Rediscovering

A year later. Battle left scars. In search of her purpose in life Hermione joins mission to help people in need after earthquake. With her, not only her friends. Draco becomes more than expected. Warning: it might shake a bit.

Healing/Hurt/comfort/love/smut.

Notes

Forever grateful for my Magzillasaurus, for her amazing beta work, her non-stop support and redacting my thoughts in a better way. I really needed her help, big time.
Finally my Campnanowrimo is finished. You can expect 17 chapters, including a prologue and epilogue, a little monster of almost 50k words, written in one month. Phew. This fic was the reason why I put all my wip's temporarily on hold. Now I'm returning faithfully to them, I hope you enjoy this new baby as much as I loved to write it. Share the love!

Disclaimer:

Nothing you recognise belongs to me aside from my plot bunny.

Note:

Some of the facts have been slightly adjusted to fit the plot. But the main events and their consequences are kept true, as also the meaning of the Mid-Autumn Festival. For the DWA (see Epilogue), I found inspiration within Paul Walker’s Reach Out WorldWide, a foundation built out of volunteers who offer help to affected areas following natural disasters. Something I have a huge respect for and also financially support with a yearly donation.
Prologue

May 1999

The Second Wizarding War, one year later.

Life after the Battle of Hogwarts didn’t return to its normal rhythm.

The dark side paid dearly for following the idealism of a half-blood, blindly hungry for power.

Every Death Eater who didn’t flee in time, enjoyed a compulsory stay at Azkaban while waiting for their hearing, the three Malfoy’s included.

Every Pureblood family with ties to the known Death Eaters, underwent a strict investigation to determine their participation in the war. This was so for the Parkinson, Greengrass and Zabini families. The involvement of Nott Senior, with his association as a Death Eater, was undeniable. Contrary to Draco’s fate, Theo was spared from imprisonment, unless the ongoing inquiry, stirred up evidence of wrongdoing.

The society as a whole, who once kissed the ground these young adults walked on, didn’t hide their distaste. They treated them as pariahs, the unwanted, to be avoided at all costs. The hypocrisy of it all was maddening.

Either way, the Slytherin housemates lost their foot. The Pureblood superiority was proven unjustified on any grounds. The truths fed to them on golden spoons turned out to be big piles of dung. Every wizard, regardless of their origin, peed the same colour, bled red just as they did. All
their beliefs were based on quicksand. In the end, the majority regretted their actions, the expressed words, and above all the cruelty they had been forced to apply. On strangers, on children, on fellow students.

Draco was the poster boy for regret. Nights filled with horrifying memories. Dreams shattered; the man he considered a hero was, in reality, a racist coward. The man he looked up to his entire life was the reason why Draco was nearly forced to commit murder. Only Salazar knew, how that mission destroyed him from the inside out. Yet, he didn’t regret accepting it. It came down to Dumbledore or his mother.

He would never confess it aloud, but he felt ashamed, betrayed, and regretful. Lost and expected to spend the rest of his days behind bars.

The light side licked its wounds too.

An astonishing amount of volunteers combined forces to bring the grandeur back to the beloved Castle. Old and new students, teachers and civilians.

At the same time, guilty or not, every Pureblood family was forced to contribute financially to Hogwarts reparations. The extent to which they contributed depended on their established level of participation in the events surrounding the war. Those who were already imprisoned received a higher bill.

Healing was a different kind of beast.

The golden trio was dragged from celebrations to memorials. Everyone wanted to show gratitude and see and be seen with the nation’s heroes. Harry and Hermione hated it. What they wanted was peace, breathing room to deal with the aftermath of the war. They saw too much, they went through the impossible, had to do the unthinkable.

Ron loved the attention and used the spotlight to temporarily forget Fred’s passing, not that the rush lasted long. Contrary to Harry and Hermione, who attended every funeral of a fallen friend, Ron skipped more than he was present but no one blamed him, the raw wound was too fresh.

On the amorous level, all went south.
Ron and Hermione tried and failed at keeping the fire alive between them. Hermione ended it by confessing that she had to force herself to feel. He was one of her best friends, but more than friendship wasn’t in it for her. Ron didn’t take it well initially, but when she argued her case, he ended up admitting he sought comfort above all.

In the first month following their break-up, they kept their distance but their friendship was too strong and, slowly but steadily, they grew closer again.

Harry didn’t fare much better. Ginny became possessive, blinded by insecurity and worry, forcing him to explain over and over again what he and Hermione had done while they shared a tent. Harry tried to fight for their relationship, but her bitching - which increased after Ron and Hermione’s break-up - suffocated him and he snapped. He forced a time-out so they both could ponder what they wanted in life.

He was broken. Broken from losing Sirius, Dumbledore, Remus and Tonks. Killing Voldemort came at a cost, it had demanded a toll. Also, the fact that everyone pulled at his arms and wanted to touch him as if he was some kind of Messiah irked him to no end.

Instead of taking it as it was meant, Ginny only made it worse. Even Molly tried to make her see that Harry’s decision was the wisest. Recover from the hurt and start anew. But not for Ginny. And instead of showing Harry they were meant to be and could survive it all, she only dug a wider wedge.

In the end, no matter which side, dark or light, both parties saw and did things they couldn’t erase. They were lost. Empty. Adrift.

The war left scars. Scars that urgently needed to be healed.
Chapter One

Chapter Notes

Offering the first chapter so fast, because the prologue only sets you up. The story starts...now.

Don't forget to voice your love, it's my reward after writing such a baby.

Chapter One

June 1999

"After long consideration, the Wizengamot finds the accused, Lucius Abraxas Malfoy, guilty of all charges and he is hereby sentenced to a lifetime imprisonment at Azkaban," the Chief Warlock spoke clearly. An agreeing murmur filled the room, only Narcissa gasped in horror, Draco never blinked an eye.

"Narcissa née-Black Malfoy, the Wizengamot finds the accused guilty of cooperation, but the court takes into account the testimony of Harry James Potter. Therefore the Wizengamot sentences the accused to a period of two-years house arrest, whereafter the court will decide if the sentence is to be ended or prolonged." Narcissa nods to Harry, thanking him in silence for his kind gesture, but closes her eyes right after, fearing Draco's fate.

"Draco Lucius Malfoy. After long consideration and taking into account both testimonies from Harry James Potter and Hermione Jean Granger, who argued a compelling case, the Wizengamot finds the accused not guilty. You are free to go, Mr. Malfoy." The blond looked up in surprise, glancing around him. Upon hearing his mother's sentence, he hoped for a similar penalty, but feared the same punishment as his father's. Not once did he expect to be pardoned, so when he heard the liberating words which cleared him of every charge, he nearly fell on his knees, the tension which kept him upright, melting like snow in the sun.

Draco refused to cry but the tears burned behind his eyes. His mother was not returning to Azkaban and he was a free man. It felt all so surreal to him.

A guard helped Draco up, and the wizard strolled towards his mother. She had a shadow, the
assigned Auror, who would accompany her to the Manor and set up a series of restricting wards to ensure the fulfilment of her house arrest.

"Son." She caressed his face, his cheek leaning onto her hand. The last time she touched him, was almost a year ago.

“Later, Mother.” His throat was constricted.

Narcissa was allowed a last moment with Lucius before they took him away and so was Draco but the son refused to give his father another look. The man was the very reason why he spent the previous year in this godforsaken hell. All that the man taught him, about blood purity, muggle-borns inferiority and all the other nonsense was in fact no more than racism and misplaced superiority. None of it turned out to be real.

So, instead of walking towards his father, Draco spun around and approached Harry and Hermione, extending a shaky hand in gratitude. “Thank you. You both did more than I deserve.”

Harry looked him straight in the eye, “Letting you be convicted for the crimes of your father wasn’t right. I did what I had to do.”

“Will you ever accept my apology?” Draco lowered his gaze, ashamed.

Only Harry answered, “Maybe one day.” Hermione remained silent, but nodded in agreement.

End September 1999

Major earthquake in Taiwan, magnitude 7.6, more than 2,400 dead, 11,300 injured.

October 1999

“Harry.”
“Yes, Hermione?”

Two weeks after the earthquake, a significant deployment of aid occurred from around the globe, and the request for volunteers was printed in every newspaper. In the UK alone several NGO's were preparing to give all kinds of assistance to Nantou, the second largest county in Taiwan; as more than one-hundred thousand homes were destroyed.

She sipped her tea before answering. "I'm going to volunteer."

“For what?”

“To help in Taiwan.” Now she got his attention, he and Ron were both engaged in a chess game.

"Why would you do that?” Ron spoke with his mouth full of cookies, a batch Hermione finished an hour ago. They were still warm and he was already on his third.

“Ron, I feel useless. I can’t sleep decently without one of you two in my bed or I have nightmares. The grief, the wounds and scars, it doesn’t stop. No matter how many times I listen to that old crow of a mind healer, I don’t find any peace. I saw the ad in the Daily Prophet four days ago and I’ve played with the thought ever since.” She gestured wildly, hands restless. The Hermione she used to know wasn’t there anymore. She wanted to rediscover herself, find her peace and her purpose in life.

“Makes sense. How long?” Harry stopped playing, Hermione’s idea resonated with him.

“You too, Harry?” Ron stopped mid-air, fourth cookie in his hand.

"Ron, why not? I had my share of fighting. Shacklebolt wants me to join the Aurors, but I've seen enough death for a lifetime. I don't know what I want from life. I'm as clueless as Hermione is, as are you. Again, why not? Make myself useful for once, mean something to someone in need. Tell me more about it, Hermione."

Harry arranged for a meeting at the Leaky Cauldron. Hermione's idea had grown in him each time he gave it a thought, and he proposed to suggest it to their closest friends, who were also adrift after the war. Among them, Neville, Luna and a very calm Ginny. Ron gave her an ultimatum upfront, keep herself in check or forget the chance to join their mission.
"Friends, Hermione decided first to join this humanitarian mission, to be a volunteer in Taiwan. You know about the earthquake." Several nods confirmed this. "The Daily Prophet has been publishing a series of advertisements where several NGO's ask for help, financial or volunteers to help in the clean up and reconstruction of the city."

Only a few faces looked not so happy about it, the majority seemed interested.

"I’m joining." Neville’s tone was determined.

"Don't you want to know more?" Hermione smiled but wanted to be sure he understood all the facts. "We will be living in tents, there's no luxury, basic needs only. I don't know how long I'll stay. Maybe a month, or two. It could be longer too, depending on how I feel and how long they'll stay."

"Why are you doing it?" Hannah asked, though the reason probably sounded much like how she personally felt.

"Feel useful again, find me again. Start anew and mean something to someone."

"You mean something to our community already, Hermione.” The statement came from someone at the end of the table.

"It came with a cost." It was Harry who answered, "I need to mean something to someone who doesn't know me. Someone who doesn't look at me as a hero. Guys, I will not rebuild the city by myself. I'll be a drop in the ocean but I want to mean the ocean to someone who needs my help. Without the killing and suffering."

"How can we roll in?" Harry looked satisfied. As he guessed, many were looking for a goal in life, feeling equally adrift in an sea of confusion. This mission promised to be physically demanding, probably mentally also, but it gave them what they needed. To be far away from a fractured but healing community and to rediscover their place in this world.

Two tables away from the group, three Slytherins heard the compelling speech.

"Potter's idea sounds good." Blaise broke the silence. He looked around and he found two agreeing
faces. "I could use a new start. Living here feels suffocating."

Pansy set her teacup down, "Will you have the balls to ask if we may join them?"

“I have no problems with Potter, nor with Granger.” Blaise shrugged, “What do you think, Theo?”

“I think it could be what Draco needs. Be somewhere where people don’t judge him.”

“Potter and Co. are around. They will judge him.” Pansy always called a spade, a spade.

“They spoke on his behalf, maybe they are willing to give him a second chance.” Theo finished his butterbeer and motioned Blaise to join him.

Ron spotted them first and frowned, "We don't talk to snakes."

Harry corrected him, hand on Ron’s arm, “Ron, we don’t judge. That’s Wizengamot’s job.” He addressed Theo, “What’s up?”

"We heard your speech." Theo motioned to his table, and Pansy waved from afar. "I was hoping you wouldn't mind if a few Slytherin joined your mission."

“It’s not my mission.”

“You know what I mean, Potter.”

Blaise joined in, "Listen, what you've said about turning a new leaf in a new environment. Feel useful for once. I want that. Fuck. I need that. So does he, and her back there. And a few others I know. I speak to your integrity and ask if you don't mind sharing the details so that we can join your group and mean the ocean to someone. Even if we are only one simple drop of water."

Hermione approached, “How do you feel about blood prejudice? Be honest.”
“You proved us wrong, Granger. You showed us how that was a big pile of shite. You made us take a front row seat and realise that we all cry the same tears.”

“And your friends?” His answer satisfied her, but she needed more.

"The one who regrets his actions the most towards you isn't here to say sorry." Theo couldn't sound more serious.

“He'll be joining us?” Harry was wary.

“If it’s up to us, yes. Merlin knows what that boy endured under the reign of the nose-less bastard.”

Ron shook his head, “No Malfoy.”

“Ron, if we deny him redemption, we are no better than Voldemort.”

“That’s a bit far-fetched, Hermione,” Harry pointedly stated.

"No, Harry. Did you save him from Azkaban to condemn him to a life as a pariah? I agree with Theo, though I don't trust Malfoy a bit. You saw him break at the Astronomy tower. If he was evil, do you think he would have second-guessed his orders? He's a bully, a menace but not downright evil." Hermione reasoned. "Now, Theo and Blaise, one wrong step and one more vile word about my origins and you won't recognise him when I'm finished."

“Thank you, Granger.”

"You don't need to thank me. I count on a large mission, where I'll be working far away from your friend's presence. I need peace in my life, not daily stress courtesy of a prejudiced member of my community."

“Hi Draco, thank you for receiving us.” Pansy kissed his cheek, followed by the Greengrass sisters and Tracey. The men shook hands.
“You’re welcome.” They followed him to the gardens, where Narcissa greeted them with a polite smile. Shortly afterward a house-elf served some finger sandwiches and drinks.

“Consider me quite intrigued about why you have come to visit me with such a sizeable delegation.”

“Son, drop the act. It doesn’t suit you. Yet, I’m curious as well about the intention of your visit. We don’t get many visitors nowadays. I guess the muggles are correct about one thing, it’s in times of need you find out who your true friends are.” Narcissa nipped a cucumber sandwich delicately.

Pansy and Theo shared a look, but it was Blaise who spoke, “We overheard a few Gryffindors two days ago, at the Leaky Cauldron…”

“No, it seems Potter and friends are as damaged as we are.” Blaise continued, ignoring Draco’s sneer. “Granger convinced her gang to join a volunteering mission to help the victims of that earthquake. A wizardry NGO is preparing to assist, and the swot is joining them. Not only for humanitarian reasons but to start over, feel useful and find herself again. Those were her own words.”

“Hmm. And you believe her?”

Pansy raised a hand, “Potter and Granger sounded genuine. It resonates with what we feel, Draco. We are fucking lost in this world. People look down on us, the very same people that previously laid out the red carpet to kiss our arses. Now we are all persona non grata. I’m not afraid of rolling up my sleeves and getting my nails dirty if it gives me some self-respect back. I’m damaged as much as you are.”

“No as much.”

“Oh Draco, save us from your self-pitying monologue, none of us will listen.” Daphne spoke for the first time, “Let us not forget how it was you who brought the hating game to Slytherin house, I didn’t know the mudblood slur until you brought it up.” She leaned back in her chair.

“Try having the Dark Lord using your house, Greengrass. Try getting a kill order for a man who you didn’t hate, knowing that failure would have severe consequences. Then you can talk.”
“Agreed, you had it harder than us in the end.” Daphne conceded, “But you were far from a saint.”

Narcissa diffused the bomb, “What is the goal of this volunteering mission?”

“Mrs. Malfoy, the NGO is sending a team of volunteers to help clean up the rubble, help in the rebuilding of the county and to maybe aid in the health department. They will only have the full picture once we’ve landed.” Theo was calm. “Blaise, Pansy and I have joined the team already.”

“So am I.” Tracey’s voice was almost a whisper. Daphne nodded.

Draco was sceptical, “And Granger agrees?”

“She does, if you agree to keep your distance.” Blaise silently debated between a white chocolate strawberry or a dark chocolate one, settling on the dark. The quickly grabbed napkin came in handy to dry the escaping juice from his first bite.

“I don’t need it.”

“Yes you do, Draco.” Narcissa reprimanded. “Your friends have a point. You don’t sleep well, you have nightmares, your mood is acid lately. Maybe Miss Granger has a point. You need to get your soul back, you are restless and lost. And yes, Daphne, my son is no saint, but he’s not evil either. He likes to poke the bear, I agree, but he’s always been loyal to you.” Every head nodded. “Maybe far away from the UK and their judging looks you’ll find peace again, and who knows people may start respecting you again if they see your efforts.”

“Mother, I can’t leave you alone.”

“I’m not alone, I still have a friend or two left.”

Astoria added, “I’m not going, Draco. My sister shielded me from the worst of the war, and I’m not as damaged. I’ll visit your mother and keep her company during your absence, Draco. You have my word.”
“I don’t know. I mean, Tory, thank you for the offer. But to be in a godforsaken Timbuktu, working with victims. I’ve never moved a single stone in my life…”

“Neither have we, Draco.” Blaise felt the surrender, his friend only needed a little nudge. “But these two,” he raised his hands up, “Aren’t afraid of a little dirt. Do what you want, mate, but I’m joining. How did Potter word it? Be a water drop in the ocean, but mean for someone, the whole ocean. Make a difference. Do something good for once. Something useful, positive. Make a difference.”

“But Potterhead and…”

“And Gingerhead plus his sister, and the swot and Longbottom and Looney. They will all be there, yes.”

“But keep your distance, be the man we know you are and maybe they can finally see what we see. A man you can build on.”

Six pairs of eyes looked at him silently pleading with him. “Son, do it. Make a difference. Be so much different than your father.”

Theo raised a fist in victory when Draco nodded. “You won’t regret it.”

“I don’t share your optimism, Nott.”
Chapter Two

Chapter Notes

My Magzillasurus cleaned up my chapter, it was needed. I love her.

Chapter two

A week later.

The six Slytherins arrived together at the departure hall of London’s Heathrow Airport and joined the group of twenty students, not solely but majority Gryffindors. Slightly further away, the rest of the NGO’s volunteering corps stood.

The snakes let their duffel bags fall with a thud to the ground. The bag contained everything Hermione had forwarded, including strange items to most of the wizards: a razor and shaving cream instead of a decent razor blade and old-fashioned shaving soap. The concept of a condom was probably by far the weirdest, and something the Wizards planned to interrogate Harry about.

Hermione assisted everyone during the check-in, all of them flashing their brand new passports with a huge smile as if they were Auror’s badges. With the first and the second she smirked at their antics but after the third, she had enough of it.

“Potter, are you sure the metal bird is safe enough?” Blaise voiced everyone’s fear.

“Don’t fret so much, Zabini, relax.”

But the tanned wizard had one question left, "Your girl underlined in her owl the word condoms. The apothecary gave me a side eye when I bought three packs." Harry let him finish but gave him a half smile. "What are those for?"

“Three? They are for just in case.”

"Yes, three Potter, for the boys and me. In case of what?" Harry noticed how all the wizards inched closer to listen, even Ron.

“If you bounce into a bird.”

Theo objected, “We have spells for that.”

“Not if she’s a Muggle.” The majority understood the logic. “Don’t forget we will be in a zone where the statute of secrecy applies.”

Draco followed the whole exchange from a distance. Snatching a bird was not his priority. He already regretted coming along; he had enough on his plate, and he didn’t need someone else’s misery on top of it.

For now, he had no reason to complain, no one had been rude to him. Potter and the swot even nodded upon arrival. Her annoyed look when he got his boarding pass wasn’t lost on him, he
suspected he got a seat next to her by the way she reacted.

Either way, Draco planned to take the dreamless sleep vial he carried in his pockets, once he boarded the airplate, and sleep all the flight away. For now, he followed their lead and ask no questions.

Boarding the flight and finding their seat was a walk in the park. The blond stewardess demonstrated how to fasten their seatbelts and all the wizards followed the instructions precisely. They almost took notes on how to react in case of emergency and read the leaflet in the seat pocket, from top to bottom.

Hermione indeed sat next to Draco, ignored the whole litany. “Granger, where’s the nearest exit?”

“Behind you, two rows down.” She waved her hand behind her.

“Is this thing safe?”

Hermione used her lecture mode, "Malfoy, you have a higher chance of falling off your broomstick, than of this aeroplane crashing."

“Airplate, you mean…”

She blinked a few times, “What?”

“Airplate, you mean airplate. Harry called it airplate."

“I believe you need to have your ears checked. We are inside an aeroplane.” She inserted the earbuds with distinctive manners, connected the jack, and faced the window ignoring him further. She stole his window seat, but he was clueless about it. Her move pleased her, thinking, finders keepers, losers weepers.

During take off, the plane picked up speed, and when the nose rose, Draco grabbed her hand in a vice grip hold until the pilot reached cruising altitude. "Now you can let go, Malfoy. You're safe for the next few hours." Hermione wiggled her hand out of his hold and patted his hand, pussy.

"How long?" Hermione wasn't paying attention, and he repeated his question, ticking her on the shoulder. "How long will it take?"

“Oh, just less than 14 hours.”

"Salazar's tits, 14 hours caged inside this metal bin?" He looked incredulous. Fourteen hours? What the fuck?

"Do you know the worst part?" Hermione rubbed it in while adjusting her seat into a flatter position. She had no patience for him. "Almost fourteen hours in my company. Your pureblood genes will receive an overdose of my mudblood germs."

“If that’s the only thing you have to say, please go to sleep, Granger.” He could do without her nagging.

"Aren't you afraid of my dirty blood?" She sized him up. "Be careful, so I can't taint your precious heritage."

“Granger, just stop.” Draco rubbed a hand over his face. “You and I need to have a talk, but not confined in here. But spare me the sarcasm.”
Hermione gave him one last scornful look, turned the music on and closed her eyes. Five seconds later, a finger tapped on her shoulder. She hissed, "What?"

"Could you please tell me how these work?" He showed her the earbuds. She reacted slightly pissed off, snatching hers off a bit harsher.

"Oh, boy. He does know the word, please. These go in your ears, this," she showed the jack, "goes in here. And with these buttons, you choose your channel and the volume." He followed each instruction meticulously. To piss him off, she raised the volume up with a sneering face. Draco winced, yet he didn't react. Instead, he thanked her and mimicked her seat position, and fell in a slumber, just like she did.

An hour after takeoff, the first service passed through, offering a refreshing towel, drinks and pretzels. Draco accepted them both and kept hers aside, wondering if he should just keep it there or wake her up. Hermione did look tired. Harry, who sat diagonally across them, nodded suggestively. Draco demonstrated a finger across his throat, but Harry mouthed, "Gently."

Carefully, Draco rested a hand on her shoulder, shaking really gently. He whispered, "Granger, wake up." No reaction. "Granger, C'mon, wake up." Very slowly he removed an earbud, realising she was listening to the same classical channel, which played very low. "Granger, please. Wake up."

"Huh?" Confused, she looked around, saw him, and winced. "Wha’s the matter?" He offered her the towel and opened her own tray to set her snacks and napkin. "Oh, thank you."

Stretching out with a moan, she sat again upright, using the wet fabric to refresh her face, neck and hands, before opening the bag and shoving two pretzels in her mouth. "It was an early morning. Sorry I was acting cranky."

He was dumbfounded, her moan froze him in place, and now she was apologising for her behaviour earlier?

"I’m always so stressed out until I’m in the air. Checking in, going through security, finding the correct gate and being shoved into this bird? I hate it." He was impressed at the speed she ate her snacks.

