inside her. Whether minutes passed or hours, she didn’t know, but after their third deliciously lazy round she’d fallen asleep with him still buried deep inside her, their arms knotted together, his chin resting in the cradle of her shoulder.

Draco’s invitation to drinks had been his excuse to go down to the cellar, knowing that his father’s cryptic message that it would have all they needed couldn’t only refer to wine. He made his way down the old, dusty, cobweb woven staircase to the low ceiled room, small torches bursting to life as he passed them. The walls were indeed lined with racks of ancient wine bottles from floor to ceiling, even old casks of firewhiskey from the nineteenth century, but in the floor itself was an iron hatch door with one heavy ring handle in the center. He tugged on it and it didn’t move, even after throwing an Alohamora at it, it wouldn’t budge. And then he saw the small circular depression beside the handle with an inverted image of his signet ring. The heirloom ring his father had insisted he wear after their conversation in his nursery, insisting it would help him in the future. He pressed the ring into the negative impression and heard something inside click. The handle pulled up easily then and he found what his father intended – boxes and boxes full of galleons, velvet drawstring bags full of loose gems and jewelry as well as bundles of English Pounds and old French Francs. There were yellowed and curled deeds to property throughout Europe, bundles of old letters tied with green velvet ribbon, even a photograph or two, relatives that Draco had never heard of although they all looked familiar, the eyes and the hair. He sat, dumbfounded and thumbed through everything, everything they’d ever need – including a crudely drawn map to the nearest wizard friendly town and how to get to the market district via an old pub
in Southampton called The Dolphin.

“Malfoy? Did you get lost?” She stood at the top of the staircase in one of his t-shirts that barely covered her hips, her hair piled up on top of her head, held fast with one of his mother’s jeweled clips.

“Not at all, love,” he called, grabbing a fistful of papers and a bottle of wine. “I’ll be right up.”

It was uncharacteristically warm for the end of February and they stayed on the balcony until the stars came out, the half moon reflected on the choppy surface of the ocean. He told her about the buried treasure, the jewels, the papers, and together they read through the letters that had been wrapped in the velvet ribbon; tales of the Malfoy’s in France and England, announcements of marriages and births, appointments to the Ministry in France, a history book that he’d never read. All the while they slowly drank their wine, snuggling closer, their blankets wrapped tight.

“You’re terribly patient,” he said. “Especially when you know I have a gift for you.”

When he turned to catch her eye she was frowning, and his heart nearly stopped as the reality of their situation finally caught up with him. After all, the collar was gone; she was free. She’d told him as they made their way south that she could feel her magic again, that it had returned intact. He’d never seen her so bright eyed, so alive, and it made him love her all the more. But she had no need for him anymore and he had told her, he promised her that he would let her choose. She was going to ask his permission to leave. He could feel it in his bones, and he knew that if he truly loved her at all, he would have to agree to it and just hope that one day she’d find her way back to him.

“What’s wrong Granger?” he asked, his voice shaking as if he were ten, asking her to dance.

She let out a laugh that shook a few tears loose. After so many years, he could not let the name Granger go. Only at their quietest, most intimate moments, when he was laying with her naked, their bodies joined, would he call her Hermione and it always sounded so beautiful falling from his lips. And yet it never felt as…real…as when he called her Granger. Maybe because it was a reminder of their history, of how his tone had changed over the years. Her name had become a map of their ups and downs; how he spat it at her when they were young, poking fun, flinging insults and threats. How he drawled it at her when they were prefects, as if her very existence both bored and humored him. Then how he whispered it to her when he met her in the kitchen in the dark, checking to see if she was OK. How it tumbled from his mouth when he was drunk or high, spilling his heart without realizing it. Anger, fear, exasperation, teasing, flirting, it sounded different every time. It showed how visceral and raw they were together. The both of them having a distinct distaste for flowery and soft. Malfoy and Granger. She just hoped he never wanted it to change.

“I don’t want you to feel trapped by me,” she said suddenly, wiping her cheeks dry. “The collar… and the tether are gone. I never – I never got pregnant so there’s no reason to feel beholden to me. I’m a fugitive. I’m sure there’s a bounty on my head. I forced you away from your family, your passion, your work in London, from real wizard society…it’s not fair to ask that of you, to change your whole life…” she was nearly hysterical in her crying, but when she turned to face him he looked as if he would burst out laughing. “MALFOY!”
And then he did, laughing until tears streamed down his cheeks, shaking his head in complete disbelief.