"Granger, have you ever flown fourteen hours?"

"No, Malfoy. It’s going to be a really long haul."

"I’m glad for this little vial here." He showed her the potion. "I’ll sleep through half of it."

"Is that Dreamless sleep?" She pouted, "You’ll not drink that."

"Why the hell not?"

"Because in case of emergency, you’ll have to be awake. With one of those in your system, not even a bomb will wake you up."

He looked alarmed now, "But you told me flying was safe."

"It’s a safe mode of travel, yes, but not infallible." He paled and tightened his seatbelt. Hermione rolled her eyes and loosened up his buckle. "Don’t be a toddler." Annoyed with her action, he
tightened it up again.

Harry followed the whole exchange with a grin.

---

A blond stewardess asked with a nasal voice, "Chicken or pasta?"

"Chicken for both of us." Hermione decided for both of them. He frowned and she elaborated, "Are you a vegetarian?" Draco huffed but shook his head. "As I expected. Don't expect a five-star meal. But it's food. Enjoy your meal."

His grunts, for once, weren't unjustified, their meal tasted bland. Luckily for them, their dessert looked much more appealing. On Hermione’s tray stood a brownie while he received an apple crumble. Draco sighed, “You have more luck than I do.”

Without a word, she traded their cups, picked her spoon and moaned at the fresh taste of apple in her mouth. “Your loss, Malfoy. This is divine.” Her tongue licked the back of the spoon.

He had trouble following her mood swings but thanked her for the gesture. Chocolate was his sweet indulgence and he had almost contemplated using Confundo to trade the plates.

---

Harry took a picture to taunt Hermione later during one of her lectures. Rubbing it in her face would feel so good. He had the evidence in hand of how Hermione fraternised with her nemesis. Halfway through the flight both had fallen asleep. Hermione before Draco, because Harry saw how the blond tucked the blanket around her body and turned off the ventilation. Harry even witnessed how Draco had raised the armrest between the seats because it was pressing against her side. At this very moment, saved for eternity, Hermione slept with her head on Draco's chest, his arm around her shoulder, her hand on his abdomen.

Harry had to admit, they looked good together.

---

Fourteen hours later their flight touched down. The wizards and witches felt cranky and tired despite the slumber and dreamed of a long bath and a soft bed. However, they landed in a whole different world. One of chaos and destruction. The first lesson in humility stood right under their noses.

Hermione's words sounded on everyone's minds. This mission was far from luxury. Helping in the rebuild would restore them. Through hard work. Merlin help us.
Chapter Three

My Maggie magzillasaurus flicked her beta-wand to make this perfect. Can't thank her enough.

If you like, your reviews are always much appreciated. And don't worry, this fic is already fully written.

Chapter Three

Nantou day one.

"Hello, I'm Tanya, I'll be your supervisor, your confidant, the shoulder to cry on. You name it." The young woman asked for their attention once they arrived at the designated location. She was dressed practically in a blue t-shirt, jeans and sneakers, her brown hair in a ponytail and spectacles on her face. "I would say, 'welcome to Taiwan' but as you can see, this beautiful country and county don't look so good. I know you all desire a bed, after such a long haul, I've been there, believe me. However, there's no place to sleep yet." A general grunt rose. "I know, I know. Before you can sleep, you'll have to put up your tents. and set up the sleeping quarters."

Not one of the large group of volunteers looked happy with her announcement but they had no choice. Tasks were assigned and while some witches set up disillusionment charms around the perimeter against Muggle eyes; the rest took the material and put up the magical tents which seemed small on the outside, but were spacious inside.

Tanya approached the Hogwarts group with a relaxed stance. "I thought as you all know each other, you would prefer to share one sleeping quarters. There's enough space to fit in separate sleeping arrangements, girls and boys, you know the drill." She sought out Hermione, "Is that okay with you? We don't have much room left, and I'll be otherwise forced to trade with strangers. I think you prefer to have all your friends around."

Hermione shrugged, "Yeah, that's okay. We'll find a way to get along."

Tanya frowned, "Are you expecting problems?"

"We didn't always get along together but this might the best way to find common ground. We'll keep it as it is." She looked everyone in the eye, in search of any disagreeing face. Only tiredness stared back, and lazy nods. They didn't look forward to setting up things first; they just wanted to lie down.

Ten minutes later, the sight of a camp bed crushed their dreams of a nice soft mattress and a decent pillow. "Hermione, this sucks," Harry whined and brought her straight back to the time when they were out there in the Forest of Dean.

"Harry, I'm starting to doubt your abilities as a wizard." She halted her unpacking to demonstrate very clearly how to conjure a bed and a good pillow from scratch. Her movements were copied all over the place. Harry blushed, creasing his forehead and pressing two fingers to the bridge of his nose. "I get it, Harry. It's jetlag."
She kept unpacking. A night lamp, her comfy blanket, a canvas wardrobe, her favourite bathrobe. The more she took out, the bigger Pansy's eyes grew. "How the hell did you pack so much in such a tiny bag?" Hermione's duffle bag was the smallest of them.

"Undetectable extension charm combined with a feather-light one."

A female finger pointed at the brunette, "Next time I travel, Granger, you'll help me pack!"

"Parkinson, you can't afford my wage." Pansy was dumbstruck for a second, while everyone else roared.

Unpacking happened fast, travel clothes traded for comfy pyjama's. "Granger, interested in a nice cuppa Earl Grey before you sleep?" Blaise offered her a steamy mug. "Sit down with us, you too Potter and the Weasleys." Ginny choose a seat ostentatious far from Harry, not something that went unnoticed. Blaise asked the question on everyone's lips, "Trouble in paradise, Weaslette?"

"Which paradise exactly?" A tired Ginny was obviously a cranky one. Harry looked her, silently urging her to let their problems remain private. "He wanted space to breathe. I'm giving him the room for it."

"Ginny, can you please?"

"Oh, Potter. Whatever." Cranky can also lead to bitchy.

Theo tried to diffuse the heat. "Granger, what do you think we can expect from tomorrow?"

Hermione sighed, "Nantou was hit by an earthquake of 7.6 three weeks ago now. We're supposed to set up camp in one of the smaller villages, as the major assistance is being concentrated around the bigger cities. From what I understood during the briefing, we'll help clean up rubble, set-up shelters, help build homes, provide assistance to the medical team...basically a bit of everything."

"Broken nails, strained muscles and a cut here and there." Tracey summed it up.

"After this, I'll never complain again about rough sheets," Daphne added and together the two Slytherin's lightened up the mood.

"The sheets are something you can conjure, Daphne. As for the broken nails, only patience works or a charm I don't know about. Concerning cuts and aches, I might have a thing or two in my bag; Neville and I mixed up a few potions and salves for our own first-aid stash. I don't know more than what I've already told you."

Harry added, "I think if we need to use magic for anything, we'll need to work in pairs. One employs a disillusionment charm while the other does what it has to be done."

"This wizard here is busted, I'm going to sleep." Ron waved, "Night boys, ladies." Nearly everyone followed his example.

Hermione went outside for one last sniff of fresh air. The rustling behind her piqued her curiosity, it was Draco. "Goodnight, Malfoy." She went back in.

He answered silently, "Night, Granger."
Crammed into Jeeps, the whole team was brought to Lugu, a rural township of Nantou. The two-hour journey felt like a safari, filled with more bumps on the road and sudden jerks than flat surfaces.

After the most basic of breakfasts, simple coffee and bread with jelly or butter, this kind of travelling was not one of their most favourite types of transport.

Hermione whined, "I'd prefer a ride on a broomstick," as Ron helped her step out of the back of the Jeep.

Harry held his hands up, "You've all heard it. Stop the presses! Hermione prefers to fly!" She struck him on the back, annoyed with his fun at her expense. Her smile, however, spoke of another feeling.

Tanya approached them, "I'm happy you all can still smile after the joyride. My back is screaming in pain. Right, kids." Several eyebrows rose at that comment, the woman was maybe only five or so years older than them. "Welcome to Lugu. This is a rural village, which is happy to have electricity and running water, under normal circumstances. At this point, none of them is present." She motioned for them to follow and join the bigger group. After demanding silence, she continued, "Our basic concern today is restoring these basic needs and making an inventory of what needs to be done ASAP. Thankfully we have a team of experts in electricity and waterworks. Hi guys, wave to the gang!" Four muggle-borns waved back. "I'm giving you a green light to do whatever is needed. Do you need extra hands?"

"Maybe two extra for us, and for David two more as well?" David, from the plumber team, nodded to the electricity guy, Henry.

"Who will join them?"

Harry and another half-blood wizard, volunteered. Ron asked, "Are you sure, mate?"

"It's fun to work with cables. For the water, they might need brute muscle." Ron volunteered almost immediately, together with Neville. "We want to help with plumbing."

Tanya pointed them out to David. "Okay, before these two teams leave. Gentlemen: please set up the tents for tonight, you know the drill already. Ladies, we are going to unload the jeeps, bring everything inside, unpack what's yours. Then our water and electricity teams will go do their thing and we are going to make an assessment of the most urgent needs. Make acquaintances with the local people, there are some folks here who can translate for us so we can ask them what the foremost needs are." Clapping her hands, she set everyone to work.

Two hours later including lunch, the remaining group was divided into four almost equal teams, each covering a quadrant.

They found a populace who despite their vast misery, still welcomed the strangers with a smile and gratitude. Even though there was much work to do, the local folk knew that this group was here to help them. Most of the homes had been destroyed, the majority was now sleeping in temporary shelters, some with unattended wounds from falling debris.

In short: chaos.

Tanya and a few others who had participated in similar missions decided where the medical bay was
to be set up. She designated a few wizards to raise the tent while a few witches unpacked everything from the magically shrunk medical gear.

"You, and you five behind her start over there. Sort out the rubble, it's time for us to clean up the mess." Hermione was the one Tracey pointed out. Following this method, the woman divided the group into smaller teams, all of them almost immediately setting off.

Theo, Pansy, Luna and Hanna plus an unknown wizard were part of Hermione's team. Working in pairs they moved layer upon layer of wood, bricks and other rubble; all under a scorching sun which turned unexpectedly into a summer storm. In no time, they were all soaking wet, despite their short run to the shelter.

"Oh fuck. Even my knickers are soaked." Hermione wrung her ponytail out in a corner copying Pansy's actions.

"Makes two of us, Granger," Pansy smirked.

"Makes all of us," Hannah added to the fun. "I don't think I have a single dry area."

Theo pitched in, "If any of the ladies need help to dry off-"

Tracey interjected, "We'll ask Neville."

"Why him?"

"Because he is a gentleman." Hannah shuffled her tank top, the fabric was sticking against her skin. Pansy and Hermione grinned. "We know he wouldn't oggle us like you would." Theo huffed.

Pansy waved her finger back-and-forth, "Blaise, you're no better than our Theo here, don't consider yourself an angel, love." The wizard in question drew a halo above his head.

As fast as the storm broke out, it stopped and soon they were all back at work. The rain, however, made everything muddier than before, which increased their workload.

When sunset arrived, they all returned to their base, cracking their necks, rolling shoulders or stretching an arm. Luckily for the majority, a kitchen team prepared a delicious stew, the scent enticing their hungry bellies to the right spot.

"I would kill for a shower." Ginny groaned.

"If we are lucky enough to restore the pipes, you might not need to resource to such extreme measures. Today only a scourgify is possible." Harry explained, exhausted from digging cables out from under mud.

"Thank you, Harry. Always the buzz killer." She bit off, and Harry wanted to sneer in return, but a short head shake from Ron and Hermione held him back.

"I offer a back-rub instead. These hands give great massages. What do you say, Red?" Blaise suggested to the red-haired witch.

She gave him a once-over, "Maybe the next time. When I feel less filthy."

In the distance, candlelight lit the shelters, just as in their own tent.
Hermione let her hair dry in the air while sitting on a rock, her back turned to the Hogwarts tent behind her at a distance. She felt a presence nearing her and a few moments later Harry sat next to her.

"How are you?" She looked at him sideways, chin leaning on her shoulder.

"Tired, angry."

"Try not to react, I know it's hard, Harry. She's looking for a way to start an argument and this is not the place to do so. Don't fall for it." Hermione squeezed his fist.

"If she keeps this up, there's no way we will ever get back together." Harry sighed. "Ginny is so suffocating. Anyway, how was your day?"

"When I saw the rubble...it made me think of Hogwarts. How the entrance was turned into a mess of bricks and dust. I fear that I'll bump into someone, a dead, missing person." Harry put his arm around her shoulder, nudging her against his body. "Like with Lavender. Eyes open."

"Let us hope this remains a fear and not reality." His hand rubbed her upper arm, "Is this what you expected to find? This setting I mean."

"It looks similar to missions I've seen of Nepal and Turkey. Yes, in a way it's what I thought it would be."

"Hey!" Ron joined their little sit-down. "Plumbing is cool. Dirty job but a cool thing."

Hermione and Harry chuckled, "Leave it up to Ron to find a dirty job great. Hermione, what do we do with him?"

"We keep him, Harry." Hermione nudged Ron, playfully.

"Hey, I made you two smile, you're welcome. A bit more of your lamenting, and you would have needed tissues." Ron grinned but got serious shortly after. "I'm sorry for my sister back there. I do my best to keep her in check but there are moments when she can't help herself. Don't take the bait, Harry." The ginger wizard stretched out a hand, "Now get your asses back in there. Tomorrow is more of the same, if not worse. We need our rest."

None of the three noticed the blond who followed the exchange with interest. It was clear to him that Granger wore a mask the whole day, giving a vibe of 'everything is alright' while she felt quite the opposite. Harry had serious issues with his ex, Draco even wondered if it was wise to allow Weaslette to come. Weasel and Granger weren't a thing anymore but they were still buddies. Both behaved quite neutral around him, which was a good thing.

The fear Granger voiced was similar to his own. Not to see a Lavendel-chick, but a corpse, reminding him of the many lifeless faces staring at him after the umpteenth crucio. With luck, he would be spared and if it was up to him, even Granger. Draco would never tell her, but when she snuggled against him, during the flight, it hadn't felt so bad. In fact, it had felt scarily good. It scared him, indeed. It scared the hell out of him, how good she fitted around his body. Another complication he would miss like a toothache.
Chapter Four

Lugu day three.

Harry and his partner left earlier than the rest to take advantage of the early sunrise, expecting their digging through the mud to be harder thanks to yesterday's rainfall. Shortly after, Ron and Neville left to join the plumbing team, with a similar purpose in mind.

The remaining group returned to where they left off, with some changes here and there to the teams. Blaise replaced Theo and Ginny instead of Hannah. Hermione thought, this will not be good. Signalling Luna, both women shifted wood blocks into the designated pile. They went on, the scorching sun burning on their backs; in a jiffy, they were sweating rivers, panting from the exertion.

"And, Hermione dear, have you seduced a new wizard lately? Now that you're sleeping in a tent again." Ginny smiled viciously. Pansy and Blaise watched it unfold, admiring Hermione's patience to ignore the stab. "You have experience sleeping with wizards under a tent roof so that you don't feel lonely in the small bed."

Silence was the only answer she received, Hermione kept working at an increased pace, but Luna understood and followed swiftly.

"Tell me, 'Mione, did you enlarge the bed or did you keep it a single size, to lay more snuggled up against your lover?" Hermione drew a deep breath, though Luna saw her wall of self-control shatter. "It must feel good, to have a wizard cocoon at your back and in the morning feel his hard cock between your arse cheeks."

Blaise intervened, "Ginger-head, take it down a notch. This is not the place nor the time."

Pansy added, "From what I know, you were fucking another Gryffindor while she was in the field, trying to save your sorry arse, Weaslette." Stabs below the belt were unheard of, even if justified. Plus she knew from Draco how much Hermione endured under his roof, so the Slytherin witch actually respected the brunette. Not that she would make it known to the public.

"Slytherin bitch, stay out of this. You are known as the snake mattress, you don't get to teach me any lessons."

"I might have been the snake mattress as you call it, but you are accusing a woman of cheating with your man, while he wasn't yours at the time. So what if they scratched an itch?"

"Red, no need to be rude, witch." Blaise put his body literally between both women while holding an eye on the third; probably the most dangerous one, if she snapped.

He got, however, help from an unexpected corner, Luna. "Try not to react, Hermione. It will escalate. I see a pile over there, come with me." The brunette did follow, much to Blaise's relief, but he was concerned about the explosivity of his friend.

"You don't tell me what to do, Weaselhead, belt up." Ginny did indeed back down, as the focus of her anger walked away. Fighting with Pansy would lead to nothing for now, better save her energy for later. But Hermione wasn't off the hook, today.

"Are you okay, Hermione? I see Gulping Plimpy's above your head." Hermione snorted. "I really mean it, they are the sign of a mind in anger. Don't let Ginny get to you. You and Harry did nothing wrong."

"We didn't do a thing, Luna. If I had, I would understand her anger, but I didn't. We've admitted sharing a bed, platonically, because we both felt lonely, there was no more than cuddling between friends. I've explained this a thousand times to her."

"Granger, my two cents. If you and scarhead-"

"Pansy, stop calling him that," Hermione warned her.

"Okay, pardon my English. If you and Potter did fuck, no one has the right to judge you. Definitely, she doesn't."

"I know. And, however much I appreciate the gesture, I'm more than capable of fighting my own battles." Pansy returned to her place and helped Blaise raise a massive log.

The electricity team was having trouble with all the digging they had to do to uncover the cables. To speed up the job - another night spent by candlelight wasn't on Tanya's schedule - she assigned an extra team of six people to Harry's group. Using muggle shovels, mud and earth were thrown into a growing pile of muck.

Draco puffed, "Can't the sun shine somewhere else?" He shed his t-shirt, just like all the new arrivals did, drying off his forehead. Harry had been working in only his cargos since the beginning.

"You could try and ask it, Malfoy. You are used to getting everything done, maybe it will listen to you." The frown on Draco's face faded quickly when he noticed the lack of malice on Harry's face. "And for once, use 'please', Malfoy."

"You want me to do your job, Chosen One? Who do you think I am? A substitute for your know-it-all?" Using a foot he dug the metal head into the muck, grunting loudly when he lifted a hefty pile of mud. Sweat ran down his spine.

"Haha, you wish." Somehow they ended up working together, attempting to outdo each other in the size of muck they lifted. "Damn, Malfoy, why are always trying to outdo me?" They grinned.

"May I ask you something, Potter?"
"Wait, are you asking me permission to ask a question. Shit, the heat is messing with your brain, Malfoy. Be careful."

A blond eyebrow lifted, "Never mind."

"I'm just messing with you, ask away." Harry dried the sweat off his forehead with the back of his hand, drinking from his water bottle.

"Granger and Weasley."

Harry was on his guard, "What about them?"

"I've just noticed, I mean no harm." Draco lowered his head and continued to dig up the thick cable further up.

Harry followed him, "I saw the way you took care of Hermione on the airplane." Draco wanted to deny it. "No, don't even try. I saw and I have proof." The blond's eyebrows drew together. "Tsk, you don't scare me, Pureblood. All kidding aside, they are good friends. No more no less."

"Hmmm."

"That's very telling, hmmm. Are you planning on pursuing her romantically?"

It took a few scoops before Draco answered, "No, just curious. You and Red also in a bad place?"

"What are you all of a sudden? Doc Ruth?" Draco eyed him confused. "Nevermind, it's a muggle tv thing." Between the scoops, more cable got uncovered. Both wizards hoped the rain wouldn't spoil their gain. Harry sighed deep. "Ginny is acting possessive. Suffocating, really. She's convinced that Hermione and I had a thing during our time in the Forest of Dean." It was silent between them for a moment or two, except for the squelching sound of mud. Both were surprised at how well they worked together.

Watching ahead of them, they saw the other pairs having the same success on the other half of the cable. At this pace, they might end up connecting the dots and enjoy the luxury of light from a bubble, them and the locals both. "I hope the water team has as much luck as we do, Malfoy. We are achieving nice progress."

"Maybe Tanya should increase their team too. I've never missed a shower like I do now. Scourgify doesn't give you the feeling of cleanliness." Draco kept digging further along the cable.

Out of thin air, Harry continued to vent. "Hermione and I only sought comfort at night, as friends. No intimacy, no sex, nothing. Just held each other as anchors. We went through hard times while searching for those cursed Horcruxes, Malfoy. But Ginny doesn't get it. Instead, she wants to know where I went, every step of the way. What I did, with whom I spoke, what I ate. Soon she'll want to know how many times I farted." Both men chuckled.

"And how many were there?"

"What?" Harry gave him the 'What-do-you-mean' look.

"How many times did you fart?" Draco lost his balance after a shove from Harry, almost falling on his butt. "Watch it, Potter, my clothes are already messy enough."

"Is your father going to hear about this?" Harry waggled his eyebrows, mockingly. "Sorry, it's insensitive of me." By now, their side of the cable was completely free. A quick survey showed
where their help was the most necessary. "Malfoy, that dark haired witch, not Pansy, but the other one who was with you..."

"Daphne? She's single. But play no games with her. Your unspoken warning also applies to you and your gang."

"Noted, but what I wanted to say was, she's no ordinary snake."

"No, she's a mix between a softy Hufflepuff and the cunning from Slytherin. We tease her often about it. You and Weaslette, what are you now?"

"In a time-out." It came out tersely.

"A wise decision, Potter. Room for both to decide if you really want each other. Was it smart to bring her along?"

"Ron tried to stop it after she overheard his conversation with Molly. Ginny was unstoppable, sadly, and sort of obnoxious until he caved in, though he warned her he'd send her back with the next Fed-Ex if she causes too many problems."

"She's quite temperamental," Draco stated the obvious and Harry rolled his eyes.

"Tell me about it, Malfoy." The second part of the cable was bared enough to lift it up. Henry, the head-electrician, divided the group in two to raise it up. Once the open ends were at the same level, Henry used a complicated version of Reparo to connect both ends again.

Henry sighed, "Great job, guys. Now only need to restore that point over there, and we are done here." All hands were on deck to pull the last end of the cable to the desired location. They didn't use levitation, fearing unwanted effects. Electricity and magic could interfere badly and Reparo was one of the few spells that was safe to use, so it seemed. It took all their strength to pull the cable along, grunts followed every step taken. Finally, sweating like a bull, the team succeeded in restoring the electricity to the village.

"Woo-hoo! We have light." Harry did a happy dance, side-eyed by all but the Half-blood and Muggle-born wizards. "People! It means light, hopefully even somewhere there's a fridge where we can store our cold drinks. I could kill for a fresh fizzy-drink right now."

Sunset had arrived, and they returned to their tents. Harry held Draco back, "Thank you, Malfoy. You let me vent."

"Don't fret about it." They shook hands. As they went to enter the tent, Blaise held them up.

"Your Red is out for blood, Potter. My guess would be even for the Muggle-born type of blood." Both wizards stared at the tanned one, expecting more details. "She was on our team today, with Granger and Pans. Out of nowhere she started to nag Granger and Pans intervened. I'm impressed with the witches' ability to ignore Reds' stabs, but it wasn't pretty, and my little toe tells me it's not done for today."

"She's not my Red anymore but thank you for the warning. I'll keep an eye out." Harry patted Blaise on the shoulder and started to move but stopped in his tracks. "What exactly did she say to Hermione?"

"Wondering if Granger had seduced a wizard lately, now that she had experience with fucking one under a tent's roof. Plus shaming our Pans as a snake mattress."
Harry swore, "Fuck, great."

Draco, though he wasn't happy with the accusations, commented calmly, "Pansy can take care of herself. You better warn Weaselbee." Harry's dark look made him correct that last one. Draco put his hands in the air, "Weasel. I can't offer better."