“Why are you laughing at me?” she said, hazarding a smile. “Stop it!”

He stood then, pulling her up and over his shoulder, carrying her tiny frame back into the house, giving her beautiful peach of an ass one hard smack before throwing her on their bed, in their bedroom, in their home, hovering over her, caging her in with his forearms.

“You always…always…assume the worst, Granger! And believe me, I know that’s easy given the lives we’ve lived. But do you really think that I’d bring you down here to this gorgeous house, shag you senseless in this beautiful bed, show you the sights of the seashore and then send you on your way? I know I’m an asshole, but really.”

She sniffed up her tears and shrugged, feeling a bit idiotic when he explained it like that, but not quite ready to admit it. Besides, she liked hearing him talk, she wanted to hear more about how he felt about her. So she scrambled out from beneath him and pulled her knees up to her chest, shyly ducking her head as Draco rolled his eyes, crawling across the bed to the nightstand on the other side where a long black velvet box sat on top.

“Here,” he said, holding the box out to her. “If you think I’m not desperate to stay with you, maybe this will convince you.”

She snatched the box out of his hand, trying her best to keep pouting as a tiny smile pulled at her lips. Inside, on a nest of green velvet was a beautiful black wand, the handle dotted with delicate pearls.

“Merlin… is this…”

“It’s technically my mother’s,” he said, moving to sit beside her, his head on her shoulder. “But she bequeathed it to me when she was dying. She wanted my daughter to have it one day, but I’d rather you have it. I’m passing it on to you.”

It felt oddly comfortable in Hermione’s hand, like something she’d held in another life, another time. It was the same heft and length as her old wand, a similar fulcrum and distribution of weight.

“But how would it – it wouldn’t work,” she said, twirling it between her fingers, flooded with energy and excitement at even holding a wand again.

“It’s Ebony, with a dragon core, a forgiving wood, and it will change allegiance, for someone of great principles. And because it’s mine I can pass it along to you.”

He smiled as she attempted to levitate the velvet box, the wand twitching and rattling rebelliously against her hand, as if she were taming a wild bronco.

“But only if you shut up about being a burden,” he said, holding her jaw in his hand, one eyebrow arched dramatically. “One more word about that and I grow your teeth again.”

Her eyes narrowed and she pushed him down, straddling his chest. Her new weapon pointed playfully at his throat.

“How dare you,” she said, even though she was smiling. Draco reached up and tickled her, just beneath her ribs, making her squeal. “You really are a loathsome cockroach.” she said, collapsing forward on top of him, letting her hair fan over his chest.
“And you really are an insufferable swot,” he said, pulling her mouth to his for a kiss.
EPILOGUE

You guys! I haven't written fanfiction in at least a year and I was floored when these two stories (Prince and Finch and Houseguest) popped into my head at the same time. I wasn't even sure I'd finish them as I was just in the mood to write some Draco smut and be done with it. But all of your comments and questions and interest and incredible compliments kept me going. Thank you so much. I think I've got one more short smutty story in me, maybe, maybe not. But I'll be around, soon and I hope you'll join me again.

Thank you thank you thank you.

EPILOGUE

When Spring came and soaked them with rain and wind, Hermione threw herself into her magic studies as if it were first year all over again. Within three weeks she had earned the ebony wand’s allegiance, easily accio-ing books and cups of tea from across the house and changing hairbrushes into hedgehogs with ease. For his part, Draco begged her to wear a short plaid skirt and knee socks and dutifully helped her with spells and charms and engaged in duels in the backyard. Every day her magic was stronger, exercised like a muscle, easily brought back into shape.