"Try harder, Malfoy. By the way, I might follow your advice." Wary, the three entered the tent, but the expected animosity wasn't present. Yet.

Dinner went smoothly, maybe because Hermione and Harry chose to sit as far as possible from Ginny, although the tension was almost palpable.

The spark ignited while they were getting to sleep. "Harry, there's room in Granger's bed for you." Ginny's words caused a total silence inside the Hogwarts tent.

"Ginny, not another word," Ron warned softly.

"Brother, don't be a fool. Those two shagged but keep denying it. Watch her go for Harry now that she's single again and has done all she could to force our break-up. Or is there another wizard's dick you would like to take for a test-ride?"

Draco approached Hermione cautiously, ready to separate them in case of need. The witch didn't deserve to be crucified this way; not after what she endured after her capture by the snatchers. He kept an eye on Potter too, who got more irritated by the second.

The witch in question nonetheless grinned and bore it. Hats off for Hermione's control.

"Let me sum it up. From our lions, you still can ride on Neville-"

Harry sneered, "Ginny stop this right now."

"If you prefer vipers, you have a few choices. Behind door number one, Blaise, door number two-"

"Ginny, I warned you before we left the Burr-"

"I don't care about your warning, Ron. She's the reason why Harry broke up with me. She stole him from me and now puts up this mask of a saint. Heal the scars, rediscover my soul. Puh. She's a first-class whore."

An explosion of voices erupted at the same time

"I didn't break up with you because of Hermione, I've-"

"Ginny, as your older brother I order you to stop!"

"You first class bitch." Hermione's voice drew the most attention. "I didn't do shit to steal your boyfriend. You did it all by yourself with your mad pursuit of ghosts. I didn't fuck Harry. Not yesterday, not last week, nor last year." She stepped calmly but determinedly towards Ginger. "You were the one who danced on Corner's dick, while Harry and I searched for the Horcruxes. Putting our lives on the line to save your sorry arse, you spoiled brat." Her finger pointed at the witch in anger. "You don't teach me any lessons, and if you accuse me once more of shagging Harry, while I haven't, I'll make you eat your own words."
"Oh yes? I'm quite handy with my bat…"

"Har, har, yes, we all know, the infamous bat bogey hex" Ginny lashed out towards Hermione but hit air instead. Blaise picked her by her waist, while Draco dragged Hermione, similarly, outside their tent.

Draco whispered, "Come with me, Granger. Be the better person."

"Put me down, Malfoy."

He kept carrying her until he was satisfied with the distance between them and their tent. Only then he released the squirming witch. She hit him in the chest. "You stay out of this…ferret…obnoxious git…"

"Call me all the names you want, Granger. Take it out on me, I can handle it." He barely put up a fight.

"I didn't shag Harry. I didn't cheat on Ron." Her fists punched his chest, slowly losing their strength. It was only then he hugged her. "I don't need you to comfort me, Malfoy. You're not my friend."

"What if I want to be? What if I'm sorry for everytime I called you the M-word? What if I regret being a coward while my beloved aunt carved that…word into your arm?"

"You…don't…get…to…this." She fought a sob.

"You're right. This is not the way it should be be done. But I know one thing. You might be an insufferable know-it-all bushy haired-swot, and annoyingly intelligent witch. Yet, you are loyal and would never cheat on the Weasel. I believe you when you say you didn't fuck scarhead."

She grew silent.

"Now, we wait here for a while until the gang inside has calmed that crazy bint. If needs be, put up some silencing wards around you, red-specific ones. Ignore the wacko and be the better person. Go high when she goes low."

*Meanwhile inside the tent*

Pansy reached Ginny and struck her in the face. "Ungrateful bitch. You fucked around behind your boyfriends back, and you call her a whore?"

Ron came into her vision, "Stay out of this, Parkinson." His hand raised in warning towards Pansy, but Ron focused his fury towards his sister. "I've warned you, Ginny…" She started to retort, but he silenced her with a spell. "No, Ginny, now YOU listen carefully. You say one more word about the whole tent affair, and I'll personally put you on the next flight back to the UK. I believe Hermione and Harry. We broke up because we both, Hermione and I, didn't love each other beyond friendship. Not because she cheated on me. Stop this petty, childish jealousy, because, instead of winning Harry back, you are only pushing him further away."

He took a deep breath. "Tonight you'll sleep with conditioning wards, only allowing you passage to the ladies room. Tomorrow, I'll personally ask Tanya to assign you far away from our group as long as it takes until you realise your mistakes. And overstep my decision one more time, and I'm done with you." He pointed a finger towards her bed and repeated the gesture with more anger when she
tried to rebel against his command.

Nobody intervened, it was a first, to hear Ron as the mature and level-headed one of the two Weasley's.

Behind Theo and Neville, someone whispered, "Damn, I hoped for a dirty cat-fight." Another added, "Who would have won, do you think?" A third, "Granger."

Theo and Neville exchanged looks, first both put out, but then in agreement, whispering to each other, "Weaslette is a good fighter."

"Yeah, but Hermione is a force to be reckoned with." They smirked in brotherhood.

Chapter End Notes

A.N. Share your thoughts. Its one of the reasons why I write. Kudos!
Chapter Five

Chapter Notes

Warning, turbulence ahead, keep safety belt tight.
My Magzillasaurus cleaned all my mistakes up, god bless her.

Chapter Five

Lugu day four.

The Hogwarts tent was silently divided into two groups. One, the smallest, kept an eye on both witches, ready to intervene if it got heated- surprisingly enough it included all the Slytherins. Not one soul could guess why the snakes were prepared to protect the Golden girl - not one of them was excluded - even Daphne and Tracey would intervene in case of need.

The more prominent group, however, didn't mind seeing a fight break out between the two former friends. That faction even started to bid possible outcomes. When Theo caught the gossip, he brought Draco up to date, "They are betting on who would win." It was breakfast time, both wizards sat in a corner with their friends, slightly away from the rest.

Upon hearing those words, Blaise put up a muffliato, and everyone inched closer, "What the hell? And we are the ones with the reputation, in Salazar's name!"

Draco didn't smile, "How are the odds?"

"Ten to one for Granger. They don't give Weaslette much of a chance." Theo munched on his buttered slice, grinning wide.

Pansy slurped the lukewarm coffee, "At least they are smart, Granger has an edge."

Tracey agreed, "You can accuse Granger of many things: being a swot, the overachiever but not of sleeping around. She's always given off a vibe of integrity."

Daphne nodded while choosing her jam flavour, her finger waving over the two choices. "It's what I think too. I guess aside from Krum, Weaselbee and Scarhead - though she denies it - I don't think she has messed around much. Weaslette flirts with everything that wears pants; Granger has no idea of her beauty."

Pansy eyed Daphne surprised, "You checked her out, witch?"

"Pansy, be honest. Look at her. She has a natural beauty; she doesn't need tons of make-up to clean up nicely. Remember Yule ball, Pansy, her make-up?"

"It was light, I know. I'll not forget it easily, Daph. A certain wizard forgot I was his partner when she showed up." The accusatory look didn't miss its target.

"Sister, your problem was not a Draco issue exclusively. Granger had that effect on several others." Theo at least had the decency to look away.
"In our manly defence, we are allowed to watch but not touch. Only watch, girls. Times are different now."

"Meaning?" Three feminine pairs of eyes demanded more explanations but got none. Blaise knew it was a dangerous field he was walking on.

"Do we all keep an eye on Granger?" Draco's hunger vanished, and he pushed away his plate to see the thing move back into his eyesight. Annoyed with Pansy's move, he tried but failed to push it away. "I'm not hungry, Pans."

Pansy gave him a stern look, pointing at the half-eaten slice of bread. "We are doing heavy physical work, you don't have the luxury of eating so lightly. What good will you do to Granger if you can't protect her due to weakness?"

The blond snorted, diverting attention, "Again, my question." but he ate the remaining food, mostly against his will. Pansy had made a point, even if it pained him to admit it.

"Isn't it obvious, Draco? If we have to pick sides, I'm on Granger's every day of the week and twice on Sunday. I know who's the strongest party here, and I'm still Slytherin." Pansy answered, the two other witches nodding in agreement. "Now, please, share your motives with the class, Draco, we told you ours." Draco didn't answer straight away, "C'mon, Draco, honesty. You used to hate the girl, now you are oh so protective of her."

Under the intense stare of five pairs of eyes, he confessed, "I feel guilty alright? I saw my aunt torture her in ways you can't imagine. I watched, and I didn't do a thing, Salazar knows how much I regret my passiveness."

"Mate, from what you told me, you weren't capable of intervening without risking your own life."

"Blaise, yes, true, but it doesn't change how I feel about it. Yes, we bickered and exchanged some nasty words, yet, the witch did nothing to deserve my aunt's special treatment. Under my fucking roof. So, yes, I'm watching over her, because now, now I can be useful to her. Consider it my penance."

Theo concluded, "Count on us, Draco. We have your back, brother."

Tanya gave Ginny one single warning, "If a fight breaks out because you can't keep your problems at home, you're off of this mission before you can say Jack Robinson. Clear? Wonderful."

The electricity team got a new assignment, getting water running was becoming a high priority. Some elders and children were feeling the effects of drinking contaminated water and they needed to prevent an epidemic. Acutely aware of the underlying tension between the Hogwarts group, Tanya decided to take a few witches with her for the medical wing.

The rest each got a new area assigned to clear up the rubble in; one, in particular, was almost ready to be reconstructed. Some of the local men lent their hands to speed up the cleaning, the gratitude readable on their faces.

The plumbing team rejoiced loudly, they had water running!
"Thank you, Merlin! Shower tonight, what a luxury!" Harry pumped his fist in the air and high-fived Neville.

The big wizard was doubtful about how, "We don't have bathrooms, Harry."

"I know, it will be an old fashioned wash, Neville, with the water hose." The few Muggle-born wizards around them winked at Harry. Purebloods washing with the hoses? That will be quite a sight.

"We have water, ladies!" Tanya announced loudly, cheers rang out over the entire medical wing. The girl clapped her hands, "Okay, now we have the most essential things up and running, let us concentrate on the wounded. Hermione, Daphne, you'll tend to these patients: changing bandages, applying salves and administering potions. In short, act as a nurse."

She moved on to two other volunteers, who were healers at St. Mungo's with Muggle medical licence training. Her orders died in volume as the three walked away from the other two witches.

"It's you and me, Granger. Each a bed?" Daphne headed to the first she came across, a frail elderly woman with a big bandage covering her arm. The blond witch uncovered the wound softly with shaky fingers, a wide gap appeared underneath. "Oh shit."

"Do you need my help?" Hermione was standing next to her in a second.

"This looks bad, why don't we use magic? Don't we have potions for this?" The sight of the injury turned her stomach upside down.

"Tanya told me something about difficulties between Muggle and Wizarding folk - something to do with the differences in habits between Taiwanese and European muggles - and that they are forced to use Muggle techniques. We must make do with what we have, Daphne. Do you prefer to work together?"

"No, Granger. It's okay. I feel frustrated because I know we can heal this easily at home. Here, we are back to basics. It's exhausting." Daphne took a deep breath, "I'm sorry, I'm just grrr and tzzz, you know?"

"If you start calling me by my first name, it might ease the burden." Hermione sat on the edge of a bed next to Daphne's, with a similar patient. Efficiently, she unwrapped the wound by winding the bandage up backwards. The first of four Hermione had to uncover before she could start tending to the injuries, at the second one a thin hand covered hers. Hermione smiled softly at the elderly woman, skin heavily wrinkled and weathered from working outside all day. The hand holding hers had translucent skin, the veins very visible underneath; yet it barely had the strength to squeeze.

"Hello, I'm Hermione."

The woman answered back in a raspy voice, though the Hermione didn't understand a word. Trying a second time, Hermione pressed a hand against her chest, "Hermione. Me, Hermione."

"Ahh." A series of Mandarin words followed, which were fully lost on the witches, until the old woman mimicked Hermione's gesture, "Huan."

Happy to finally have an understanding, Hermione laid a hand over the frail one, "Hello, Huan. I Hermione, she Daphne."
The woman smiled a nearly toothless grin, "Ah, Ermine, Dafe, Huan."

"Yes, something like that." The dark-haired Slytherin smiled gently, "Not a word to the guys back home, Hermione. I'll not hear the end of this, otherwise." Hermione understood her.

Hermione's gentle hand applied the salve over the problematic healing wounds, mostly because the treatment had waited too long. Both witches winced everytime they caused pain. "I'm officially not made to be a nurse. I can't handle their pain, Grang...Hermione."

"I feel you." Two done, two to go. She was impressed with the courage of both patients, not one sound despite the pain they felt. Relief washed over her when she was finally done and able to move on to the next patient. A new similar case awaited her and Hermione sighed loudly.

"Oh bloody hell." Daphne's new patient was covered with bruises from falling debris. The man also had a gash spanning the whole length of his leg, another cut over his cheek and a missing finger.

"I'll do his hand, Daphne. Concentrate on the other wounds." The man winced a few times but didn't flinch, tracking with his eyes every move of both women.

Silence filled the room until Daphne noticed the fall of a tear. "Granger? I mean, Hermione, why are you crying?" Daphne laid a hand on the brunette's. "Hey, tell me."

"It's nothing, Greengrass." Hermione wiped the rebel tears.

"Pot meet kettle, Granger. If you want me to call you Hermione, don't call me the Greengrass girl. And you're no drama queen, so tell me why are you crying." Her hand turned Hermione's face toward hers by the chin.

Hermione nodded, "Memories, Daphne. Memories of similar injuries, on people I care for. Fred was covered in them when he died. I tended to so many others, after the battle. Don't mind me."

"Are you forgetting I fought on your side, Hermione? At the end of the big battle, I was defending the Hall and almost saw Tracey be killed by a Death Eater." Hermione observed her, "Yes, a Death Eater. The colour of our robes played no role in who they planned to kill."

"What about Draco, I mean…"

"You mean, how can I be friends with a man who took the Mark? He was forced to do so under duress. It was the Mark or his mother. I've never considered him a Death Eater and I never will." She focussed on unwrapping the bandage on the man's leg. "Draco is far from a saint but much of the wrong he did during the war was for the right reasons. His mother is his world but I understand your struggle, he was a prick to you."

Hermione wiped a stray tear before she opened the lid of the jar of salve. Applying a thick layer first, she covered the finger again in a fresh bandage, passing the pot to Daphne. Both witches worked in silence on their male patient, on what seemed to be a never-ending task. When one bruise was attended, they found another one.

"Hermione, Draco is a complicated man. He's been raised to believe he stands higher and mightier than a king himself. When Harry denied him friendship, Draco was furious. How dare the new kid in town reject a Malfoy? It was unheard of, a first in history. What you don't know is that Lucius was so fucking displeased with Draco that he punished him for it. If that wasn't enough, he was always second in grades, right behind you, but never surpassing you. Lucius, again, spoke only of disgrace to the family name." She took a deep sigh, Daphne never dared to speak about this with Pansy, nor Tracey. Hermione felt trustworthy to her, it was so weird. "I never understood how the man never
saw what an amazing son he had. To us, Hermione, to us Draco is an amazing friend. He shares what he has, is loyal, he helped me with Arithmancy, Greg and Vincent with nearly every subject. He was like you with your Potter and Weasley. He made them work on their homework, but Draco tutored them, probably from the very first year."

Finally, they were able to move on, each to a next patient, for Daphne a new man with the same injuries. Three down, ten more to go. Daphne kept talking, "Then you come along, you with your different origin, one we were raised to believe to be inferior. We didn't know better than to expect a thief of our magic, an ugly being, a dumb lowlife. Hermione, you were completely the opposite. Absolutely the opposite of ugly, more intelligent than most of us and with a generous heart. You opened my eyes, and believe me, you caused an earthquake to Draco's beliefs. But boys tend to act stupid, and he lashed out, in self-defence. I'm not telling you to make weak excuses. It's an explanation of his behaviour. Pansy had to accept that despite her beauty, she wasn't in the spotlight like you were, enter her "hate" towards you; until you started to sacrifice your life to save ours."

The fourth patient had minor injuries and soon both witches moved on to the fifth. Working together turned out to be faster than each to their own. "Pansy acted stupidly during the war, believing following the footsteps of the Dark Lord might be the right choice. Until she saw the bodies of fellow Slytherins, girls she spent time with, painting nails, doing hair, you know, girly stuff...killed by the ones she thought to be on the right side. We all have nightmares, carry burdens, some have deeper scars than others."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"So you can understand where we come from. We learned to despise your kind and you taught us the hard way, how wrong we were. We had to suffer before we were able to comprehend the wrongness of our beliefs. So that you can, maybe, find a way to forgive us. Him." Luckily for them, the last five patients had minor injuries, and Tanya send them away to help the others on the field for the rest of the day. Quickly enough, Daphne spotted the telltale blond hair and motioned for Hermione to follow.

Probably ten steps away from Draco's group, a zooming sound rose in volume, something none of them had ever heard and it put them on alert, chills running down their spines. The tremor began lightly at first but the panicked screaming of the locals raised the terror in everyone's heart. Hermione confirmed everyone's fear, "Fuck. It's an earthquake."

Daphne instinctively grabbed the brunette's arm and held on for dear life. "Hermione, what do we do?"

"Uh, shit, uh, earthquake, find shelter. Solid shelter. FIND SOLID SHELTER!" Dragging Daphne along, Hermione ran, in search of an open doorway, spotting a solid roof a few feet away. Draco's team followed suit, and Hermione directed them under the thresholds between connecting spaces. Draco and Neville stayed with the two witches. "Are you okay, Daphne? Granger?" A quick once over calmed Draco's mind. The shaking lasted only seconds, but it was enough to remind them where they were and why they were there.

In the distance, a toddler cried.

Hermione spotted the location of the wailing and looked for a searching relative. No one in sight. Only the alarming rumble of a building falling apart, right above the place where the toddler stood.

It all happened in slow motion.

Led by instinct and impulse, Hermione took off on a sprint towards the little girl, scooping her up in
her arms.

She was totally oblivious to the panicking screams of Daphne to come back and Neville's shouts to return.

The building cracked in half with a loud bang, the facade falling forward towards woman and child.

A blond blur scooped up the witch and barely made it out before a brownish cloud covered them with a layer of dust.

Connecting the dots, Hermione found herself sandwiched between a blond wizard who served as a mattress and a toddler who cried louder than before. "Tell the kid to stop crying, Granger." He sat up, grunting; his back had connected with the hard ground harshly. Hermione remained seated on his lap until she realised it. In her haste to get up, she nearly fell on top of Draco again.

Extending her hand to him, she helped him up, "Thank you, Malfoy."

"Don't mention it. Try to stay alive, will you? I feel like I've aged a few years in the space of seconds." His hand raked through his hair, shaking off the dust.

She asked coyly, "Do you care so much about my health?" Am I flirting? Granger, get a grip.

"More about mine. Potter would slit my throat." He gave her a half smile, probably the first in a lifetime.

The whole group assembled at an open space within fifteen minutes after the earthquake. Tanya was in a real state, just like everyone else. Pale, shaking, contacting the outside world to find out more news but trying to count the heads and ensure herself that none had disappeared.

The little girl clung to Hermione, who was trying to release the small burden from her body - which ached from the weight - despite the efforts of Draco who suggested the girl come to him. The dark-skinned toddler, with her big dark eyes, smiled widely at the wizard, playing hide-and-seek from her hide-out, namely Hermione's neck, but shaking her head negatively every time he extended his arms.

The Malfoy charm worked but only to a certain extent. Slightly annoyed, he conjured a high chair against which Hermione could lean on for support. She showed him gratitude for this gesture.

"Alright, I'm a...I'm just human, people. I'm sorry, but this is the first time I have experienced an earthquake myself. The most horrifying twenty seconds of my life." The woman ran a hand several times over her face. "This was what they call an aftershock. They've been happening the last few weeks, are unpredictable, and we just experienced one of a 5.0 in the Richter Scale. Not as heavy as the earthquake itself, that one was 7.6, but still heavy enough. Oh, fuck Merlin." She sighed and cursed some more before gathering her wits, "Is everyone alright? Are we missing anyone?" The negative headshakes were actually relieving.

A few locals came running towards the group, in full panic. The translator had trouble following the waterfall of words and as he understood more, the more aggravated he became. "A building has collapsed, wait…" He listened to the Taiwanese man, "There's a family trapped inside a fallen house, with a few children."

"Tell him to show us the way!" Ron took the initiative but he wasn't the only one prepared to help. The translator had barely spoken the words before the little group of locals ran off, followed closely by the team.
Draco held up Hermione, "Stay here with the tot. There are enough of us out there."

"The hell if I'm staying behind, Malfoy." She set off with the child still in her arms but Draco took the kid, not paying attention to the girl's shouts. Once they arrived at the scene, he handed over his little cargo to an older Taiwan woman. In a series of lines, debris was handed over from one to another pair of hands. The more massive pieces were removed by use of a wand, after setting up a disillusionment charm around the entire scene. The translator kept talking to the endangered family, learning there was a couple with three children buried under the rubble. Time was a critical issue.

"The man says the wife is bleeding severely from a head wound." The linguist spoke fast, "One girl is unresponsive and the two sons have light injuries like the father." Several curses followed this announcement and added fire to the urgency.

It was a race against time, the fear of a new aftershock very real in the back of their minds. The amount of rubble they moved was immense, and still, they had the feeling of barely moving an inch forward. Grunts from exertion mixed with heavy panting and the noise of rocks falling on a mountain of wreckage. "The man says his wife is losing consciousness." It urged them to work faster.

In the queue where Hermione worked, a light hole opened. "We need to make it bigger, so one of us can crawl in." She looked around her, "Tracey, you're the smallest, Ginny you too."

Neville remarked, however, "The hole needs to be stable too, so we don't lose two witches in the attempt."

Tanya arrived, out of breath, a stretcher in each hand and a heavy medical bag on her back. "We can stabilise it with a spell. Good thinking, Neville."

Combined forces widened the gap, while a group of wizards kept the stability going with their wands. It was dark inside, the murmurs and children's wails echoing from deeper within. Tanya, Henry and David as the senior members made a preliminary check. "The smallest indeed tightened with ropes, so we have a way to pull back. I want to save victims but not jeopardise my team's lives in the attempt." She faced Tracey and Ginny, "Do want to do this?"

Ginny nodded, but Tracey was doubtful, "I don't like confined spaces, I want to try though."

"We have no room for trials, Tracey." Both of Tanya's hands rested on Tracey's shoulders, "I understand your fear and I don't judge you for it but I need conviction, and there is no room for doubts. Do you prefer someone else go in your place."

Tracey looked at her fellow Slytherins before Hermione. Draco spoke, "Don't be afraid to admit it, Tracey. The time when we judged for perceived failure is long behind us, we understand, and we support your decision."

Hermione volunteered, "I'll go in your place, Tracey. Admitting a fear also speaks of courage. Trade places with me."

"Hermione, you and Ginny, can you set aside your grudges aside long enough to cooperate?" Tanya's question was not unnecessary. Both witches nodded. "Alright. We'll set up a group of wizards on each rope so our girls can be lowered down. When you give us the sign, we will pull you up."

"We can use Patronuses for this. Don't you think, Hermione?"

"Good idea, Ginny."
Henry and David helped the witches put on their harnesses, "Too tight? No? Good." subsequently securing them with carabiners to thick ropes. The other ends were divided between four wizards each, a surprising mix of houses on each side. Hermione saw Draco and Harry on her side, plus Theo and Anthony Goldstein. Ginny counted on Ron, Neville, Blaise and Terry Boot to keep her safe. Henry and David themselves acted as frontmen on each side. The women took care of the spells keeping the structure in check.

Tanya handed over to Hermione a small bag with bandages, gave a thumbs up, and the descent began. She positioned herself on her knees between both ropes, trying to keep a visual of both women, as long as possible.

Inside the dark cavern, Ginny and Hermione helped each other out in unclasping the carabiners. With the aid of a Lumos, their eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness and they moved cautiously through the obstacles. Ahead, the outlines of the family huddled together. "Hello! I'm Hermione, and she's my friend Ginny."

"Fuck." As a reflex, Ginny held tightly onto Hermione's upper arm when her foot slipped away.

"You okay, Ginny?"

"Yes, let us move on." They reached the small group and crouched. The man had blood oozing from a cut under his fringe and held tightly to his arm. The woman bled more severely from a head wound and hovered between awake and unconscious. Hermione next checked two kids who appeared more frightened than hurt but the third worried her the most, as the little girl didn't respond to any type of stimulation.

"Ginny, I'll take the girl, can you carry the little boy?" With hands and feet, Ginny and Hermione explained to the father to follow them, but the man shook his head. He couldn't carry his wife and he would not leave her alone. In the end, the only solution was multiple trips back and forth. Walking back to the ropes was easier, with the natural light shining through the entry point.

"Tanya, we are bringing two children up!" Connecting their harnesses to the carabiners, they pulled lightly on the cord to signal that they were ready.

"Hermione, we will pull you up one at the time."

"Take Hermione first, the girl is the most critical." Outside the five men worked together to hoist up witch and child. Tracey took the little one, who in turn was turned over to a healer for further examination. In the meantime, Hermione stepped aside to allow Ginny passage. A silent nod towards Harry calmed his anxiety and unknowingly Draco's too. Round two started as soon as Ginny was up again.

The men could feel when the harness was unhooked and the waiting enervated them, them and everyone around them. The tension of the rescue mission was almost tangible. "Get ready folks, Hermione is ready to come up again!" The last child left behind had crossed over on his own and was actually waiting for one of the witches - the boy was probably around eight or nine years old. Pulling Hermione up this time happened much faster, the routine of the first time eased the second one.

Puffing, Hermione warned Ginny. "The man will only move if we bring the wife up. But they are both adults, we'll have to cast a feather-light charm behind his back, I will not be able to carry his weight and neither will you."

"I feel you. Let's go down, the woman is becoming critical." Back down they went.
Silence cracked among the team on the ground. It took a long time, a very long time.

No movement on the ropes, no sound. Even Tanya was riled up, every minute she stuck her head down the gap to see if there was any movement. "Hermione! Ginny!"

Nothing.

A minute went by.

Then another one.

"Potter, they need help down there." Draco was losing his shit, but Harry wasn't much better and neither was Ron. "Tanya, is there a third harness?"

Henry answered, "No, only those two." The experienced men were also getting nervous with the silence. The oldest already thinking of a plan-B.

"There's movement on Ginny's rope!" Her side got ready to pull her up, after Tanya's warning. "Ginny, what took so long?"

"The man was difficult to calm down, Tanya. Hermione had to put him out with a Stupefy." Hermione screamed a spine-tingling scream. "Oh shit, Hermione, wait I'm coming!" The harness was again decoupled, and with less gentleness than desirable, Ginny dumped her male cargo to the side, disappearing into the darkness.


Harry was at his wit's end, "Use a levitation spell to lower one of us or get a fucking stepladder, I don't care, the girls need our help."

"Set up some Muggle-repelling charms so that we can perform decent magic."

Hannah followed Draco's suggestion that sounded more like a command. Daphne and Tracey helped her with the large surface.

"I want everyone silent!" Tanya's voice rose above all others. "Ginny, repeat what you just said."

"Hermione is okay. She lost her balance while carrying the woman and fell face to face with a body. Her ankle is messing her up a little, but we will be up in a minute."

"Potter, cast that levitate on me, I'm getting both of them out." Draco sounded strained.

"I'll go, Malfoy." Harry was about to fight for that job but something in Draco's face stopped him. "Why, Malfoy? You used to hate her. Give me a good reason why I should trust you with her life."

"Because I feel fucking guilty for what Bellatrix did to Hermione. I felt helpless then, just like I feel right now." His arms gestured wide, and everyone could hear him speak, even Ginny who stood at the gap's opening. "This is my chance to do something right for once. I regret my words and my actions. Is that good enough for you, mighty one?"

"Tanya, tell Ginny to make room for Draco's descent." Both men stared at each other for a few seconds, "I'll give you one chance. Hurt one hair on her head, Malfoy, and you won't even see me coming. Now go get my sister." He waited until Draco and Tanya nodded. "Wingardium Leviosa." The landing was less smooth than intended. "Sorry, Malfoy. Or maybe not." That last bit was
whispered. They might be in a temporary ceasefire, but long-term habits were hard to let go.

Draco helped Ginny first, anchoring the unconscious man to her. "Go up and send the harness back down. It might come in handy." A tug on the rope and the witch was lifted immediately. "Granger, where are you?"

"Here." Guided by the sound of her voice, he found her kneeling in front of an old woman, eyes wide open, but lifeless.

"Granger, let us get the wounded woman out of here." He pushed on her shoulders, "Granger, snap out of it."

"It could be McGonagall or Molly. She reminds me of a witch lying dead at Hogwarts, I never knew her name." Hermione rocked back and forth.

"Granger!" He turned her face to him, "Let's go. Can you stand?" She nodded, and he guided her by the elbow to the gap, "Stay here, I'm getting the woman." On his way back, Hermione was gone.

"Granger, where are you?"

"I can't leave her here, Malfoy." Hermione favoured one leg, while she bent down to pick up the corpse. "She's coming with me."

"Oh, you stubborn witch. Give me a minute, Granger." He looked up, "Tanya, get ready, I'm Mobilicorpus'ing the injured woman. She's passed out." He levitated the victim until Tanya and a healer could get a hold on her. The second he was free, he focused on the limping brunette, the dead woman in her arms. "Hand her over, Granger." It felt like lead, the rigor mortis was setting in, faster than usual because of the heat. "Lean on me for support, Granger." Slowly they made it. "Watch me get the body out of here." His hand forced her chin up, "Look, Granger."

A new mobilicorpus later followed by several gasps and screams from above, Hermione's wish was fulfilled. "Now, let me hook you up to the rope. Tanya, are they ready to pull her up?"

David peeped through the gap, "Tanya is busy, but yes, we are good to go."

"David, Granger can't put weight on her right foot." He yelled, satisfied with the thumbs up in acknowledgement. "Granger, it's our turn." He linked the carabiner to Ginny's harness that he used now for himself, adjusting it to his size with the help of his wand. He gave both ropes a tug and linked hands with Hermione. "Look at me. We are getting out of here." Her red-rimmed eyes met his, while they dangled in the air.

In no time both were out, and Harry scooped Hermione up, the witch breaking down. "It's okay Hermione. Calm down, sweetheart." He sent a grateful look to Draco, who received help taking off the harness.

Ron caressed her hair, "There was nothing you could do, Hermione. Calm down, sweetheart. We need to take a look at your ankle." His arm snaked around her shoulder from the moment Harry sat her down, to free her from the harness.

Somehow her breakdown affected everyone, words were redundant. They were all thrown back to the Hogwarts courtyard, in the midst of broken walls, stones, and dead bodies on both sides. Every death, one too many - except for the one no one mourned.
Later that night, the thoughts of the day were reviewed by everyone. Sleep seemed not to evade them.

Experiencing an earthquake stood in no one's list of must-do-again, the odds were probably not on their favour.

Saving victims from the earthquake was good for the cooperative morale of the group. Slytherins worked side-by-side with their former foes, united in their goal; the rate of cooperation actually dismantling the centuries-old belief that Slytherins and Gryffindors couldn't work together.

Which other lies would find their end by the end of this mission?

The hard reality check came when Hermione came face to face with death once more. This wasn't just shifting stones from point a to b, and restoring water and electricity to the village. This dead woman could be the first of a few they would uncover. Merlin and all other wizards, give us strength.
Chapter Six

Lugu day five.

It was silent inside the Hogwarts tent, aside from the snores and a few who talked in their sleep. Despite the sheep she counted, sleep refused to come; tears came instead and the sobs she hid behind a muffliato charm, plus by pressing her face against her pillow. It became too much, too overwhelming, all the memories from the recent past returned in full power, and they choked her.

In need of fresh air, Hermione walked outside using a silencing charm on her footsteps. She walked as far as she could go before it all got too much and she cracked; the burden so heavy, that she let herself fall on her knees. Confident she was alone, Hermione cried freely, rocking back and forth. Arms crossed at her belly, staring into distance while the tears blurred her view.

All of a sudden, she encountered a steady frame when she leaned back, his arms snaking around her, offering comfort. He only whispered in her ear, "It's okay, let it all out." Hermione turned inside the circle of his arms and threw hers around his neck. Stealing his warmth and his strength. He let her cry, and she took all the solace he offered; his hands rubbing her back soothingly.

Hermione drew back to look him in the eye, spent, "Thank you, Draco." His thumbs came up to dry her tears, the silver gaze watching every detail of her face, full of concern and something else she couldn't define. Before they left the UK, she had counted on dodging him; expecting him to push her buttons as she was accustomed to. Instead, something was growing between them, something unforeseen. Plus, she saw the side Daphne spoke so warmly of, the loyal friend, the wizard you could build upon.

It disturbed her, on one side, because this was not the image she had of Draco Malfoy and therefore he became unreadable and unexpected. On the other end, it made him human, made her want to see more of him. It brought up questions for which she tried to find the answers, even though this Taiwanese mission was not the place nor the time to do so.

They remained in each other's arms for quite a while longer, Draco only sitting down instead of kneeling, and she curled up on his lap. No words were exchanged, the only sound she heard was his powerful heartbeat, soothing. Anchoring.

She rose to her feet, suddenly, and he followed suit. "I'm going back inside." He nodded. Standing on the top of her toes, she cradled his face in her hands and kissed him softly on the lips. "Thank you, Draco. For everything." He just stood there, stiffly.

Tanya entered the tent with a foreboding look. “I have bad news.” The otherwise typically energetic
The start of the day was this morning traded with a dark setting and the mood didn’t improve with Tanya’s announcement.

"The wife we saved yesterday died from internal bleeding the healer couldn't stop. We were simply too late." The majority took a deep breath. "Fortunately, I have good news too. The little girl was severely injured, but our doctor was able to stabilise her, and she's being moved as we speak, by helicopter, to a more specialised medical facility. We are positive that she’ll make it." Some tears were wiped stealthily to avoid discovery, especially the ones on the male faces.

“The aftershock yesterday had luckily not set back the most basic needs, we still have power and water running. The pile of rubble, on the other hand, has grown. I’m not going to spend any more energy in splitting you into groups, you’ve worked long enough already with each other to form your own teams. You know the drill, I expect you to act accordingly.” Tanya looked around her, pausing a moment before moving on. “For medical, I have today a few new hands, so your job today will be clean up. I would love to start rebuilding, instead of piling up the debris.”

With these words, she left them. Blaise whipped the group into action, "Let us get our magical arses moving, people."

With an objective in mind, groups were formed and the work divided. The heat didn't help much, but the general consensus was: rather heat and rain than a new aftershock.

The mixed group of Slytherins and Gryffindors worked on a large area together in pairs, a witch to every wizard.

"Holly fuck, Merlin's balls, Salazar's arse." The train of swear words coming from Theo's mouth, paused everyone's movements before they all barked in laughter. Theo hopped on one leg, grabbing his foot now and then. "Oh, get the fuck out, that damned rock fell on my foot and you are all laughing with my pain. Friends my arse. Fuck…” He kept using expletives and it only made everyone laugh harder.

Luna walked to him, "Sit down for a minute before you fall and attract a lost Bibbering Humdinger." She removed his shoe and sock to inspect the foot. "Look, no blood. Only a bruise tomorrow, and stop cursing." Luna kept rubbing his foot, smiling to the wizard who was now very quiet. "My mother always gave me a kiss to make me feel better." She pecked the instep, "There, is it better now, Theodore?" He only nodded.

Behind his back, Blaise and Pansy doubled over in laughter, Draco and the other Slytherins amusedly watched their slack-jawed friend. Luna even went so far as to put his sock and shoe back on, ending it with a pat on Theo’s knee, “Now, we can all go back to work.”

When Theo turned around, everyone faked being hard at work but the grins plastered on his best friends faces didn't fool him. Luna gestured to Tracey to change places with her, pointing at Neville and worked further alongside Theo.

Hermione formed a heart with her hands and Theo drew a line across his throat with a grin. The mood had brightened thanks to a falling rock. Who knew?

The scorching sun drove them crazy, all the blokes worked with their chests bare while the girls
knotted their tee’s high up under their bosom, leaving their bellies fully exposed. Their efforts paid off, luckily and the area with debris cleared up visibly at a decent rate. Between the pairs, a comfortable chatting happened between, grunting from the heavy lifting and the occasional sigh of relief to get rid of the burden.

“Helga’s unicorn turds!” Choked Harry looked up to see Daphne suck on a finger. “I’ve hurt my finger.” She flipped him her hurt digit and blushed heavily when she noticed which one she was openly waving at Harry. “Yikes, not nice from a lady.” Daphne resumed her sucking.

“Don’t worry, even Hermione drops one or two swears now and then.” He chuckled at her uneasiness. “Lift that side up, Daphne. Or do you want me to kiss it better too?”

“Not in front of the kids. They might throw a tantrum.” She put her hands where Harry asked and lifted a piece of concrete.

“Yeah, I know.” He tried to carry most of the weight, not noticing how the witches’ stare was glued to his flexed pectorals. “It’s getting embarrassing.”

“How are you doing? I mean dealing with the aftermath.” She used the tip of her shirt to dry a trail of sweat, giving him a peep of her bra. Harry swallowed dryly.

"Being here away from Britain and all the slimy kiss-my-arse weirdness? Better than I thought. Working my butt off, seeing the results of my efforts pay out, it gives me a sense of fulfilment. What I'm doing is helping others. Like, when we worked yesterday all together to save that family? A sense of belonging. Yes, death happens here too. Yet, it feels different. Do you understand?"

"Better than you think, Harry. For once, Slytherins are not antagonising the other houses, but we are working with them for a common goal. Hexes aren't being shot around my ears, only stupid rocks crack my nail and hurt my finger. Or the earth underneath my feet shakes and scares the hell out of me." The new rock she chose was way heavier than expected, and she groaned. Harry took it over and she selected a smaller one; walking towards the pile. "It forces me to relate, Harry. The hell we went through back home was never of our own doing; we were called to solve a problem grown-ups created out of hunger for power. Sixteen years old teenagers shouldn't be branded and forced to commit murders. You shouldn't have to give up your education and go search for relics containing monstrous things."

Harry hung on her every word. “At least, here, I’m busy and have no time to think about home. I must hand it to Hermione. This is working for me.”

“You and me both, Harry. You and me both.”

Each time Tracey picked a heavy stone, Neville stole it from her to replace it with a smaller one.

At first, she found it funny, somewhat adorable, but after the third time, it began to work on her nerves. "Neville, why do you do this?" The moderately sized rock in her arms was being hijacked as the previous ones. Before he could finish his gesture, she turned around and kept the stone out of his reach.

“Give it to me, Tracey. You shouldn’t be carrying such a weight.”

“I’m perfectly capable of dragging this piece all by myself.” Demonstrating her words she dragged, with more effort than she wished for, the stone to its destination. “See, Neville?” Tracey panted
heavily, “I can do it.”

"I'm just trying to be friendly." He said regrettfully. "Sorry if I offended you." Neville dropped off, bowing his head.

“Neville, it’s not that…” She followed him and put herself in his way. “Damn it, Longbottom. Look at me.” She had to pull his face down to face her. “You want to help me, fine. But don’t take every hurdle out of my way, dummy. I can handle things too. Smile at me, please? I feel awful now.”

He gave her his goofy smile. She beamed.

Pansy had trouble focusing. The reason? Her ginger-headed partner. He carried stuff to the pile at twice her speed, while she watched the muscles of his back ripple.

Life wasn’t fair.

The man irked her to no end. He had no table manners whatsoever, had zero filter while he talked but hell if he didn't have a body to drool over.

She shook her head once again, life wasn’t fair, at all.

“Are you just going to drool over there, or are you going to lend me a hand?” Ron stopped right in front of her face, panting from his heavy cargo. “I’m not paid to do your job as well.”

She hissed at him but did as he told, wondering however, if she let the stone fall on her head it would help against her Weasley infatuation. Pansy needed a cure, and fast.

"If you focus just a bit more on your ex, your eyes will fall out, Red." Blaise grew tired of her fixation on the couple several feet away from them. "Are you jealous of every woman he speaks to or is it rage after losing a toy?"

"Go fuck yourself, Zabini." She got back to work for a few trips but soon fell again into her habit of watching Harry and Daphne's amused talk.

“RED!”

Ginny jumped, “What is it with you? Leave me the fuck alone.”

“Do you still want him or has it become an obsession? Because if it’s the first, you’re doing it all wrong. The latter, let it go and look wider around you. Maybe, there could be someone more worth your efforts.”

"Zabini, are you offering yourself?" Blazing in anger, she picked up the first thing she found and realised it was way over her head. He came to help her drag it down.

“It seems you’re mad because it wasn’t you who broke it off, and less because you lost Potter. It’s your pride that got a knock, not your heart that’s broken. Grow a pair and move on instead of ruining a good friendship with your childish behaviour.”

His truth tea hurt more than a real punch, and she lashed out, "I didn't ask for your opinion,
"When you've matured enough to see reason, come and talk to me. Until then, go play with the kindergarten group, witch." He turned his back on her before he did something he would regret. Like, bend her over his knee…

Draco had managed to partner himself with Hermione. Yesterday's last moments kept him awake the whole night, and he needed answers.

For now, he remained empty-handed. They worked more than well together, half-words were enough to show what needed to be done. More than once a bottle of water showed up in his face, once she was even annoyingly insistent that he would drink.

Draco heard her cast a charm over his skin, while she murmured over irrational behaviour and something that had to do with the sun and his pale complexion. Plus she shifted her gaze more than one time when he caught her ogling his body. He lost count of how many times she had done this by now; at first, it surprised him, but after the third time his mouth twitched.

In return, he had to admit that he liked her features, long, athletic legs, a flat belly and according to his assessment of her bosom, he knew her tits would fit the palm of his hand perfectly. When she cropped her top like all the other witches and knotted it at the right height, he had to think of a buzzkill to calm down his hormones. Hence his payback by the very striking way he flexed his muscles. Draco was a cunning snake after all.

"Draco, can you help me?" Hermione underestimated the weight of her burden, and hauled the stone beam, unable to lift it.

Seeing a new opportunity arise to flex his abs right in front of her face, he nodded, picked up the lower side, and lifted the massive bar. It turned out it was more substantial than he thought too but the sigh he heard from her, almost made him forget to keep the cargo up high.

Grunting, they finally got the burden away from the zone, both brushing the dirt off of their hands on their pants. "Thank you, Draco."

"You're welcome." He sipped from his water bottle, and a few drops fell from the corner of his mouth. Her eyes followed the trail. "How are you feeling today?"

"Huh?" She blinked a few times.

"How are you feeling today, Granger?"

"Much better if you would call me by my given name, Draco." She felt caught and feigned irritation to get away with it.

"Hermione, my apologies." Leopards don't change its spots, he still knew how to push her buttons. She squinted at him, seeing through his game. "So much better, did it hurt your tongue much?"

"Cheeky, really cheeky. I'm glad you're doing well if you're interested. It was a heavy day yesterday." His half smile changed into a more serious face.

"It was. I think I'll never grow used to the face of death."

"Nor should you. We've seen our fair share of it, in our lives, I don't mind breaking the habit. My
consolation is, none of it is at my hand.” Gone was the flirting, his demeanour now replaced with sorrow.

“Did they force you to…?”

"More than you know. I tried to avoid it, inflicting pain on another being is not my cup of tea. But it was me hurting them or someone punishing me.” He shut his mouth and settled for the hard look. "Eat or be eaten." Her hand rested, suddenly, on the top of his. But before she could speak, he seized the opportunity. "Nowhere near enough, will I be able to ask your forgiveness. Not for that offending word, not for lacking courage and saving you from my aunt, not for making your entire time at Hogwarts awful with my actions."

“Say it one time to me.” He barely heard her speak up.

“What?”

“I want to hear you say it one time.” She was unaware of their audience by now.

Draco closed his eyes, to gather courage, but spoke with a steady voice. “I’m sorry, please forgive me.”

The world paused around them and breaths were held when she kissed him for the second time in two days. "I do. Now I don't want to hear it again, I move on, and so do you."

He stared at her, blankly. It was the second time she took him by surprise, blacking his brain out, causing his nod to come with a delay. He took a deep breath, aware of the silence and all the eyes on them.

“Now, let us get all back to work!” She dispersed the attention in mere seconds, blushing. Harry and Ron stared at her puzzled; the group of Slytherins gave her a sign of respect and gratitude, bowing their heads. Feeling uneasy, she faked a visit to the ladies room.
Chapter Seven

Lugu day ten.

The past five days, a routine kicked in, the team focused on clearing up the rubble, happy to watch a truck remove the piles of debris with the big toys.

For the wizarding folks, it was the first time they saw something like this happen, Ron and Blaise agreeing on how great it must be to steer one of those Caterpillars. Their eyes grew big when its front loader effortlessly picked up a big piece of a façade no one could lift.

"Couldn't this monster have arrived a day or so earlier?" Pansy whined, her back had been aching for a day or two now.

Tanya felt compassion, the freshness of day one made room for a tired woman, "I feel you. Unfortunately, this monster, as you call it, is only now available to us. On the bright side? Tomorrow we can start the build-up." She patted Pansy on the back, and the witch grunted.

"Hermione, don't you have a salve of a sort for sore muscles?" Ron approached her. "Parkinson could use some."

"She'll need someone to rub it in…"

Ron rolled his eyes, "I'll ask Harry's new best friend. Or the Tracey girl."

"Hmm. Ron, does it bother you, that Harry talks with Daphne?"

"No!" He grimaced, "It's not...it has nothing to do with my sister. She dug her own grave and sealed it with that little thing a few days ago between you and her. It's all Ginny's doing with her suspicious mind, I warned her enough times." He rubbed his stubble, "It's...we are all of a sudden fraternising with the enemy. You are very cosy with Malfoy nowadays, I mean, you kissed him once very publicly, and now you clearly enjoy nice chats with the ferret. Harry spends more time with the Greengrass girl, and I have Pansy on my back who eyes my torso the whole time but keeps making annoying comments about me. In my face." That last one included big gestures.

"She checks you out?" Hermione's mouth twitched.

"Well, yes. From head to toe, it's weird, 'Mione." A hand ranked through the ginger tresses, "It's so weird."

"Maybe she likes you? Have you thought of that?" Her amusement grew at the rate of his discomfort.

"Ha! Don't make me laugh, Parkinson? Pug-face likes me?"
Now it was Hermione's turn to look annoyed, "She's not so bad if you get to know her. Please do me a favour and drop the name-calling, we are all trying to get along. And now, I want to know something, and you'll be very honest with me."

Ron hummed noncommittally.

"Have you checked her out?"

He flushed, "Well...I...a...I might have."

"Have you tried to have a normal conversation with her?"

"No."

"Try it, you might be surprised, Ron. Look at Harry, how good he finds it with Daphne." She pat him softly on his cheek, "Slytherins are not a bad as we thought. Sorting students into houses destroys the freedom to judge people for the right reasons." She gave him a cheeky look, "Even ferrets turn out to be nice." He faked nausea.