Every few days a delivery would arrive in the foyer of the house. They would see a greenish glow and find a black wooden trunk with gold hinges sitting on the white marble floor. It was immovable, but they could open it and retrieve the contents: Draco’s notes and experiments, small pieces of equipment, vials of potions, books and scrolls, tightly lidded jars filled with ingredients. When the trunk was empty the lid would snap shut and it would disappear, arriving again later in the week with another load. Slowly but surely, piece by piece, Lucius was sending Draco his lab. They knew it wasn’t only because Draco wanted to work, but because his father was trying to get rid of any bits of evidence that the investigating Death Eaters may be sniffing around for. Occasionally there were other, less practical things tucked in among the vials and jars. Sometimes there were bits and pieces of Draco’s memorabilia; his snitch, his metallic dragons…photographs of Narcissa. Once there was red velvet box with a tag reading Miss Granger. Inside was a diamond and emerald bracelet with matching earrings and a long pair of black satin gloves.

By way of transmitting information, the glass bottles, delicate pipettes and other fragile pieces were wrapped in strategically selected pages of the Prophet, containing updates on the search for escaped Criminal Mudblood Hermione Granger and the Blood Traitor and Disgraced Heir, Draco Malfoy. There was a picture of the two of them standing at the Winter Revel, Hermione still in her black cloak, clinging to Draco’s arm as they looked off into the distance. As the weeks went by, however, the articles got smaller, relegated to back pages of the paper, no pictures, no quotes. They were fading in importance. Once all the equipment and notes were delivered they went a long while without hearing from Lucius at all. She could tell that Draco was worried, his eyes flicking to the foyer at every sound, checking the porches for Owls, looking down the winding road expecting to see his father sauntering over the stones to their house. Then they received the trunk a final time, empty except for a copy of the Prophet with a front page story about a tragic, all consuming fire at Malfoy Manor. Lucius was shown in a photo, ash streaked and devastated,
shaking his head. “Everything was lost,” he was quoted as saying, “The guest house, the gardens, our entire library of precious wizarding literature…all of it gone.”

“He’s covering for you quite well,” Hermione said stirring a pot of soup from across the room. “As well as making sure you don’t sit around on your ass for the rest of your life.”

“Says the woman cooking from the couch,” Draco said, folding up the paper and setting it on the coffee table.

Summer burned hot and humid near the sea bringing the usual distractions of the beach. Draco spent far more time out in the sun, his skin turning honey colored, his hair more golden than white. He even wore shorts once he realized that it meant she would wear a bikini. They started a sea glass collection and Hermione learned how to make pie crust from scratch. When the beaches weren’t too crowded they would bring a picnic down to the water and go for a swim. And every couple of weeks, Draco would take his nearly perfected anesthetic potion and Hermione would slice open the wounds on his arm to keep the mark broken. Over time the unevenly healing cuts would build a mark of their own, pink and jagged skin distorting the serpent and skull, keeping their lines apart.

They spent a great deal of time in bed. Not only having sex, but with Draco sleeping better than he had in years, his mind calm and his dreams rarely waking him in a sweaty panic. They slept in late, wasting most of the morning staring out at the ocean and talking, exchanging stories about how they’d both survived school, how they’d truly felt about each other in the midst of their rivalry. Draco told her about his mother and her desire for him to be a father one day and Hermione explained exactly what a dentist did with muggle teeth. And when the time for talking was over, he stayed true to his promise of giving her affection both hard and soft, particularly after they’d developed their secret code.

Hermione woke and dressed, preparing to head to the Belmont Road Wizarding District in Southampton, but before leaving the house she took out a shining brown Chestnut that they’d found on one of their walks and dropped it loudly into a glass bowl that sat on the sideboard in the foyer. The echoing sound of the nut rattling and swirling around the sides of the bowl before it came to a wobbling stop at the bottom caught Draco’s attention as he sat with his notes on the sofa and Hermione disapparated from the house.

When she got home, her heart was already fluttering in anticipation, her cheeks a bit hot, wondering what would happen. And yet, walking in the door she heard nothing, saw nothing.

“What are you doing in my house?” She dropped her bags in the hallway and kicked off her shoes. He was nowhere on the first floor. She padded up the grand white staircase, her yellow sundress sticking to her damp overheated skin. She had goosebumps, and she was wet. “Draco?”

She walked down the hallway on tip toes, peeking into each bathroom and bedroom and then she felt it. The heat of his body behind her.