"Kids!" A general snort rang out, "The locals have pointed us to a natural water source, a ten-minute walk from here. We could take the rest of the afternoon off, it's already five o'clock anyway, and have a swim. Tomorrow we start with a whole new project." The snorts made way for cheering; swimsuits and beach towels were conjured, in a matter of seconds, from the clothes they wore.

The trek towards the lagoon took the estimated time indeed, but their reward was so worth it. The water was so inviting that no one doubted too long and dove as soon as the shoes were off. The heat from the past week kept the water at a decent temperature, the contact with the water was so welcome that everyone voiced their excitement loudly.

They played like toddlers pulling each other underwater; the wizards trying to steal each other swim trunks or shoving water into each other's faces. Harry teased Hermione so much that she challenged him on a swim race. Harry's fan group had a slight advantage compared to Hermione's, but Blaise's loud voice made up for the difference. Daphne was the only Slytherin on Harry's side, as all the others loved to taunt the Chosen One with his upcoming loss.

"Are we sure she can beat him?" Blaise followed Draco's lead, but he wasn't so sure of the win.

"She'll give him a run for his money, that's for sure, Blaise." Theo considered the options, "He has more muscle power but she's lithe. They are evenly matched."

"I think so too, Theo. Blaise, my girl will nail it." Draco was confident and didn't notice his slip.

His friends, however, didn't let him get away with it. Blaise rubbed it in, "Your girl, huh? Did we miss an episode?"

Draco gave them a dirty look, "Oh, go take the piss somewhere else."

"Calm down, Draco. We're just teasing you." Theo rose both hands in surrender.

Neville gave the start to the race, and gracefully, Hermione dove into the water, setting a powerful crawl, closely followed by Harry. He could make up the distance of two of her arm swings with one of his, and the first leg ended in a tie. The difference was made on the return journey, Hermione choosing to stay underwater for a few legs more before coming to the surface. Harry misjudged his speed, and he lost by a half-length.
Rising up till her waist was out of the water, she pushed Harry underwater, encouraged by the feminine shout-outs. But her feet got pulled under the surface as well, and her return to the surface happened coughing and sputtering water. All worries temporarily forgotten, the fun prevailed.

When most of the chaos stilled around Hermione, the focus lying now somewhere else, she distanced herself from the group and swam further away, to have a quiet moment of peace. Floating on-the-spot she noticed too late the approach of Draco; startled she went lightly under and spit the water out.

He held her up by the arm, "Are you alright, Hermione?"

"I noticed your approach too late, and I got startled, that's all. Are you having fun?" Her hands shoved some clingy hair away from her face.

"I'm pleased that I was cheering for the winner. I had faith in you." His blond eyebrows wiggled, "I like to be on the winning side, you know?"

"Always a slimy snake, aren't you?" Hermione shoved water into his face and ducked away. She ended up swimming to a secluded area, hidden from the rest.

Draco waited patiently until she turned around to face him. At the perfect moment, a wave of water was thrust towards her and she cried out. In no time, they were outdoing one another with their attacks.

He caught her wiggling arm and pulled her against him.

Daphne walked towards Harry, who sunbathed with a grin. "For a loser, you look amused."

"Ah, I knew Hermione could beat me, she's a terrific swimmer. I had a great time riling her up, it's good to laugh so freely, you know."

"You knew you could lose? You could have given me a heads up, Potter. I cheered for the wrong team." Her lips puckered with the dirty look she gave him.

He tapped on her chin, "Hey, are you mad?" Batting his eyelashes a few times, he drew a smile from her face, helped by the pleading faces he made.

"Agh, Harry." She slapped him on his shoulder, "Stop it." Unexpectedly, he took her down and tickled her until she contorted with laughter, "Potter...stop...it...hahaha...damn you!"

He pinned her down, hands at each side of her head. "Say you're sorry."

"Never."

"Daphne Greengrass, say you're sorry!" His hands kept tickling her sides, mercilessly. "I can't hear you."

Between her barkings, she shouted, "Alright...I'm sorry...oh mighty one!"

His face was just inches away from her, as her laughter died to make room for another feeling.

"Red, if looks could kill, I would be preparing my girls funeral. Don't you get tired of the pouting?"

"Don't you have anyone better to annoy, prat?"
"No. I seem to be fixated on the toddler from the group, who keeps pining for a lost possession."

"I love him."

Blaise dragged her away from the scene and turned her not so gently around to face him. "Red, look me in the eye and repeat those words." Her silence was telling. "As I expected. It's not love, it's only frustration about the lost toy. When will you grow up?"

"When will you get lost?" It came out weaker than she meant. She hated to admit he was right.

"When you take off those eye blinders and see what stands in front of you." His arms were crossed, to avoid choking the irritating witch awake.

"What should I see then?" Chin in the air, Ginny kept arguing with less fighting spirit.

Cradling her face in his hand, he kissed her deeply, his tongue entering into a duel with hers. "Me." Stealing another kiss, he tugged her bottom lip between his teeth before releasing it with a plop. He left her, not giving her room to complain.

"Did Blaise just kiss my sister?"

Pansy sneered, "Are you jealous?"

"Of who, Parkinson?"

"Weasley, by the way you talk, I almost think you're jealous of your sister. Are you pining for Blaise's affections?" Pansy checked her nails out.

"I don't know why I listen to the crap that comes out of your mouth. Hermione is wrong." He dismissed her, leaving her wondering what that last part was about.

Neville swam gallantly next to Tracey. The past few days they'd grown closer to each other and he really appreciated her gentle personality. Together they stayed away from the wilder swimmers, enjoying the nature surrounding the lagoon.

"I hope we have time to return to this place. It feels like a little paradise." Tracey swam at a slow dog-paddle. "All these indigenous plants, I would like to know more about them."

"I brought a herbology guide with me, borrowed from Professor Sprout. We can check them out when we have the chance for it." Plants and Neville were the perfect combination.

"You made all those salves for us, with Hermione?"

"She asked Tanya what the most common issues were, what the volunteers might encounter the most often during a mission. Strained muscles, cuts and bruises, an occasional stomach problem as a consequence of different types of food or even a different composition of the water. When Hermione passed on that list, we came up with we would need the most for a preliminary first aid assessment." He spoke with pride.

"Bruises too?" Her question was also out of self-interest.

"Are you hurt somewhere?" Neville was already checking out the possible area. Her finger pointed out at a place on her shoulder blade. "When we're back in the tent, I'll apply some arnica salve to it. You should have told me earlier, it could be cured by now." Tracey gave him a guilty look.
"Somewhere else?" She denied, "Help me remember, I tend to forget." A finger tapped her nose.

Pressed against his chest, Hermione's breathing sped up. She couldn't dispute anymore feeling attracted to the blond wizard, the struggle of denial had commandeered her dreams enough already.

But feeling his frame so tight against her own female curves was messing with her system. The angel on one shoulder told her to push him away, it was too fast. It was just ten days ago that she hated him with every fibre of her being. The devil on her other shoulder urged her to climb the wizard and snog the hell out of him. There's no law forcing you to abide by a waiting period; how long you have to wait before the hate becomes something else. Her fight was real, and she decided to sit down and bide his move, let him choose.

Draco's gaze switched between her mouth and her eyes, his breath tingling on her lips. He searched for permission or for her powerful left, showing him her denial. Her body fitted perfectly against his, his hand helping her stay in place, but so eager to grab the globes of her arse and snake her legs around his waist. But then again, better not. They had no privacy, the chances of being caught were very high.

Draco's free hand roamed over her face, drops of water falling over her cheek when he shoved a new strand of hair away. The fingers slid along her curling hair, the warm wind so intense that the top layers were already drying in the sun. A single digit traced the lines of her cheek, over the chin to her other side. Slowly trailing over her bottom lip. He inched closer until his lips almost touched hers and waited, grey eyes keeping her brown ones in his gaze. But Hermione shut her eyelids, and closed the distance, following the ninety-ten percent rule.

Lips tasted each other first lightly, savouring the flavour; but pent-up desire overwhelmed him, and he consumed her, hand on the back of her head to ground her. The hand on her lower back moved to her arse and grabbed a globe, raising her high enough to push her into wrapping her legs around him. Which she did and moaned when his erection pushed against her core.

Leaving her lips, he trailed her neck down, peppering it with licks and bites, growing more intense when she rubbed against him. Her impatience took over, and she claimed his lips once more, groaning into his mouth when his hand squeezed her bum.

A scream in the distance interrupted their heated embrace, sobering her up. Embarrassed with her behaviour, she jumped away from him, breathing heavily.

"I'm sorry, Hermione. I got carried away." His hand raked through his hair, with a shower of water in its trail.

"It takes two to tango, Draco. It's just too soon, and this is not the place." She put distance between them, more out of self-protection, the desire to climb him again too intense. He nodded in understanding. "I'm joining the others. Will you come?"

"I need a moment, I'll see you in a jiffy." Alone, he isolated himself more to deal with a personal issue, a dick that needed his witch. In fact, a few pumps on his rock hard member was all that it took for him to find release, the memory of her heated core against his groin pushing him over the edge. His mind replayed her response to him, satisfying one of his doubts.

She desired him as much as he did her; when a new private opportunity arose, he would test her resolve once again. For now, it was enough, and it light a fire, his need to fight for her, the intimate feel shouted my witch.
Hermione didn't swim straight back to the group. She needed a moment to herself also. He had roused something in her so intense that it took all the control she had to not ask him to take her right there. Draco's arousal was so present between her legs it was impossible to ignore.

Since the aftershock issue and the way he consoled her, all of her walls against him were broken completely. In its place she had gotten to know him, working side-by-side, talking about war memories, reliving funny Hogwarts moments or merely working in silence. A comfortable quiet.

Draco reaffirmed the image she had of him, he was an intelligent wizard. Gone was the way she had to break down her thoughts so Ron could follow her ideas. In his place, Draco gave her food for thought; and he thought ahead. In a sneaky way, he took care of the more massive pieces or lowered her burden by adjusting the way he held his side of the cargo.

She brought them water, he refilled the bottles on time or offered her a green apple when she least expected it.

The hate made room for understanding where he came from and changed into respect, later to evolve into an attraction. During the day he was very much present, at night he invaded her dreams.

The feel of his strong body against hers and all that followed, added now a layer of reality to her fantasies.

*Oh, Morgana, give me strength.*
Chapter Eight

Chapter Notes

As always my Magzillasaurus cleaned up this chapter, thank you love!

Also thanking my loyal reviewers Shiori1995, JuliST, pgoodrichboggs, happiness_is_a_good_fanfic and ditte3 for their input, your reviews always make me smile.

Chapter Eight

Lugu day eleven.

The purpose of the stapled planks was finally revealed to the pure-blood volunteers. A few days ago, a whole load of construction material was delivered, but it remained untouched, until today.

Henry took charge, "Today we'll start with rebuilding this community. Some of you will continue to clear up the area, it's nowhere near done, but we have enough room by now to start phase two. Those who prefer, can continue in the cleanup teams, otherwise those up to a new challenge, come with me."

The majority of the Hogwarts group chose a new adventure, curious what they would do with the weird contraptions lying around. A few, mostly girls including Tracey and Luna, prefered the known task.

Out of the new group, balanced out factions were formed, some would use the still intact concrete bases as a starting point and raise up the skeletons for the new houses. The others got the task of creating the solid base first, out of cement.

Blaise and Neville were in charge of loading one of the cement mixers. “This is something else, Longbottom. Sand and cement to create concrete, a whole different approach of mixing ingredients for a potion.”

Shovel after shovel, Neville filled his share of sand into the mixture, “I still prefer plants.”
"So does Tracey, mate." Neville's blush amused the Slytherin, "Do you have honourable intentions with our girl?"

For a man who took down a snake with a swing of a sword, Neville could still react like a bumbling teenager, “I swear, I…”

"Relax Neville, I'm just playing. You're cut from good wood, a decent bloke you are. You have my blessing."

Neville relaxed just an inch, “Now, that's a bit too…”

“Soon? Maybe, but perhaps not. When you find the witch, you shouldn’t doubt, imagine another wizard snatching her away from under your nose.”

“That’s true. And you?” Blaise frowned. “Have you found your witch, Blaise?”

“My witch is a special case, too much fire and not enough control. I have to tame her first.” The last spade of cement was added, and Neville set the machine to mixing; the rumbling noise new to both of them. “She’s a hellcat, Neville.”

"First, she needs to clear up her own mess, I think." Neville seemed to be more up to date then they thought. "There's still a case of unresolved business to attend to and some forgiveness to be asked for."

"I'm well aware, no moment is lost to remind her of the Potter-issue." Blaise kept an eye on the amount of water he added, following Henry's instructions strictly to the tiniest detail; giving the Gryffindor the sign, his partner closed off the water supply. "Harry is at a crossroad too, with Daphne. Only a blind man doesn't see it."

"But they need closure, Ginny and Harry, before they can move on." Neville threw a new water bottle to Blaise, sighing. They didn't speak for a while. "I'm glad I joined this mission, you know. It feels like a brand new start."
"Longbottom, this is a new start for every one of us. My hands covered with blisters from hard work, hands that haven't ever lifted anything heavier than a schoolbag or a pint of butterbeer. My back hurts like a bitch, I hate showers with a water hose and still, I'm happy to be here too." They sat next to each other. "These locals are genuinely happy with our efforts. There's no judging glares, no talking behind our backs, no you-are-bad and you-are-good pointing fingers." Two sips of water and the wiping of the mouth with the back of the hand followed. "I don't mind a night with privacy, away from those idiots who forget to put up silencing charms before they start snoring."

Neville chuckled, “You can raise those yourself, you know?”

“I’m too lazy, mate.”

"Don't complain about the noise, Blaise, unless you do something about it." The silent moment that followed was filled with smiles and smirks. Neville broke the quietness, "I heard Hermione say the sorting hat does more bad than good, and I’m starting to believe her. Look at us. Back home we don't share a word. Here? We are trading jokes, having serious talks and complaining to each other about aching backs. Our magical world needs a serious wake-up call."

"I think the Dark-fucking-Lord started it, but on a real fucked-up level. It's up to us to finish it, to show who we should live with each other, without assumptions and prejudice. We even have the poster boy and girl at hand for the cause." A tanned chin jerked towards Draco and Hermione, a bit further away; while they moved planks to the designated area, the two kept a nice conversation going. "The pureblood and the Muggle-born, you can't have a better power couple in place to demonstrate how we should evolve."

“Power couple? Malfoy will like the title, Hermione I don’t think so.” Neville roared, “But you are right, if those two make it happen, they’ll be a hope to our hurt community. He’s a totally different bloke here, compared to the prat we knew at school.”

"For you yes, for me no. Draco always had a soft side, he just didn't show it beyond the dungeons. The outside world knew him as the scion of the Malfoy dynasty, and he lived by it, within our walls, however? A man you can build upon."

"If you ask me that’s a stupid way to live. I like this Malfoy, the one I used to know? Not even paid, would I go and have a drink with him. I haven't forgotten his mocking first year, about my toad and my flying."

“He can be an arse, I know. He was an arrogant prick, to you folks, not to us. Yet, life has a way to
set the scores right, what he had to endure inside the walls of the Manor, you don’t wish it to your worst enemy. A lot of his wrongs were done for the right reasons, but it’s difficult to understand if you’re only a bystander, instead of a witness like me. I saw him crumble, break apart. He deserved a kick in his arse for his arrogant behaviour, not to be tortured because his daddy messed up.”

“We all carry scars.”

"Some scars give you a perspective, and his? They shifted it 180 degrees. For the good. Now, this grey mass seems to be ready, it's time for us to drag it to its place.” Blaise stood up and patted Neville on the back as if they were longtime friends.

Pansy and a hammer? A dangerous combination, according to Ron.

The two were helping create the wooden mould where the concrete would dry and build a whole new base for a new house.

Raising up walls three planks high, nails and hammers were used to lock the wood in place. Pansy watched David's demonstration, the plumber bloke that was. It seemed a piece of cake for the two, and soon Ron experienced the hard way how painful it could be if you aimed your hammer poorly. "Merlin's saggy left ball. It burns!"

“Do you want me to kiss your finger, Won?” Pansy mocked him, grinning wide.

He gave her a furious look. “I buried a dear friend who used to call me that name. Don’t you dare ridicule her.”

“Hey, I’m sorry, I meant no harm beyond some teasing. Calm down, growling bear. Didn’t they feed you enough this morning?” She left him to his mumblings and focused on her task. Swinging the heavy hammer, she hammered her finger instead. “Fuck! Ah!” Sucking on her finger, Pansy tensed from the pain turning around in a circle as if it would ease the pain.

Ron watched her deadpan. “Do you want me to kiss it better?”
“Go fuck yourself, Weasel.” She could feel the heartbeat at the tip of her finger, “You’re as blind as a mole.”

"Where did that come from all of a sudden?"

"Piss off!" She knelt at the spot and instead of using a big swing, she knocked on the nail's head with small movements. The tears still dropped from her face. Ron approached her but she moved away to another place, after which he shrugged and finished her side too, also with cautious moves. Hammers could hurt like a bitch.

The mould was built and multiple trips later pushing the wheelbarrow filled with concrete, the platform was finished. They moved to the next, which went faster as they got the hang of it.

Ron ended partnering with Harry, "First she mocks me using Lavender's pet name and when I turned it around on her, she bit my head off. I don't get her."

“Teasing is asking for love, Ron. She’s drawing you out.”

The ginger-haired man rolled his eyes, “Harry, Daphne is messing with your brain, buddy. Pansy and me?” He snorted.

“Never mind, you're not ready to be converted.” Harry gave him a knock against the back of the head, smirking.

It just confused Ron even more.

“Is Pansy flirting with Ron?” Hermione whispered, watching it unfold.

“Can you imagine? Your Weasel with my Pans? Explosive combination.”

“Draco, my friend’s name is Ron, not Weaselbee or whatever you guys use. You want to get along
"Second, the idea is not so bad, you know? Pansy will look after him, giving him no room to fuck around and he’ll worship her, just like she loves to be pampered."

"The opposite of you, you don't want to be worshipped, am I right?"

"I want to be respected. To be wanted without being suffocated, I want to care for but not raise a toddler who needs help to tie his own shoes." Releasing her load, she moved on to the next pile. "You know...the basic stuff."

"You don’t want a big rock on your finger to show off how wealthy your man is? Or eat at the fancy place-to-be to see and be seen? Or am I assessing you wrong, Hermione?"

"A big rock on my finger only irritates while working, it will get stuck everywhere and says nothing about the feelings of my partner, only about the size of his vault. Second, a fancy place to eat usually means snobby waiters, tiny food portions and headaches from counting the fork’s teeth. Thank you, but no thank you." The way she gestured and held her face reminded him of their school time. From the time before the horrors.

"Good to know, Granger. My possible to-do list: return the big sapphire ring: check; cancel the reservation at Henry V in Paris: urgent.” Draco’s finger tapped on his lips, while he summed up his list.

"Stop being a prat: task urgently to be executed.” Sticking her tongue out to him, she picked the penultimate pack of planks. “Auch.” She sucked on her finger.

His amused face changed in a second into a worried one, “What’s the matter?” pulling the finger out of her mouth to inspect it thoroughly.

She pulled back her hand, but he grabbed it again. "Malfoy..." His glare forced her to start over, "Draco, it’s only a splinter.” His hand prevented her from inspecting her own finger closely.

"I see it, stand still.” Pinching the zone, a little point was uncovered, and he picked it out, patting the cushion on the top of the finger, "Do you feel anything else?” She shook no. Keeping her eyes on his, he brought the finger to his lips, kissing it softly.
“Did you just kiss it better, Draco?”

The corner of his mouth rose, “Maybe, if it makes you smile again.”

“Cheeky prat.” She gave him a loud peck on the lips and walked away swinging her hips.

Later in the afternoon, the first house skeletons rose up in the sunlight. A few unafraid volunteers stood on the top of stepladders while others lifted the planks, kept the wood upright or handed over the hammers and other equipment.

The Hogwarts building group worked together on one house, among them Harry, Blaise, Neville and Ron who stood on the top of such a ladder, while Draco, Hermione and others gave the ground support. Hermione gave her assistance more to Ron than anyone else, as Pansy was avoiding him like the plague. Draco assisted whoever needed help.

"Fuck.” might have been the most heard word the whole afternoon. Aiming a hammer at the nail’s head was probably the biggest hurdle on the field.

“Son of a banshee.” Ron almost lost balance on his ladder.

Moments later, Blaise’s hold on a plank wasn’t steady enough, and the corner fell on Draco’s head, “Merlin’s saggy left nut. What are you, Zab’s? A squib?”

Hermione came over, pulled his head down to look at the place he rubbed, shoved his hand away and kissed it. “Now there, baby. It’s all going to be okay, you’ll survive. Do you want me to write your daddy a letter?”

The nasty glare promised nothing good, “Tell him I said ‘hi’.” The look he received in return was a warning, Hermione would retaliate.

By the end of the day, they lost count of how many fingers got hit instead of nails. Head bumps,
probably ten, splinters in digits double as many. They all cracked their backs with grunts, the arnica salve was passed on to help with the countless bruises, and not one soul looked fresh, the tiredness evident in everyone's faces during dinner.

“Oh, damn Helga’s saggy tits, my nails are ruined.” Pansy checked out the damage to her hands after eleven days of hard work. “See, Hermione, this one is broken.”

“Boo hoo, Pansy. A broken nail, what a disaster.” Ron couldn’t help it, the argument from this afternoon still lingered. But Hermione’s warning ‘Ron’ was ignored.

"Not everyone wants to wander around as the ginger brother of Dumbledore. Keep on shaving your beard like that, and you'll look just like him, Weasley."

"I don't like that gileto thing Harry makes us use to shave. I cut myself more than when I shaved the first time, so I'll take care of it when I have a decent razor blade." The whole group followed the exchange. Finally, something exciting was happening inside their tent.

“Oh Merlin, you’re such a Lockhart.” Everyone barked at Pansy’s comeback, failing to notice her lack of patience.

"Please, Parkinson, a bit more and you'll try to convince me your life is as bad as crazy Mirtle. Go moan a bit more somewhere else, pug-face." The laughter stopped, surprised that Pansy didn't have a comeback. "Nothing to say?" The Slytherin wizards didn't like how it was evolving, but neither did Hermione nor Harry.

The contents of the glass of juice flew into his face. "You filthy dickhead with your perfect loving family. Your only concern is, 'what do I gobble down for breakfast, lunch and dinner'. You have the emotional range of a teaspoon, you...you...moody goblin."

“What’s wrong with you?”

"Not all of us can lean back and count on the Chosen One to save our arse, nor do we have a genius with all the answers." Her hand gestured towards the mentioned ones in a forgiving gesture, her tears, however, ran freely down her face. "I chose the wrong side of the war because it was the side my parents told me to be the right one. I was fucking scared during the war and made the wrong decisions because I believed the crap I had been fed." Her chest rose rapidly up and down, "Some of us never had the luxury to lead free lives, do whatever we want with whom we want. Unlike you, I
have been raised with one goal in life: to be the perfect pureblood wife. Groomed to know how to welcome people according to the proper etiquette, how to behave, how to dress properly. I don't know how to play chess or hide-and-seek, because that's not worthy of a lady. Hell, if Voldemort didn't fuck up our future the way he did, I wouldn't even have the luxury of choosing my own husband but would have be betrothed to the most advantageous match. I had no right to choose, they chose for me."

Hermione approached the witch, to calm her down. “No, Granger.” Taking a few steps back, she finally noticed all the eyes on her. She swallowed dryly, “I don’t want your consolation, I know all the wrongs I committed against you. I just want this moron to mind his words.” Pansy ran out of the tent.

A pregnant silence followed; protecting Pansy or any other Slytherin witch was considered a duty to both Draco, Blaise and Theo and they were not amused.

“Ronald Weasley, why did you do it?” Hermione exploded, “Can’t you see she’s bantering with you, to get your attention? You are a blind troll, Ron.”

“She started it.” He didn’t understand why she was so mad at him, nor Harry, watching his friend frown deeply. The rest remained silent.

"No, you did, Ron. And instead of keeping it funny and light hearted you went full power on her by calling her pug-face."

“You called her that too.”

"Yes, when we were in second or third year. Just like Draco mocked me about my ‘buck teeth’ and the bird's nest of hair, or called Harry ‘Scarhead’ countless times. We were teenagers, kids, outplaying each other. You should behave more maturely now that you're eighteen." She wanted so much to shake him firmly by his shoulders.

“And what do you want me to do, ‘Mione?”

"If you don't see the problem? Nothing. Otherwise, go search for her and apologise." She pointed her straight arm at the exit door. He was indecisive, looking back and forth between Hermione, Harry and the exit. She mouthed, ‘Go!’, and with a deep breath, he followed Pansy's footsteps.
Behind his back, Hermione formed two fists, one on top of the other, in a strangling gesture. To calm her nerves, she went outside too, but headed the opposite direction.

Ron had to walk quite a bit before he saw Pansy sitting on a rock. Dragging out the rest of the distance foot by foot, he sat close but still far enough to avoid being hit.

“I am sorry for making you cry.”

“Get lost.”

“Parkinson, are you going to make me grovel?” She gave him the cold shoulder. "Listen, I'm sorry okay? For making you cry, I hate it when girls go teary on me." He heard a contained sob, "Parkin-, Pansy. I clearly have no idea what it's like to grow up with aristocrats and their etiquette rules. My mother's concern was for us to be polite and to know how to help in the household. But for the rest? We played in the mud, or hide-and-seek, with bleeding knees as a result, but we were free, yes. Your kind calls us blood-traitors though." Her chin trembled, but she nodded.

"Hear my offer, let us turn over a new leaf, start fresh.” He extended a hand. “Hello, Miss Parkinson, I'm Ronald Bilius Weasley, I have no filter and blurt the first thought out of my mouth, but I don't mean any harm.”

For a few minutes, he feared he would get no answer, hand hanging in the air.

Finally, a feminine hand held his, "I'm Pansy Parkinson, a spoiled witch with no filter either, and I can be snarky at times." A watery smile met a beaming one. She cracked, and he hugged her.

He promised her, “Tomorrow, we play hide-and-seek. The winner gets to choose a prize.”

“Deal.”
“What an idiot.”

"I agree with you, Hermione." She startled, his approach had gone entirely unnoticed. Draco had followed her for sure because she knew she wasn't visible from the tent's entrance, but hid in a dark corner, behind a wall of bushes.

“I know you won’t believe me, Draco, but Ron has a heart of gold but is totally brainless when it comes to thinking before he speaks.”

“Again, I agree fully on that last one, the first...not so much.”

“She does bicker with him a lot.”

"It translates as Pansy's way to show she's interested with you. I recognise the M.O." Closing the distance with a few steps, he admired her annoyed face. "Don't ask me why, but she sees something in the ginger head which is completely lost on me."

“If you ask Ron the question about me, you’ll get the same answer.”

“You see something in me, Granger?”

"I see a man who is trying to redeem himself, but still needs his ego stroked." She grinned, "Let me see what else I see...ahem."

“Go on, please, don’t hold back…” Her mood was changing, as he’d aimed for, he preferred a beaming Hermione over a sulky one.

"I see a cut here and there, clearly also not handy with the razor, much like Ron." Draco huffed but didn't interrupt. "The hair is getting shaggy, but I don't mind, more to grab onto." Her hand ruffled his tresses; he hummed. "The will to help is there, the ability for it needs some fine-tuning. Absolutely not used to hard physical work, these calluses are from flying and the new ones come from this place. The skin on the top of the hand is still soft…” While her finger stroked his hand, the palm of his other cradled her right cheek, thumb rubbing in circles. His silver eyes burned.
"What else, witch?"

"Pansy and Daphne are right, inside this chest there's a loyal beating heart. Impulsive as hell, can perform amazing and, at the same time, terrifying things, but it's a heart with a soul who feels bad when it inflicts pain." Her hand rested flat on his pectoral. "I have hated you with every fibre of my body, I've cursed you from here to Tokyo, God only knows how many times. Nowadays, I don't know what I feel."

He closed the distance and claimed her mouth, releasing it to suck at the bottom lip. "You angered me from day one, Granger. My blurred mind, of course, was first filled with lies, and later, it evolved into frustration because no matter how much I tried, I could not beat you in class, the flying aside. You had better grades. Every. Single. Time." Her pleased look was met with one that promised revenge. "Buck teeth became perfect teeth. The frizzy hair is now tamed; the waves of curls feel soft and full in my hand." A hand followed the path of his words; the finger traced her lip, "This mouth loves to lecture and to stand up for what is right, despite the consequences. But it's your spirit that I admire the most, the courage to hold on and fight back." His mouth was now claimed by hers, her arms around his neck to keep him in place.

An invisible cord snapped, and they caved in. Hermione pressed her body tightly against his, fingers lacing through his hair. His hands roamed everywhere, her sides, arms, neck, pushing her lower back against his groin, tracing the contours of her breasts. He consumed her moans, she tasted his tongue. Lips were traded for a feminine neck, which was offered in surrender, holding tight to his shoulders for support.

The pale hands sought their way under her shirt, eager to touch bare skin. The fidgeting, however, was not to her liking and she took the shirt off, doing the same with his. Toned pale back muscles flexed under her caressing hands, a hiss left his lips when her nails scrapped over his chiselled abs. Pushing her back just enough to rid her of her bra he hid his face between the valley of her breasts, inhaling the smell of her skin, a mixture of flowers and something simply Hermione.

Draco looked into her eyes, asking for permission, before he launched an attack on her breasts, nipping at her nipples, biting and sucking them hard, the intensity of his actions encouraged by the moans escaping her parted lips. “Draco.”

He hoisted her up, the same way as he had in the water; Hermione wrapped her legs around his waist, and he kneeled, releasing his lips from her tits long enough to conjure a thick blanket before laying her down and claiming his place between her legs. Hermione pulled his face to her, devouring his mouth.
She searched for one of his hands and set it on her breast, showing him how she liked to knead the soft flesh. He complied with no fuss, a corner of his mouth curling up before he resumed the worshipping of her tits with his lips. The free hand played with the inside of her thighs, testing the waters. Touching the surroundings and ignoring what she offered; the light rise of her hips asking to be touched there. After the third almost-but-not-quite-yet time, she huffed and returned the favour, hovering over his rock hard erection but not palming it.

"Witch, stop teasing, or the fun will be over before we get to the good part."

“Give me what I want, then, Draco.”

"What is it that my lady wants?" He sounded husky, a silver fire burning in his eyes. "Here?" A stroke over her knee, "Here?" hand drawing circles on the inner side of her thigh, "Or here?" This time right above her mound. Frustrated, she shoved him away, undid her trousers and knickers, took his hand and placed it right where she wanted him to be. "Feisty lover you are, my lioness?"

He alternated between circles around her clit and a dip of his fingers in her hot cavern, gyrating the digit inside before curling it on the way out, caressing the spongy spot which made her tense. His mouth switched between her taunt nubs and her plump lips, her mewling lighting up his passion for this witch.

Hermione shuddered, consumed by the trails of fire, breath hitching, tensing up and curling her toes in surrender. Draco intensified his attack, lowering down on her and sucking on the bud asking to be eaten, his fingers assaulting her pussy at a maddening pace, pumping, circling and curling. Her cries told him she was almost there, his focus now solely on her blushed face, while his teeth plagued her clit and the fingers rubbed her g-spot merciless.

Hermione shattered. Jolting her back from the floor, head back, hips jerking uncontrolled, her fingers grabbing tresses of blond hair in submission. He rode her orgasm out, lapping her juices, fingering until the last wave settled down; astonished by so much beauty and fire. Blurry eyes stared at him, fulfilled. She rose to a sitting position, pulling him up to meet her halfway. She tasted herself on his lips, humming, before she pushed him further until they switched positions, wiggling an eyebrow full of promises.

He assisted her with his trousers and trunks, standing in full glory in front of her face. She licked him from base to tip, circling with the tip of her tongue over the head, and took him in her mouth. Bobbing, she sucked and lapped, hands fondling his balls and the perineum right behind them. He drew a deep breath at the feeling. "Woman, don't, or I will be done soon." She chuckled with his dick in her mouth, the ripples making him harder than he already was. "Granger." She hummed ‘no', and he corrected, "Hermione, you've got to stop, love."
He pulled her up, flipped them and spread her legs, stroking her entrance his fingers before circling her pussy with his cock’s head. As he pushed in, his gaze never left hers, groaning deeply. She was the perfect fit for him, and he didn't waste another minute, pumping first slow but soon increasing the pace consumed by pleasure.

She met him at every thrust, legs squeezing his waist, feet digging into his globes to drive him deeper inside. Draco set a hard pace, losing the rhythm as a coil of fire pooled low in his abdomen, however, he wasn’t going to lose it alone. Inserting a hand between them, he played with her clit, rolling it between his fingers, circling figure eights around it. Hermione squeezed him inside her channel in response, breathing shallowly and moaning; until neither of the two could hold it anymore, one pulling the other over the edge, the grunt of passion muttered in her mouth, tongues dancing with each other. She held him as tight as he did her.

Draco drank in the sight of her bliss, memorising every detail of her flushed skin, how her lips were parted, tongue wetting them. One word was on his lips, but he didn’t say it. Afraid of what she might say back, or not say at all.

But in his mind, he screamed it loudly.

Mine.
Hermione and Draco returned as thieves in the night, giggling the whole way back. Before the entrance, he kissed her one more time deeply, opening the tent's door for her right after. A whispered 'goodnight' later, and they parted ways.

Draco lied down relaxed, head resting on top of a folded arm, a smile plastered on his face.

"You look like a cat who got the cream, brother." Blaise set a muffliato up between them, before revealing his conclusion.

The blond sighed from deep.

"Hundred points to Slytherin, mate. You dipped in the honeypot, I guess.”

The assessment put Draco on alert, “Don’t you dare to say a word-”

"And ruin every chance you might have at a happy life with a decent witch? What do you think of me, mate? Completely unexpected, she gave you a chance to show her who you really are, believe me, it was not in her plan at all. Your rational brain took that chance and brought you to where you are. I want you to be happy, Draco. I wish I had the same luck."

“You and Red not on good terms?”

“The irritating witch doesn’t know what she wants. I bet my entire vault that Red doesn’t love Potter anymore, for that she reacts a tad too intensely to me, yet she behaves like a bitch. As if she’s a tot
who lost her toy, or even better, as a woman who’s angry for not making the decision herself.”

“What is your plan-B, Blaise, we snakes are cunning and resourceful.” Draco leaned on his flexed arm, to face his friend.

A tanned hand scratched at stubble, it was time for new quality time with the cursed razor, he thought, ”Draco, should I follow her skirts like that? Is she worth it?”

“You tell me, Blaise. In my case, is Hermione worth it? Worth the fuss, the real effort to be a better man? Is she what I need to have a happy-ever-after? Yes, a real solid yes.”

“Red has an edge that I don’t find anywhere else? The spirit of a wildcat… I’m not thinking yet about the ring, the vows or the two point five kids...not like you. Yet, if I get the chance, I want to explore it.”

“Talk to Daphne, hear her out about where her Potter stands. I think that the Chosen One is more on our side nowadays then on Red’s, although, I suspect they haven’t crossed the line yet.” His hand rubbed his abdomen, while lost in thoughts. His mind replayed the memories from awhile back, and he had a satisfied look on his face again.

“Mate, have mercy. There are wizards here who hadn’t got laid in weeks, a bit more and you’ll be purring like a cat.”

"Sorry, Blaise, can't help it," Draco smirked.

“That good huh?”

"The best of my life." A pillow flew against Draco's head, and he threw it back, barking.

“Arse.”

“You still love me, Blaise.” He fended a new attack. “Go to sleep, brother. Tomorrow will be a new day of hard work.”
“And thinking that I had to convince you to come in the first place. I’m the godfather of your firstborn.”

“Promise, now, shut up.”

Hermione landed on her bed with a sigh of contentment. Their shagging had been mind-blowing, so much better than the fidgeting with Krum or the clumsy fumbling with Ron. It was actually the very first time she experienced an orgasm at the hands of someone, leave it be to share one most intimately. She hid her face in the pillow, contemplating that his sex-god title wasn't exaggerated.

If the occasion arose, she wouldn’t deny a new tryst between the sheets, or under the stars, for that matter. She was curious to know, how far she had to go before he would come undone. A previous attempt at a blow-job left her with a nasty taste in the mouth, but she wanted to discover how Draco would taste like, that little pre-cum drop wasn’t enough to savour.

“Psst, Granger. Are you awake?”

Hermione blushed, recognising Pansy’s voice. She whispered, “Yes.”

“Do you mind having a talk?”

"What can I do for you?" Hermione made room for Pansy to sit on her bed, while the other witch cast a muffliato.

"I wanted to ask you for some advice...wait a minute...did you and Draco shag?" Hermione turned beet red. "It's none of my business, witch, you have this glow over your face, one of a thoroughly satisfied woman...I don't beg on principle, but I'm breaking my rule. Don't hurt him, please. He's in a very vulnerable place, though he's making considerable progress since we arrived, and I suspect you're the reason why. It's just, he's my friend, he has had a crush on you since third year, don't even get me started about Yule-ball. I would hate to see him broken again." Her hand squeezed Hermione’s by now, emphasising her words. "But, back to my business. Your Ron…”

“You want to know how you make him see you?” Pansy nodded, “Well, feed him. Instead of
antagonising him - because it really doesn’t work, he doesn’t even see them coming - praise his good work. That is the recipe for Ron Weasley’s heart. And don’t call him Won-Won, Lavender’s death is a delicate issue."

“Food, praise and no Won-Won.” Pansy pursed her lips, “I can do that.” She hesitated for a minute, “Do you want advice on how make Draco crazy?” Hermione hummed, blushing, Pansy whispered close to her ears, forgetting the muffliato for a second, “Rub his you-know-what, between your breasts. He’s a tits man, girl, and use your tongue while at it.” Hermione’s eyes grew big, “Plus he’s very sensitive behind his balls.”

"That I've noticed it." Hermione bit her lip, embarrassed by her confession. "Pansy...Ron is…"

“Probably the opposite of Draco.” Hermione confirmed it. “Not anymore, after I take him under my wing.” Pansy sighed, “Forgive me for my bitchy behaviour in school. I only see now what a mistake I made.”

Lugu Day Twelve.

“Here, Ron. My peace offering.” Pansy sat a plate with buttered bread in front of the wizard, surprising everyone with the mood switch, compared to the night before. Ron didn’t waste much thinking about it, thanked the girl and attacked before the bread could be stolen. The majority were, however, waiting for the other shoe to drop, except Hermione, who gave a thumbs up to the witch.

Draco caught Hermione's eyes and signalled between Ron's plate and his, questioning. Stealthily, his answer was an extended tongue, followed by a slowly licking of a spoon before it disappeared into Hermione's mouth and show up again with hollowed cheeks. He gulped.

Harry cleared his throat, wondering what she was doing. Hermione shrugged with a half smile.

While the team focussed on raising the walls of their construction, Harry searched for Hermione, telling her unknown work partner, to go somewhere else.

“What was that at breakfast?” Harry came straight to the point. “Were you openly flirting with Malfoy?”
“I have no idea what you are talking about.”

“No shit Sherlock.” Harry side-eyed her. “It’s your heart, your life, your decision. He hurts one hair…”

“I guess you sound like a broken record, Harry.” She inclined her head.

“Hermione, what do you do when… I mean… Tell me what should I do with Ginny?”

Hermione paused what she was doing to give him the full attention, "What do you want, Harry? Do you want Ginny back?"

“Hell no!” Harry checked to see if someone was listening. “We are supposedly on time-out. But I want out, I don’t want to go back.” He shared a glance with Daphne, who worked on the opposite side of the house, “I haven’t done nothing indecent, didn’t cross the line yet, not even for a kiss…"

“But you want to give it a try with Daphne, like me with Draco?” Harry acknowledged, “Try to have a calm conversation with Ginny and tell her that you don’t want to get back together. It will be more decent closure than her finding out the truth God knows how.” She shifted from one foot to the other, “That might not be easy, though I suspect she has a failsafe without her knowledge.”

“Blaise.”

“Yes, it’s so obvious how he came in between fights every time.” Hermione kneaded on his shoulder. “The other option is don’t say anything and just go for it-”

"Not the way to wrap things up. I spoke with Ron too, and he gave me the same advice, decent closure first. He felt sad that things didn’t work out, he was looking forward to becoming a legal brother-in-law."

“We will always be brothers and sister to each other, Molly had adopted us from day one.” They both laughed, Hermione continued, “If you don’t want to do it alone, have Blaise in the neighbourhood. It will be much better than me.” The almost-catfight on the second day was not yet forgotten.
He kissed her on the top of the head. “I love you, Hermione.”

"I love me too, haha."

At the end of the day, the group contemplated their progress. The walls stood upright, just as the floor for the upper level and a second skeleton was rising up next to it. For some parts, they employed the use of magic to levitate more massive pieces up and hold them in place until they were secured. For tomorrow, the closing up of the room was scheduled, a task that Draco looked forward to partaking in, weirdly enough. Hermione stopped watching for the reason why.

She had just left the tent, fresh out of a shower and a new set of clothes when she was almost tackled to the ground. Looking up, she saw the beaming face of the toddler from a few days ago. She had run on in front of a smaller group of locals and their translator.

"The local villagers want to invite your group for a celebration." The English had a strong Taiwanese accent, the ‘R’s' weren't always what they should be. The eagerness of the girl's face melted Hermione's heart. "They want to thank you for all your efforts, by sharing their gathering, with food, drinks and music."

Tanya joined them, “The other tents are going, it would be nice if you lot joined us.”

Theo spoke for the group, with an arm around Luna’s shoulder, “We are coming, right guys?” Nothing but nodding heads. With a last squeeze at her legs, the little girl waved at Hermione and left with the group.

"We should dress up for a party!" All the women disappeared inside the tent, with a murmuring about the most significant issue in a woman's life, *What do we wear?*
Chapter Ten

As the girls didn't really know what to expect, they conjured what they wore into summer dresses which could be considered decent: not too much cleavage visible and proper above-the-knee length. The wizards chose to wear polos and slacks, both in light fabrics. They formed quite a sight to the outside world, hair nicely done and light makeup for the witches.

When they arrived on the scene, the whole group was pleased with their safe choice of garments, as their translator welcomed them to a late lunar celebration, also known as the Mid-Autumn festival.

Music played softly in the background and not, as the magical folks expected, in a loud and convivial setting. "Oh, bum, no dancing tonight." Tracey sighed in acceptance.

"No, Miss Tracey." Their translator, Kuan-Lin, elaborated, "Normally the Mid-Autumn Festival is celebrated the halfway through the eighth lunar month, mostly at the end of September, beginning of October. This year due to the earthquake, the elders kept the tradition alive with a small gathering and decided to have the bigger festivity postponed to a later period when their village had recovered from the damage. Thanks to your kind help, we are recovering faster than expected and the elders wanted to include you in the festivities." Waving a hand, he showed them the party setting.

"We will be decorating our personal lantern, eating mooncakes and enjoying a moonlit barbecue with local food specialities, and the elders will tell, the mythical stories about the moon in the traditional style. In Ancient China, the moon is considered important and is greatly worshipped."

Hermione asked, "Do they worship the Moon Goddess of Immortality?" The funny looks she received made her explain more, "What? I read a thing or two about Taiwan before heading here." The swot comments she heard, were dismissed with an eye roll and a smile.

"Indeed Miss Hermione, I'm certain one of the elders will tell this story tonight, it's a traditional one." In no time, the magical group flash backed to one of their Hogwarts classes with a beaming Hermione who gave the correct answer again; only the points allocation didn't come.

An older woman approached with a plate full of mooncakes, offering one to each, while Kuan-Lin explained further, "Mooncakes are round because they symbolise unity, reunion. My mother Chen wants you to take one and offer it to someone with whom you wish to reunite with."

As for symbolism between the Hogwarts group, it was a telling gesture, foremost between the
Gryffindors and the Slytherins. It became a way to apologise, express acceptance and move on, all gathered in one cake.

Draco offered his to Hermione, who returned the favour.

Chen motioned all of them to eat it; after a polite bow, they did as told.

Huan approached Hermione and Daphne who squealed with joy, "Huan!" Both women hugged the frail Asian woman, happy to see her healed. The woman grabbed both wrists, motioned to the rest of the group to follow, and headed to a broad set of tables, each place with a white lantern waiting to be decorated.

There were no more instructions needed, as they all started to work happily as little children to be painting and crafting without condescending looks from others. Everyone laughed and threw friendly jabs at each other, admiring each other's work of art.

"Draco did you...?"

"Hmm, do you like it, Grang-Hermione?" He glowed of pride at his drawn heart with D plus H in the middle. Theo wanted to share it with the class, but a stabbing finger in his side from his Luna prevented his big mouth from spilling the beans.

The majority of the lanterns were painted in their house colours, not so odd to those who knew them. Hermione's big red and gold one received, unexpectedly, a brush of silver over the whole width. "Draco!" As payback, the heart he drew received a makeover of red and gold over the green and silver. It seemed to have a striped effect, an almost Christmas-themed look.

Kuan-Lin invited them to join the circle and to sit on the ground, the chief elder in the middle patiently waiting until the silence settled to start telling his story. The translator interpreted between the pauses from the elder.

"Chang'e was the wife of our hero Hou Yi, who saved our people by shooting down nine of the ten suns which caused much destruction to our forefathers. An immortal, indebted by the heroic act, presented as a gift to Hou Yi, a vial with the elixir of Immortality. When Hou Yi's apprentice tried to steal the vial, Chang'e drank the elixir and flew into the sky, choosing the moon as her new home. Ever since, the distraught husband worships his wife by offering sacrifices, fruit and cakes to the moon."

A few tears were secretly dried.

"Never drink a potion without knowledge…" Blaise gave his best impersonation of Snape, to the general amusement of all.

"If someone comes home to steal a vial, love, let him have it," Draco whispered to Hermione, surprising the witch with his long-term plans for them. She wasn't yet thinking ahead that far.

A few more moon tales were shared, all of them with the general theme: worshipping the moon which symbolises immortality, family gathering and praying for a good harvest and fertility.

After the storytelling came the dances between the young men and women of the village and all the younger volunteers were dragged into it, under cheering from the older ones. Kuan-Lin explained, "It's also tradition for those who seek a life partner. They dance, the women throw a handkerchief at young men, the one who catches it has a great chance at romance."

Huan and Chen handed over cloth pieces to the witches, pointing to the dance floor. None of the
girls denied such a gift, but the wizards saw their competition raised as the local young men also tried their luck. The music was easy to follow with the guidance of some local young women, the throwing part undoubtedly funny to watch as the most of the Hogwarts blokes made sure none of the Taiwanese men walked away with their witches.

Draco looked menacing at a younger boy, who was about to snatch Hermione's handkerchief, "You're mine."

"I'm no one's possession, Draco." Hermione smiled, bowing with a hand at her chest, to the deception boy, who beamed at such honour. His smile didn't last long, unfortunately, with Draco's demonstration of a proper kiss. That he was the aim of a well-placed smack against the chest, didn't even faze him. Malfoy's don't allow peasants to walk away with their possessions, even if said item refused to be treated as such.

_In time she'll see it._

Further away, Daphne's cloth was hijacked at the last minute by Harry while Ginny's was caught thanks to a tackle from Blaise against a local boy.