“What are you doing in my house?”
She closed her eyes and breathed deep, forcing a look of fear and confusion to her features before turning around. He was only wearing a white towel slung low on his hips, his hair wet from the shower, slicked back from his face as he glared at her with arms crossed.

“I…I’m sorry. I was lost,” she said, her eyes watching a drop of water race down the center of his chest, disappearing in his navel.

“Lost. So you break into someone’s home?” He asked quietly, stepping forward so that she was forced to step back. “Maybe I should call the police,” he said, tipping his head to the side, raising an eyebrow.

“No please. Please,” she said, taking another step backwards. “You don’t have to do that. I’ll just leave. I’ll leave and we’ll forget this ever happened.”

“No,” he said, and with one more step she was backed up against the wall. “One thing I’m sure of, sweetheart, is that neither of us will forget this ever happened

He pulled her hands above her head and stuck them to the wall, his towel falling to the floor. She twisted and struggled as he ripped at her dress, tearing it down the middle so that it fell open, revealing her lack of undergarments.

“What a juicy ripe little slut. No panties on that pretty pussy,” he said, thrusting two fingers between her thighs and finding her hot and slick having imagined all day what sort of wicked things he would do to her.

Closing his free hand over her throat he crushed his lips over hers, forcing his tongue into her resisting mouth, twisting and pulling at her nipples, his fingers coating them with her juices until they stood out, shining and pink, aching from overstimulation. He hitched her legs up around his waist and unstuck her wrists.

“You’re in big trouble little girl,” he whispered as he nuzzled her neck. “I’ll take you to my bed and you can try to make it up to me.”

*****

In the Fall they found they no longer needed to reopen his wound. Letting the cuts heal in the open air had caused thick, rough scarring, breaking up the picture permanently. Besides, while they were still on the most wanted list of Traitorous Fugitives and Enemies Of The Order, the news about them in the Prophet generated very little attention. People barely looked at them when they went into The Dolphin, as they no longer looked like the Malfoy and Granger that everyone remembered. Draco had fully adapted to muggle fashion, wearing wildly colored board shorts and t-shirts, boat shoes and no socks, his legs long and tan, his hair grown out a bit, a wild mop of golden blonde on his head. Hermione was leaner and more subdued than she had been during the war, her hair cut so that it hung just below her chin, streaked with blonde. The sun not only brought out the highlights but dotted her nose and cheeks with freckles. She wore long flowing skirts and comfortable t-shirts, her ebony wand tucked into the colorful belt around her waist, always with a beautiful diamond and topaz necklace at her throat.

“Where is he located?” She asked Draco as they made their way to the back of the pub, to the old black door that opened into the wizard business district.
“SHE. And I told you,” Malfoy said, squinting at the ancient map that had been in the wine cellar, “if this map is even still accurate, the healer is down the third alley on the right.”

“We’ll ask someone,” she said, walking ahead of him, her eyes drawn to an old bookstore, three stories tall, leaning in toward the street, the sign a swinging stag’s head…reminding her fondly of Harry.

“We will not. There must be a newer map, or a directory...” Draco said, grabbing her hand to hold her close. He didn’t like approaching strangers and he still didn’t like crowds, or the chance of losing her in one.

Up ahead in the center of the cobblestone road was a giant pole with no less than twenty five signs pointing in all directions, indicating where various vendors were located. Sure enough, the sign reading Healer Renfield was two doors down in the third alley. Draco shoved the map in his pocket and pulled her through the crowd. Their appointment was in seven minutes.

The healer’s office was bright and sunfilled on the second floor above a quill shop. Healer Renfield herself was sitting behind her desk as the walked in, and she looked up, her cheerful round face breaking into a wide smile.

“Welcome, come in come in,” she said, stacking and restacking scrolls and papers, trying to look busy, yet organized. "Mr...Stone and...Mrs Stone?" She asked, getting up to shake their hands. She indicated that both of them should sit and took her place behind her desk again.

“Yes,” Hermione said. “I just…I wanted to stop in, it’s nothing too critical, but I’ve been feeling very…tired lately…and it makes no sense. I get plenty of sleep, a lot of exercise…I’ve always had a lot of energy and I have a voracious appetite…”

She watched as the healer laughed gently, her smile growing brighter and wider. She stood up from her chair and took out her wand, moving to stand in front of Hermione.