At the end of the dance, only two Taiwanese boys managed to snake away the cloth pieces from under the wizards noses, much to their annoyance and to the amusement of the witch in question.

---

It darkened enough to light the lanterns and let them fly into the sky.

Gathering in pairs, an ocean of decorated lanterns rose into the night. Many a wizard held their witch, with an arm around their shoulders, against their body. It was indisputably a very romantic moment.

The vibe lasted until Kuan-Lin mentioned, "They symbolise fertility." Babies were, in the head of the majority, if not in their short-term future.

"Don't forget your anti-conception spell, blokes. Otherwise, you could name your firstborn after Chang'e!" The 'yikes' face was a general sight, right after Blaise's suggestion.

---

Ginny approached Harry slowly, "Does tonight mean that we aren't getting together anymore?"

"I'm sorry, Ginny. But, yes, there's no future for us as a couple." Harry hated this part, but he couldn't let the moment go lost, she sounded calm, and it had not escaped his attention how Blaise had caught her handkerchief, much to her amusement. "Yet, I have the idea you don't mind that much."

"No, I don't. Someone forced me to look further down the road." Blaise was laughing at something Luna said, while Theo held her by her waist. Further away, Pansy was providing Ron with some food, much to Ron's pleasure, who was falling for the witch, seemingly unaware.

"I wish you a good life, Ginny. I want you to be happy, but I'm not the man who can give you that happiness. I hope, somehow, that we can learn to get along." He also disliked the thought of missing the Burrow's Sunday brunches as part of the family. If Ginny didn't found a way to get along, he feared that it would come down to that.

"My mother would have my skin if I didn't. Maybe later, not right now, I need space to get my wits together."
Neville passed by, arm around Tracey's shoulder, hugging her tight. Harry smiled, "I guess this mission should have a second title: inter-house mixing. Almost all Gryffindors have found a love interest inside the house of Slytherin."

Ginny added with amazement, "Love, Harry?"

"The feelings are stronger than mere friendship for the most. For some," He looked at Hermione, who fed Draco, "It's the real thing. For me? Can't label it, but it's more than-"

"Have you kissed her, Harry?" The seemly calm question carried an underlying tone.

"No. I had to clear up things first, between you and me." The honest answer diffused the tension.

After a beautiful celebration, the return to the tent went in an entirely different mood than the departure, but everyone stalled at the entrance of their sleeping quarters.

On the one side, you had a few singles plus some pairs that weren't official yet, and preferred to keep the divided sleeping arrangement; across you had couples that didn't want to be separate anymore. A little negotiation followed, and they ended up having half of the tent keeping the arrangement as it was, while the other half underwent a change, creating double bedrooms for who wished them.

Among several new established couples, Neville and Tracey moved together, and so did Theo and Luna, plus Draco with Hermione.

One golden rule was enforced: multiple silencing charms had to be used for the sake of privacy.

While Draco moved Hermione's wardrobe and the other small furniture to their room, Hermione enlarged her reallocated bed to fit two people instead of one.

"I know I'm quite late to ask this but are you on a potion?" With all the fertility symbolism around, he was reminded of a forgotten anti-conception spell, last night. The lug of tension in his chest melted when she smiled. "Didn't you buy the condoms Harry suggested?"

"No, Blaise did." He chuckled, "Thought I knew I wasn't going to need them. Shagging wasn't on my list."

"That's quite arrogant, Draco, you planned from the start that if you were snogging with someone, it would be one of us?"

"No, that's not it, believe me. I didn't plan a shag at all, didn't even see this one coming, you are quite unexpected. Very welcome, yes, but totally not on the agenda at all."

"Charmer."

"Come here." His finger beckoned her, she complied. "You like this charmer, witch." He licked her lips, and she giggled. "Have you raised those silencing charms already?"

Hermione smiled cheekily, "No sound comes in, none gets out. I added a three-layered charm to the usual one."

"Know-it-all show-off."

Her finger rested on her lips, "How did you say it again? You like this show-off, ferret."
He caught her in a blur of movement and dumped her on the bed, caging her with his body. Her ear-to-ear smile was consumed by a heated mouth. Hands pulled frantically at clothes while peppering each other with kisses wherever possible.

Draco descended down her body, leaving a wet path behind wherever he stopped to kiss or lick her skin. Her tits received the most prominent attention, confirming Pansy's gossip. Nipping, kneading and tweaking, he divided this focus equally between both mounds. She became undone, needy of attention somewhere else, and he followed suit. With a gentle nudge, he spread her legs and feasted on her core as a hungry man. His tongue left trails of fire, licking her clit and entering her warm pussy.

Hermione jerked and jolted from pleasure, murmured inaudible words, alternating between grabbing his hair and pinching her nipples. Muffling her cry, she tensed utterly when the waves of pleasure washed over her, his fingers still thrusting in her hot quim to prolong the bliss. Holding his face with both hands, she pulled him towards her to kiss him passionately, licking all the remains of her juices on his lips.

"I want to try something." Hermione pushed against his shoulder until he laid down on his back, helping her take off his slacks. His member stood proudly in her face and was rewarded with a long lick, the tongue flat against his velvety skin.

Kneeling between his legs, she bent forward and pushed both tits together, trapping his dick between them. "Salazar's tits, it looks so hot, love." He shoved the tresses away that stood in his line of sight, leaning back on bent elbows for a better view. Her tongue licked at the head, every time his cock peeped up, tasting the beads of pre-cum at every turn. "Fuck, woman, again." Draco was mesmerised, watching her tits pump around his member. "Have you spoken with Pans?"

Her answer came out huskily, "I might have." She felt so feminine, driving him this crazy with her actions, and dazed, she changed her attack, engulfing his dick in the hot cavern of her mouth, as deep as she could. But it could go farther, and she breathed deeply in and out to relax the back of her throat and take him until the hilt.

"Fuck, Woman. Witch. Love. Stop…"

She purred, "No, I want to taste your cum. To see you come."

"Keep this up, and, fuck, you won't have to wait...fuck...much longer, oh Merlin's balls." His body flushed, head falling back but rising up again to watch her every move. He was a sight to behold, this Draco so undone.

His control snapped and holding her head in place, he fucked her mouth rising his hips up for each thrust. It surprised her, and she had to adjust to the onslaught, but Hermione let him, it aroused her intensely, this Adonis with his flexed abs and grey eyes drunk with need. He shattered after a few powerful pumps, growling low; his hot seed spurting into her mouth while she did her best to swallow it all. A few drops escaped through the corner of her mouth, and he pulled her up so he could lick it from her lips, tasting the combination of her own taste with his cum.

This was by far one of the hottest shags he had ever experienced, and he thanked her repeatedly with caresses, kisses and bites on her neck, face and earlobes, while he kept her bodyweight entirely over his, "You're incredible."

"You're not so bad yourself, Mr. Malfoy. I enjoyed the taste."

"For the record, it's fucking hot to see you swallow my cum, but I prefer to come inside your pussy."
His arms engulfed her tightly, his legs pinning her against his frame. "Give me a minute, so I can have my favourite part."

"You're up for round two?" Wiggling her hips around his half hard member, she rubbed her perky nipples against his chest hair, the friction arousing her once more.

"Don't underestimate me." His hand, which held one of her arse cheeks, moved to tease her from behind, the fingertip entering her quim, and pulling away. Her moans hardened his dick enough for him to replace his digits with his member, making her gasp. "Happy now?" He used his core strength to pump upwards until she rose to a straddling position and met him at every thrust. Her hums of pleasure aroused him even more.

His hands on her waist assisted her in keeping a fast pace, the patience for a long love-making session was completely gone at this point. Her soaking wet channel called for his rutting; her breasts jiggling up and down and asking to be bitten. He rose up to a sitting position, "Hand over your tits, woman." She held them up so he could suckle and bite each side equally, her head back in ecstasy. The explosion didn't wait for long. Who brought who over the edge, not relevant at that point, what mattered was how deep he rutted inside her, consumed by passion, blood roaring in his ears. She held him tight, the feel of him pulsing inside her walls, intoxicated her even more.

There were no words enough to describe the fireworks.

Exhausted, he fell on his back dragging her along, both breathless. His hands roamed over her back, caressing, holding her head in the crease of his neck, finding pleasure in the way her breath heated that spot on his throat.

Hermione slid sideways off him but kept her body inside his cradling arm. Her dazed smile was kissed away by his soft lips, before he rasped, "We'll be doing this more often, we've lost already too much time."

"My ferret."

"My love."
Chapter Eleven

By now, the whole team had raised three houses from scraps, a fourth and a fifth were in their infancy. Not only thanks to the hard work of every volunteer, but also thanks to the aid of every healthy pair of hands from the local village, who saw their hope and prayers become a reality. While the UK folk rose the walls, created ceilings and floors, and closed the roofs, the locals helped set up the plumbing and other needs according to their ways of life.

The daily cases of hurt fingers lowered at a visible rate, as hitting with a hammer improved. The splinters were not avoidable, neither was the occasional bruise - the arnica salve ran out but was luckily replaced by an Asian medicinal cream, courtesy of Chen's apothecary talent.

The majority ate with chopsticks, sharing many of their meals with the villagers - the tables set up from the festival were now used for this purpose; their food more the Asian style than good old fashioned British cooking. Neville and Ron never got the hang of those sticks, despite the many tries and failed attempts. Chen or Huan would have a fork and knife at hand especially for them, tired of seeing them fumble with the meal.

Something else they also grew used to was, being rained out without notice. Showers of rain followed by intense sunlight was a daily recurrence. The girls whined about their hair, the boys, however, enjoyed the sneak peak of bra outlines when the shirts became glued to the witches skin.

Some of those wizards applied the fast drying-spell technique, as the view of their girlfriend's body was considered a restricted area. Draco became a master, and Harry copied it, out of honour to keep Daphne's virtue intact.

On the other hand, some girls, like Pansy, would use their wet-shirt moment to show off their assets to certain wizards. Since she had employed the feed-Ron-project successfully, she added the make-Ron-blush feature to her plan of seducing the ginger-haired Gryffindor. And he sure did he blush alright.

To mess with his system, Blaise would come from behind and click his fingers right in front of Ron's eyes, "Snap out of it, your eyeballs almost fell out, mate." The already blushing bloke turned beet red, time and again.

They all had sun-kissed skin complexions, the more sunburned using the intensity to gloat with the paler tanned folks, particularly, inside the double bedrooms.

Nevertheless, between all the talks, the taunting and the laughter, the new found friendships solidified, regardless of their house or their blood status. Harry and Draco discovered how much they
had in common and their easy-going comradeship grew effortless. For Draco and Ron, on the other hand, it did not come so easily, though they got along better than before, both making efforts for Hermione's sake.

"Malfoy, could we have a word?" Ron stopped the passing wizard, on his way out of the men's room.

"Wha's up, Weasley?" Draco was shaking his hands dry.

"Pansy told me a few nights ago, that she never played games, like hide-and-seek and that sort of stuff."

Draco thought for a few seconds, "Yes, probably. Witches aren't allowed to play such childish games."

"Are you going to tell me that you never played them either?"

"Of course I did, Weasley. Don't be daft. Girls don't, it's not considered proper, but we do." He realised where Ron was getting at, "You want Pansy to play hide-and-seek?"

The Gryffindor shrugged, "Well…"

"I'll talk to Tanya, I guess we could use another time-out, we've been working non-stop the past week." Draco considered his next words, they obviously didn't come easy, "Maybe you're cool after all."

Ron jerked away, "Wha?"

"Never mind, I said nothing." Draco walked away, shaking his head. How did she do it? Thinking of Hermione.

Draco stood on a bench, whistling hard between two fingers, "May I have your attention." It was past six p.m., and they got off early, thanks to Tanya. "I suggest we let off some steam by playing a game."

Everyone broke in a burst of laughter, his words came out of nowhere.

"Whoever is too serious to have some fun, be my guest and stay behind. Otherwise, those who are interested, follow me." He guided the group, which in the end turned out to be the full body, towards a setting Kuan-Lin suggested as an interesting playfield. It was a temporarily abandoned temple and the perfect setting for his game. Hermione linked her hand with his and followed his steps. At the atrium, he laid out his plan. "It has been brought to my attention, that some of us never played a cool children's game called hide-and-seek." Automatically, they all thought of the argument between Ron and Pansy a week ago. "Shortly explained, one counts to ten, the rest hides the best they can." The smirks rose around him, "As we are quite an extensive group, it would be quite unfair to the seeker, to search for the hiding spot of nineteen people, so, I propose that we, the boys, give our girls the chance to hide. The winners get to choose the next activity, as this is my only idea, I'm out of suggestions." Not one soul said no.

Harry added his two-cents, "We count to ten very slowly right, Malfoy?" The blond agreed.

"Wait," Hermione didn't trust them for a second, "How can we be sure you won't peek?"

Pansy suggested, "Can you create a blindfold that disappears after the ten?" Hermione snapped her
fingers and readied her wand. Seconds later, the world blacked out for the wizards.

Draco shouted, "One." Like a rumble of thunder, the women spread around the temple, giggling in the wind. Many screams and the requests for help could be heard about where to find the best spot. Hermione gave a tip or two, especially to Pansy and Daphne to make it harder for the respective wizards, and took off in a sprint towards a tower on the opposite side of where Draco stood. In the distance, she heard ten being shouted and the boys taking-off.

Screams and laughter floated around, some girls already discovered behind a thin wall. Hermione rolled her eyes from where she stood. The first scream she recognised was Ginny's, who was literally being dragged to the centre by a wide smiling Blaise. I guess a good chaser doesn't know how to hide decently. Luna's singing laughter followed shortly after. For now, Hermione seemed to be safe. She spotted the blond hair in the opposite of her position a few times, brightening her spirit even more.

She broke into a laugh, watching Harry carry Daphne over his shoulder, while the witch hit on his arse in retaliation, 'Let me go!'. The tone, though, was of glee instead of fury.

Hermione was curious about Pansy's hideout, crossing her fingers for a hard search and the witch surprising Ron with a stolen kiss; it was time Pansy stepped up her game, thought Hermione. She heard footsteps approaching, but a quick look at the hallway calmed her panic. For now.

"Oh, Granger. I saw you looking." Draco's voice wasn't as far away, as first thought. "Are you jealous of Daph and would you like to be carried that way? Like a caveman."

She barely suppressed a giggle.

"Love, make it easier for both of us. I'm going to find you anyway." The next giggle was less contained, and she spotted him following the sound. "That's good, let me know where to find you, Hermione. I'll make a deal with you, I'll give you two choices for the next activity. Feed me in front of everyone." Her huff was detectable. He smirked, riling her up with his typical Malfoy banter, "Or you let me bind you to the bed and have my way with your delicious body."

In the meantime, she learned of a quick way out, and she took off, hearing him run right behind her. Her agility came in handy, avoiding an obstruction here or there, but she was no match for his strides and sooner than she hoped for, he caught her by her arm. "I win!"

Not giving her the room to escape, he threw her over his shoulder and walked out through a nearby exit. They were, apparently, the last couple missing, and under the loud cheers and boos, Draco made it to the centre, dropping his cargo not so gently. She threw him a deadly look.

All the wizards patted Draco on the back, congratulating him with the win for the male team. Draco searched for Pansy's face and was happy to see joy splattered on her features, despite her loss. This was what Ron was after, and he nodded towards the beaming wizard, who had, surprisingly enough, traces of lipstick on his lips.

"Hey, Malfoy, what's Hermione's fate?" This was now a genuine manly showing off act.

"I let her choose between two, to give her a sense of control." He barked, knowing too well he would pay dearly for his statement, later.

"All good and well, but what about you decide between you all, which activity, we girls, should do together. Not singular acts, but as a group of witches. Sounds fairer." Pansy was as cunning as a true Slytherin. "And only if we get to choose the next game on another day."
Blaise shrugged, "That sounds good to me." Only nodding faces around them. They formed a circle with a casted muffliato, and after a few back-and-forths, they decided that the witches should belly dance for them, dressed accordingly. Their decision was met by a simultaneously raise of eyebrows, but the girls accepted the challenge.

Back at the tent, one witch helped the other change their outfits into belly dancer's, complete with cropped tops, harem pants and many golden ornaments. A few men outside conjured the perfect setting with lights and music, plus comfortable seats for everyone.

Entirely in the mood, the girls stepped onto the platform and took a pose, waiting for the music to start. As the first notes filled the space, the witches gave their best possible performance at the Arabian dancing style, a few quite unhandy, but the majority with a surprising talent for it.

Hermione singled out Draco as the focus of her attention, her makeup heavy on the eyes. He was drooling over the sight she formed, shaking her arse right before his face, spinning around seductively, eyeing him over her shoulder, jigging her breasts at the beat of the music. Draco admitted she was a sight to behold, once more. When she dipped low, he gulped dry, shifting his legs to hide the bulge inside his shorts.

Theo taunted him, "Stop drooling, mate."

"Speak for yourself, Nott."

"This is a game we can't handle." Theo had to admit, with her blond hair, Luna looked like a goddess. Her dancing was less Arabian-style, but it mesmerised him, nonetheless.

"Theo, think about later, we have a fire to extinguish."

"Long live silencing spells."

"I'll drink to that, Theo."

"So will I," Harry confirmed. He regretted not having a double bedroom with Daphne, but maybe tonight exceptions could be made. It seemed to affect her as much as him, maybe luck was on his side.

Draco tackled Hermione onto the bed, pinning her under his weight. "I don't want you to shake your assets again in front of others, woman. Your tits and arse belong to me, and me alone."

"It wasn't my idea, Draco." That last one came out laughing, he tickled her. "It's your fault!"

"Doesn't matter. This delectable body is mine." Her answer was muted under a demanding kiss. His tickling attack paused just long enough for him to devour her mouth and returned soon after.

Later that night, he confessed to her to not to be the original mastermind of this playful evening. "Ron wanted to please Pansy."

"She needs to give him a little push, he's almost there." Her chin rested on his chest and rose with his intakes of breath. Her finger played, in the meantime, with the blond curly chest hair.

"I think she already has, he was drooling all over her during the dance."

"Like you were, right, my dragon?"
“Vixen, you played me.” He tickled her some more but drew her soon after tight against his frame. “You bring me joy, witch. I haven't laughed this much in a long time.”

"Pleased to be of service, now shut up. I'm tired." A quick peck on his lips, before she returned to her place inside his arms and closed her eyes.

She was soon fast asleep, never aware of his last words, "I love you."
Chapter Twelve

Lugu day twenty-two

"Oh, hell, it's *nurumia* again. Damn, do I miss a good kidney pie." Ron spooned some of his beef noodle soup, blatantly against his wishes. Some of the liquid dripped back onto the noodles as if they would magically become his favourite dish.

"Ron, darling, is Niu Rou Mian, now eat it like a nice boy." Pansy offered a full spoon containing a little of everything. Bringing it to his mouth, she waited patiently until his lips parted to feed him, hand under the spoon to catch any drips. "That's it, see...it doesn't hurt." She watched him chew and swallow before kissing him full on the lips.

Around them, everyone held their faces as straight as possible.

In a true Ron-manner, he devoured a second spoon, "I still miss my mom's kidneypie."

"Ron, don't speak with your mouth full." Pansy lectured him in the same way Hermione used to do, disgusted by his table manners. "Now, with an empty mouth, what did you say?"

"I still miss my mom's kidney pie." The third spoon went in.

"Ron, I miss your mom's cooking too," Harry confessed. "A good kidney pie…"

"Or a shepherd's pie." Blaise dreamed aloud.

"I can taste a good roast beef with Yorkshire pudding and gravy in my mouth…" Draco continued.

Tanya intervened, "And I miss a good full English breakfast with tomato, beans-"

Daphne took over, "Blood sausage, toast and a sunny side up."

"In the meantime, we eat broth soup with beef chunks and thick mie noodles." Hermione brought everyone back to reality. She admitted to missing British cooking, especially Molly's dishes, but she grew to appreciate good ramen with shrimp.

Tanya laughed, "Well, our mission here is coming to an end, within three days we'll fly back to England and satisfy our cravings for good old British cuisine."

The deadline wasn't met with cheers, surprisingly enough. Yes, the majority missed their homes, but the pride of the work they carried out here, compensated for the pinning. The thought of going back barely crossed their minds, if they were honest.

"Our NGO might return, to help this or another village evolve, but for now, our funds are running
out, and it's time for us to go back home, to our jobs and family." Tanya shared the sad feeling.

Draco murmured, "Some of us have no future to return to."

"Yes, you do." Hermione wasn't having any of this self-pity talk. "Or was I only a fling?" His denial was barely noticeable. He didn't want to leave, he didn't want to return to a place where once again, he would be judged. Here, he felt instead accepted and respected once again, not condemned for each and every crime. He often lied awake - while she slept - worried that he will end up losing her, once back in London.

Just in case, he memorised every detail of her face, how she looked like when he brought her over the edge, the sound of her voice, her carefree laughter, the feel of her arms around him.

Hermione inquired, "Will our mission receive any media coverage?"

Tanya confirmed, "Yes, the Daily Prophet has asked for an interview upon arrival. Our work here is not so insignificant, the press got wind of it, and people contribute easier to charities if they see their money be used well."

"Perfect."

"Why do you ask, Hermione?" It was Tanya's turn to be curious.

"You see, some of our friends stood in a bad light during the war, but I think they proved their worth here, earned their redemption. Our community should know about it."

"I agree with you, Hermione." Harry's statement didn't miss its effect. "Our community needs to move on, and it will do if they see how people do change for the better. Those who still continue to judge will do so unjustifiably."

"What he says." With a thumb pointed at Harry, Ron's statement was short but useful.

Neville, however, had one last question, "What's our task for the last three days?"

"The last house is almost ready, we have three others which are also almost finished being repaired. We wrap up all the little issues, that's our task. The last evening, the villagers are planning a goodbye feast."

"These people have so little to offer. They shouldn't waste more money on us." Theo remarked.

"In the scheme of things, we were drops in the ocean, but to them, we meant the ocean. With our medical assistance, rebuilding their homes, repairing others, and by simply offering a shoulder in support. We meant something to them, and they want to thank us for it." Tanya left no room for doubt. "We would offend them by denying them this feast, even if we did so with the best intentions."

Theo understood, "It's absolutely not my intention, Tanya, even if I will refrain from eating noodles in the next two weeks or so."

It was quiet outside, and Draco paced a few feet away from the tent, a thousand and one thoughts running through his mind.

"What's bothering you, Draco? Talk to me." Hermione embraced him from behind his back, face resting between his shoulder blades.
He rested his arms over hers, "How the world will be when we return. How I can keep you in my life, give you a future without people looking down on you for being with me, gossiping about how wrongly you chose."

"Why don't you wait with all your assumptions, until we're back? You can only fight demons if you know which you will face in battle. People will always talk, that's what they do. People will always be ready with their unrequested opinion, no matter what. This time, you can shove their preconceptions where the sun never shines, because of what you did here. You've earned our respect, you've shown us your true self. And I couldn't feel more proud of you."

Her last words stilled him for a moment, "You are proud of me?"

"The little girl we saved from the falling facade, Yi-Hsuan, what do you do every time she comes to say hello?" Hermione gazed at him, finger poking in his chest.

"I hug her, swing her in the air, make her laugh." He tried to evade her lecture.

"Who has learned a few Taiwanese words to thank someone, say please or simply wish a good day?" No way could he escape her intense look, her finger poking non-stop.

"They don't understand English." His arms in the air, apologetically.

"Do you know how many of us made an effort, Draco?" He rolled his eyes at her, wishing she would just make her point. He still couldn't believe his ears, she's proud of him. "No, Draco? You, me and Harry, who wants to impress Daphne."