“Of course dear. Of course.”

She scanned the wand over her body from head to toe, coming to a stop just below her navel, below the waistband of her skirt. Her stomach glowed with a white, pulsing light, a fast, fluttering rhythm. A heartbeat. Renfield pulled the wand back and smiled.

“Nine weeks I’d expect. Certainly less than twelve or else the light would have told us the sex.”

*****

She gave birth in the house in Bournemouth late in the Spring, with Healer Renfield standing by and Draco holding her hand, watching her with a face of awe. He was struck speechless by her strength, how she knew instinctively exactly how to move and position her body to most efficiently push, how she silently bore down and within an hour had birthed his son, a squealing little bundle of red skin with a dusting of white hair, wrapped tightly in a green blanket that appeared mysteriously after they’d sent a surreptitious message to Lucius about her pregnancy. The black chest had arrived in the foyer with a handful of things that he’d saved from the fire, an old leather bound edition of Wizard Adventure Tales For Children, blankets and tiny black robes with the Malfoy crest on them. Draco had worn them when he was three.
In August Draco found a dog. A sturdy, brown water dog that looked far too thin, wandering the beach in front of the house. Against her judgment, Draco left out clean water and a bowl of table scraps for him, and he inevitably came back every day for a week. By then she knew they were sunk. He brought the dog in and named him Harry.

“He’s strong and young and shaggy and he follows me everywhere!” Draco said.

Hermione laughed, and was touched that he would allow such a tribute to her fallen friend. It had been years, but it was nice to hear his name again. She brought the baby over and let the dog sniff him, Jasper’s tiny hand stretching out to stroke his ear, giggling when Harry’s nose touched his belly. And there they were, a new family built from the ashes of the ones they’d lost.

After a day of shopping in Southampton and showing off baby Jasper to their new, small circle of friends at The Dolphin, Draco climbed into bed beside Hermione, who was reading Wandless Magic Revealed: It’s Within You! He pulled the book out of her hand, tossing it across the room and kissed her neck, his hand running under the covers to find her leg.

“Would you like to know what today is?” Draco asked, his fingers trailing up and down her thigh. She’d taken to wearing his t-shirts to bed because she liked the smell of them and he quickly discovered that he liked that even better than fancy lace and silk lingerie.

“Thursday?” She asked, smiling.

“Yes. Good for you, smart ass. It’s Thursday,” he said, biting her shoulder playfully. Before saying anything else, he placed a long strip of black satin in her lap. “It’s also two years exactly since I first kissed you,” he murmured against her ear. She hummed appreciatively, holding the black satin in her hand as he spoke further, keeping her eyes closed to drink in the sound of his buttery purr, feel his hand stroking her leg, moving closer and closer to where she really needed him to touch her.

“I’ve told you before how beautiful you looked when I walked in on you, like a caged beast, brimming with energy, held back by chains and collars,” he said, kissing and licking at her neck. “I’ve told you how when you kissed me back even though it was ‘against the rules’ that it made my prick rock hard, your hot tongue in my mouth, whining against my lips.”

His hand moved to part her legs a bit, rubbing the white strip of fabric that hid her core from him, soaking through with her own wetness. He slipped his fingers beneath it and pulled it taut so that it dragged between her shining, sensitive lips, his knuckle pressing against her clit.

“I wanted to fuck you so bad, Granger. I wanted to pull off your blindfold and throw your legs over my shoulders and plow you into the mattress, but I’m glad I waited.”
He kissed her mouth and she pressed against him hard, her tongue plunging between his lips, her hips grinding against his teasing fingers.

“Because I love to make you beg,” he said, rubbing harder, licking at the pulse on her neck.

Her breath came fast and he could feel her pulse racing beneath his lips. Her cheeks flushed red and he knew she was close. And so he stopped. Without a word of explanation he just pulled away and snapped the waistband of her white panties against her stomach before smiling broadly and kissing her cheek.

“Happy Anniversary, Granger,” he said, jumping out of bed and heading for the door.

“Malfoy you prick!” she said, laughing.

He whistled as he left the room and she gave him a ten second head start, because chasing him down was half the fun.

The End.

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