He dismissed her, "So what? I know three or four words in Taiwanese, I'm gentle with a little girl…"

"And you work hard, never turn down a task, and you only stop when everyone stops, you don't try to make it easier for yourself, and, you haven't complained once, not about the food, nor our simple accommodation arrangements. So different from the git I used to know back at Hogwarts."

"I discovered I enjoy Chinese cooking, big deal. My sleeping arrangements have improved since you joined my bed, and I don't want to stop, knowing there's still work to be finished that day. Plus, hard work has benefits for my physical appearance, don't you deny drooling over my lightly tanned skin and defined muscles."

"I was wrong, you're still a git…" When will he stop pushing my buttons? "If you think this dark, I feel sad, it makes me think that you don't want to explore what we have, once we leave this place-"

"That's absolutely not true, Hermione. Don't say things like that. I fear it's you who'll walk away." His head shook in denial, how can she think something like this?

"Why would I walk away, Draco?" She closed her eyes, closing the distance between her face and his, and kissed him slowly, feather light. "I." A new kiss, "Love" Again a touch against his lips, "You."

Draco pressed her so tight against his body, not even air could come between, kissing her desperately. This meant something, finally. It wasn't a few careless words after a snogging hidden in an alcove. This time, he said it with all his heart, "I love you, Hermione."

That night, he made love to her intensely. He worshipped every corner of her body, tenderly. He used long strides, to savour the feel of her body when his member entered her core. His lips kissed wherever he could reach and repeated those three words in her ears time and again. When she straddled him, he drank her beauty, caressing her nipples and kneading her mounds just the way he
knew she loved the most. He held back until her walls squeezed him because he taunted her clit, guided by her moans. His own release blinded him with passion and emotions, her mouth drowning his groan with a fulfilled purr. She owned him, and with her at his side, he could take over the world.

It was stupid to think differently. She was, after all, the steady rock in his troubled ocean.

"Why is Draco so troubled? I don't understand, he sparks when Hermione is around." Luna saw the couple enter the tent, safely surrounded by Theo's embrace.

"Because my best friend fears the outside world." The words were whispered in her ear, after kissing it gently. Her dreamy way of looking at the world brightened his own, even if sometimes he didn't understand what she said. Especially when it involved magical creatures he had never heard of.

"Why fear? He's a good man, he makes me laugh when he plays with that toddler who visits us so much." Luna kissed a fingertip at the time, unaware of the effect it had on her wizard. "What he did in the past was clouded by misjudgement, probably Nargles working along with some Crumple-Horned Snorkacks."

The effect of her words had an ice cold consequence on his mood, the word snorkack had a negative connotation. "We all were, sweetheart. I think foremost, he fears that Hermione won't stay with him."

"He should fear nothing, Hermione's spirit brightens up too if he's close to her. She doesn't allow the Gulping Plimpies to cloud her mind. They are made for each other." She turned inside his embrace, tapping on his nose. "Hermione loves, and, Draco is the focus of her heart." Luna inclined her head, face hidden behind blond rebel curls. "Are you afraid I, too, will leave you?"

"I have thought about it once or twice."

"Silly Theo, you're the sun to my blue sky." She looked up at the sky, "My Plimpies know they are fighting for a lost cause, how can I let my hero go?"

He knew bollocks about Pimplies or Snorkocks, or even the famous Nargles. But when she spoke to him with those radiant eyes and her dreamy voice, he would give her the world and then some more. His Luna made him looney, he knew that much. "Your hero?"

"Yes, my beautiful…" stroke over his dark hair, "strong…" pat on his pectorals, now more defined than before, thanks to the hard work, "gentle soul." she finished with a tap on his nose. He caught her mouth with a smile, laying his feelings for her into one soft kiss. "Even if I have to save your foot from a naughty rock."

He barked, "Woman, I'm lost without you." Theo laced his fingers through hers, guiding her back to their room. A finger kept her mouth shut until he raised the necessary silencing charms, but she wiggled herself free and launched an attack on his groin while he did his best not to stutter his words. A difficult task, so it seemed.
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Notes

My Magzillasaurus was wonderful in her beta-job. Enjoy!

Chapter Thirteen

The last three days in Taiwan flew by rapidly. The previous day, the villagers treated the whole group to a fantastic celebration, expressing their gratitude with every gesture. The language was still a point of struggle, but where there's a will, there's a way, and the intention received its appreciation in return.

Many of the wounded were now healed or almost cured, the majority smiled instead of looking sad, bowing, hands joined together, inviting the British volunteers to enjoy the food they've prepared with care.

The table was full of different types of noodles, dim sum and rolls, reminding the alumni from Hogwarts of their own feasts at the Great Hall. The local women hovering over the eating guests, making sure every dish remained to replenish in a display of traditional Taiwanese hospitality.

The honey-sweet desserts followed, with sticky fingers as a result - some of them were licked by a partner shamelessly, much to the chagrin of the singles; they viewed it as pure foreplay. The giggles confirmed the doubts if such still remained.

The older local women taught the British girls some traditional dances, often focusing on the seductive ones, the telling glint in the older women's eye not to be misunderstood. It felt weird to a few, how some women like Chen and Huan managed to follow the young adults' path from a single into in a relationship, the language issue a non-issue at all, so it seemed.

The way Huan gave the thumbs up to Hermione, congratulating her on her catch - meaning Draco, was funny and slightly embarrassing. It made Hermione wonder if her face was such an open book. The most awkward moment was when Huan approached, while Draco embraced Hermione warmly, grabbed their wrists with vigour, and she praised their union - while she spoke a train of words in Taiwanese- resting, at a certain point, a hand on Hermione's belly as if saying they would have lovely babies.

Draco grinned wide, Hermione panicked.

"Does the idea of having my baby scare you, love?" Her reaction to Huan's gesture stabbed in his heart, awakening again the terrifying feeling of losing her.

"Not of having your baby, Draco. More about the timing. I'm not ready yet to have babies and don't even think I'll be a housewife. I want to settle down first, and I want to have a job, Draco."

His hands crossed behind her back, keeping her tight against him. The lump in his belly melted at her every word, "Take over the Ministry, for all I care. Conquer our world and change our old-fashioned ways, I'll be right behind you at every step, supporting you. I offer to be your under-secretary."
"Under-secretary? Hmm. I see you more as a Potions Master, it was your favourite class at Hogwarts, or am I mistaken?" Her adoration for him was out there for everyone to see. When a shadow clouded his eyes, she stabbed her finger in his shoulder. "Don't you dare to think you can't aim for it, Draco. Stop being so dark all the time, prove your worth to others like you did with me. You are capable of great things if you believe in yourself. I. Believe. In. You." She poked him at every word.

"I think I'm dreaming in my bed, inside my bedroom at the Manor and this is all surreal. Hermione Granger believes me in. What's next, Potter admitting he's my friend?"

Hermione held up her finger in front of his face, pulled him behind her to where Harry was talking to Daphne, "Harry, do you consider Draco your friend?"

The wizard blinked, not expecting the question, "Oh, Hermione, where's the fire? Yes, the Draco that I know here is a friend of mine. The git back home, never in a million years." It earned him a dark-haired head on his shoulder, beaming at him for his kind words. Still lost at the path this conversation led to, he smiled giddily. Daphne displayed her affection differently than Ginny, it was there without being pushy.

Hermione gave her best 'See, I was right?' face to Draco. "Which Draco are you now, my dragon? The git or the friend? I bet you're the Chinese Fireball, fierce and passionate in bed." He stared back at her speechless.

"Hermione," Harry scrunched his face, "Too much information for my head, I don't need the graphics in my mind, and right now, your boyfriend promises nothing good. Stop the visible foreplay will you? Auch!" Daphne's smack hurt on his shoulder. "Daphne, not all of us wizards have the luck he has…"

Daphne's hands flew to her hips, "Oh no?"

"He's been sleeping with her for days now, Phie. I only fantasise about it."

"Potter, do you fantasise about sleeping with my witch?" A blond eyebrow hid under the fringe.

"Wha?" Panicked he tried to disarm the bomb, "No! No! I don't mean your girl, I meant mine. My Phie." Draco looked smug just as much like Daphne did.

"Harry, too much information for my sensitive heart." Revenge was as a dish best served cold.

"How do you see us when we return home?" Pansy worried as much as Draco, but she was more fearful of Molly's reaction.

Ron shrugged, mouth still chewing on his third Fengli Su pineapple cake, "We date?"

"Your mum?"

"My mum will accept you like she adopted those two into the family." Chin pointing at Hermione and Harry. He caught some falling crumbs just in time, shoving them back into his mouth. The cake was too good to let go to waste.

Pansy shook her head at his table manners, rolling her eyes. There was still work to do. "Our families didn't get along, my parents treated yours as blood-traitors."

"I know." He chewed with open mouth, but her disgusted glare made him close it. "But my mum,"
new bite, "will not blame you for your folks' mistakes." He took his time to empty his mouth but a huff forced him to wait for a new piece until he finished his reasoning. "I know she'll accept him too. Even my dad will be no different. His issues were with Lucius, not Draco."

"And they called you the blood-traitors, the inferiors. I guess the Sacred Twenty-eight minus one has much to learn." She waved him her okay, so he could finally set his teeth on the last piece of cake. With his mouth full of cake, Ron smiled widely at her, and she sighed. He needed so much grooming.

Lugu day twenty-five

It was an early morning rise, everyone packing their belongings back in their luggage, wondering again how Hermione managed to take so much in such a little bag. Draco was delighted to feel his own baggage a few pounds lighter after she applied the same featherlight charm on his pack as well.

To their surprise, the villagers had one last treat ready. A traditional Taiwanese breakfast, with eggs, dough sticks, egg-stuffed wheat cakes and several other specialities, all of them warmly served and quite the opposite of their dry slice of bread with jelly or butter and boring coffee. It was more salty than sweet, not that anyone cared. It had been ages since they ate an omelette, and Merlin did it taste divine.

Draco and Hermione chose each different items, sharing them with each other to taste a little of everything. It came down to Draco stealing the rest if what she had on her plate was more to his liking than his own choices. What was really on the bottom of his favourites list, was dropped on her plate unceremoniously.

When he tried to steal her favourite from her - she had saved it on a corner of her plate, she slapped his hand away. "Not this one."

"But you love me, Love." He pleaded with puppy eyes.

"At the moment, not so much." Smug smiles all around them. Her hand was on its way with the last bite, when he snatched it and ate the rest, biting in her fingers. "Malfoy, this means war." It was his turn to give her his smirk. Her answer was the cold shoulder holding a promise.

Goodbyes were said.

Hugs tightly reciprocated.

Tears wiped away, especially when a little Yi-Hsuan wrapped her short arms around Draco and refused to let him go. Khuan-Lin translated her litany, "She's telling you, Mister Draco, that she'll come and find you when she's a grown-up to marry you."

He laughed with a constricted throat, "If my Hermione doesn't mind, I agree." Kneeling at her height, he picked her up to hug her properly.

Khuan-Lin relayed Draco's answer and the big toddler eyes assessed Hermione, "Okay." She could say that much already in English, adding a thumbs-up to the witch. Hermione kissed the top of her hair, totally unaware of the sight they formed together.

Something their closest friends did notice before they hid their smiles to avoid being caught.
The farewell lasted longer than expected and forced the Jeeps to punch gas so they would make it on time to the airport. Needless to say that Hermione, again, mentioned preferring a flight with a broomstick than another safari.

This time she didn't have to help them through check-in, things ran smoothly by themselves. The flashing of the passports still happened, the ground crew frowning at the strange display. Some doubted the common sense of a few passengers.

"We're sitting together again." Hermione compared the boarding passes, relieved to have a seat before the wing, on the side. Draco sat again at the window, but she would steal it once more, he doesn't know it anyway. He rubbed her leg, as they shared a chair, her sitting on his lap. Their cuddling wasn't unique, almost all couples used their last minutes on the ground for some final snogging, before entering the metal bird. The not-so-comfortable seats still fresh memories.

They followed the herd entering the aeroplane, searching for their designated places. Draco went upfront and found it quickly. "It's here, love. My seat is the A, yours B." She sneaked under his arms and demanded the window seat.

"Hermione, according to this image here, the window seat is the A-chair. That's my ticket." She hummed, radiating wickedness. "Are you're sitting in my place?"

Her nod joined her blissful look, "Maybe. Finders keepers, losers…"

"Weepers, funny, love. Very funny. Wait a minute, on the first flight I had the A-seat too, right?" She looked angelic. Draco feigned offence. "You stole my seat, Granger?" Pouted lips and batting eyelashes stared back, shrugging her shoulders. To avoid being taken away from her place, she secured the belt tightly. "You're lucky that you're my lady, nowadays. The swot, on the other ha-"

"Mr., is there a problem?" The stewardess spoke behind him, surprising him.

"My girlfriend stole my window seat."

The blond woman in her tidy uniform, gave him a professional smile, "I understand. She's lucky you're such a gentleman to let her get away with it. Can I now ask you to take your place and secure the seat belt? We are almost ready for take-off." Hermione smirked unashamedly.

"I demand payment for this sacrifice, love." Both faces blushed, however. The promises held satisfaction for the two of them when they found themselves alone in a bedroom.

Harry faced them between the two seats in front of theirs. "Draco, you let yourself be fooled again. The view from the window is amazing, above the clouds you know." He chuckled, "I'm trading places halfway the flight, to allow my Phie to enjoy the sight as well."

Hermione smiled smugly, "I'm not." Daphne winked back.

They flew home on a red-eye flight, and after dinner and a movie from the in-flight entertainment - he let her choose Pretty Woman. Draco understood now where her comment about counting fork teeth came from; his laugh drawing the attention of nearby passengers when Julia Roberts loses one of the snails - Hermione fell asleep safely inside Draco's arms, the sound of his heartbeat mixed with the roaring of the engine enough to lull her away.

Closer to home, the crew woke everyone up to offer a breakfast service and allow everyone to get ready for landing, an hour and a half later. Hermione used the lavatory for their human needs and returned to find Draco in her place. "Well? This is not your chair."
Draco spoke to Harry, who followed the exchange, "How did she say again? Finders keepers?"

"You're messing with Hermione, she has a temper, I'm just saying, friend."

"The issue will be dealt with within a private setting, Harry. Daphne, teach him how to behave." The witches shared a knowing look.

Hermione didn't mind in the end, trading places with him. His giddy look watching the plane touchdown on the runway was more than worth it. The grey in his eyes shining like stars, a look she remembered seeing when Harry flew, whether it was during a Quidditch game or a practice, the look of thrill. Maybe, when they were settled, she might seduce him into travelling abroad, to America or why not revisit their new friends in Taiwan and let him have the window.

London day twenty-six

Walking through customs and retrieving their luggage was easy. The question burning on his lips was the hardest. He gathered enough courage to ask it. "Where are you going now, Hermione?"

"Going home, I live again at my parents' house, in Muggle London." She stole a leaflet from a counter, grabbing a pen from her bag, and wrote. "Here, this is my home address, and this is the nearby apparition point. Take two lefts upon arrival, and you're in my street." For a second she saw his mask dissolve. "Hey, Draco." Her hand brought his face to her eye height. "Go visit your mother, I'm sure she missed you. Come and find me when you want."

"Are we still good?"

"I'll miss sleeping with you, I grew used to your presence."

"What if..."

"Will you feel better?" He nodded, frantically. "See your mother first, and come to spend the night with me." Her hand caressed his cheek softly, he seemed, suddenly, so much younger.

A new set of goodbyes followed, parting from a group of people who had become close friends wasn't easy either.

Between the Hogwarts group, promises were made to get together very soon, enjoy a good butterbeer or firewhiskey to remember their adventure. The couples postponed their departure the longest. Getting together was not in their plan, so they had no clue how to proceed. It seemed the owl traffic was going to increase severely in the aftermath.

"Hello, Mother."

"Draco, my dear." Narcissa approached him, arms open wide, "Look at you, tanned, shaggy hair, and your stubble hasn't seen a razor blade in a few days." She threw all the Pureblood customs overboard, by hugging her son warmly. "Tell me all about your mission. How did it go?"

He smiled tired, "Mother, we need to talk."
"Mother, we need to talk."

Narcissa felt anxious, imagining what the hell might have happened for her son to speak so seriously. "Okay, I'm listening."

"Let me ask you first, how have you been while I was gone?" He figured out he could start with some pleasantries, first.

"Astoria came to visit me every other day, as so did Mrs. Parkinson who complained about Pansy's decision to join such a mundane activity."

Draco snorted, "Wait until she hears the news." He told further, under his mother scrutinising look, "She's dating Ron."

"Ron?"

"Ron Weasley, Hermione's friend."

"Hermione, eh?"

Draco blushed, nothing escaped his mother scrutinising look, "Yes, mother, Hermione."

"I don't want to leave anything open for misunderstanding. You are talking about the blood-traitor family Weasley and the mudblood Granger?"

"Mother I would prefer if you didn't speak this way about the woman I tend to marry." Narcissa's eyes widened in shock, Draco couldn't discern if it was a good or a bad sign. He drew in a long breath, "Much has happened during our mission. We saved people from under debris after an aftershock, we rebuilt at least six houses from scratch, repaired a few more, helped restore water and power to the villagers." She listened intently, nodding at every point, waiting for the important part. She noticed his nerves, by the way his hand raked through his hair and his restless demeanour. "Harry and his gang, they forwent their judgments and gave us an honest chance to prove our worth."

"Just like that?" He was hiding something, she felt it in her bones.

"Hmm, we might have intervened a few times to calm down the heat. Weaslette and Harry were in a bad place, and the witch is quite temperamental, I wonder if Blaise will be able to tame her spirit." He rambled on, unaware of how much he shared about his friends.
"Yes, her name is Ginevra, yet they all call her Ginny. Hermione will have my skin if I keep calling the witch Weaslette." His mother was trying really hard not to smile. "Well, as I was saying, Potter and his ex, had issues and we intervened. Then I saved Hermione from a falling façade." Her gleeful look changed into a wary one. "Don't worry, not a scratch, just a serious scare. My girl has a problem with assessing danger properly." Narcissa's nerves eased, and the gleeful look returned, *his girl.* "To cut it short, I did a few things that she appreciated, we got to talking, got to know each other better, I discovered how much she actually intrigues me. I love Pansy, mother, but Hermione can keep up with me, or me with her, in a way Pansy never could."

"Did you get romantically involved with the witch?" Narcissa knew the answer, it was displayed on his face, but she wanted to hear him acknowledge it.

He bowed his head, "Yes, mother, I have. I love her. She's my anchor, and she has more confidence in me than I have about myself."

Narcissa switched seats, sandwiching his hand between hers, "Son. A woman who loves will always be the strong rock in her man's life. If she makes you this happy, then who am I to destroy your chance at a good life? If there's something I learned during the war, it's that she bleeds red like I do, we all saw it happen in that Merlin's forsaken day. There's nothing filthy about her origin, son. It's us who need to change, not them." He hid inside her embrace, worries running like water down his spine. "Will you introduce her to me, properly? I hope she's willing to accept the Manor as a location, I can go nowhere else."

"I'll ask her, tonight."

"Tonight?"

"I'm not staying, Mother. I hope you understand, I miss her too much already." He gulped dryly. "When will I see you again?" She just had him back.

"I'll stop by tomorrow, I promise." Draco expected more fuss, before his confession and was pleased with his mother's acceptance.

"Now tell me, are you two the only new couple? No? Who, then?"

"I told you already about Blaise and *Ginny,* then you have Pansy and Ron, Tracey is dating Neville-"

"Longbottom?"

"Yes, mother, Tracey and Neville Longbottom are dating, they are adorable together, just like Theo is with Luna." He anticipated her question, "Lovegood. Hmm, who else? Oh yes, Harry and Daphne, he calls her *Phie.*" Draco chuckled, "And if I'm not mistaken, Hanna with Anthony Goldenstein."

Those last two didn't say much to her, "Son, I would love to be a beetle on the wall to see Parkinson and Greengrass react to the new unions." They shared a peal of laughter. Their words weren't cold, before the Floo roared from a caller.

Pansy. "Draco, could I stay with you and your mother?" Tears ran through her cheeks, her voice shaky.
"What happened, Pans?"

"My mother is forcing me to choose between the family or Ron. I don't want to live anymore under their control, I'm boss over my own life now."

Narcissa made the decision for him, "You are always welcome in our house." Minutes later, the witch arrived with a bag in her hand. The necessary instructions were given to the house-elves to prepare a room for the newest guest. "I believe emotions might run high, they've missed you and are not ready for such a radical change. They'll see reason, I'm certain."

"You told your mother about Hermione?"

"I have."

Narcissa smiled gently, "My son is the most important person in my life, dear Pansy. If Hermione makes him happy, then she'll be part of the family."

"Draco, you do understand you're a lucky bastard?"

Narcissa frowned at the vulgarity, Draco, however, smiled. "I do, and I was on my way to her."

Pansy kissed him loudly on the cheek, "Give her my regards." He disapparated after a wave to both women.

Two lefts she said.

He followed her instructions, but was forced to ask for directions from a passing-by Muggle, finding the house number afterwards easily, it was the third house on the row. A typical British house style, two-story home with a little garden in the front, big windows. Cute.

He knocked on her front door a few times before she opened it. "Why didn't you use the bell, Draco?"

Draco frowned, "The bell?" Her finger pointed at the button on the wall. "Ah, oh." She demonstrated its the ringing sound. "Hmm, handy." He shook his head, she rolled her eyes.

A ball of fur came to meet him, "Crookshanks play nice, dear." The kneazle assessed his competition, hissed first and caved in, begging the blond for cuddles by rubbing around his legs, purring loudly. "He has decided to make you his too, Draco. There's no going back now."

He picked up the cat as soon as his hands were free of his bag. "As if." He brought the familiar to eye height, he had to admit, Harry was right. It was an ugly cat.

"Are you going to stay in the hallway?" A curly head peeped through a door, and he followed, amused.

"Pans is staying over at the Manor." He chose the best chair to watch her cook the Muggle way, the aroma's reminding him it was almost time to eat. The way she cut the leek, looked to him as if she cutting a dandelion root for some potion, precise and evenly portioned.

His comment paused her moves, "Something happened?"

"I think the Parkinsons weren't so positive about the news as my mother was." She looked now even more surprised, "I've told my mother about you, and she wants to meet you." Hermione eyed him cautiously. "Don't worry, she was very adamant about accepting you into the family, I guess I
couldn't hide my feelings for you from her."

Hermione bobbed slowly up and down, "And?"

"The only problem is, my mother is on house arrest for a few more months. There's no other option than to visit her at the Manor." He kept a close eye on her features, knowing her justified fear. "We can have a tea in the gardens, my mother's biggest treasure. She's proud of her roses." He approached her from behind, holding her back against his chest tightly before turning her around and easing the wrinkles on her face. "I know that my home has not been a very welcoming place to you, it caused you so much pain. If I could, I would shield you from it, but my mother-"

"I know, Draco. I'm aware that dating you will bring the Manor at some point or another, there's no real escape from it. Plus," she repeated his gesture of shoving a few rebel hairs away from his forehead, "your mother means the world to you, I don't have mine anymore, how can I deny you yours?" She breathed in her courage, seeking comfort in the crease of his neck. "Be my rock, help me face my demons, and I can do it."

He squeezed her against his body, "Always." He kissed her languidly. "Can you pause the meal?"

"Why? Yes, I can."

She turned off the heat and followed his lead, while he searched for the bedroom. Tired of opening the wrong door, he grunted, "Where's your bedroom?" Hermione traded places with him and now it was her who led him up the second floor. Halfway down the hall his patience caved in, hoisting her up against a wall. He possessed her mouth, thrusting against her core, proud of the moans he elicited from her. "Which door?" It came out huskily, releasing her mouth long enough to express the words.

Her hands pulled him away long enough to answer, "Second door on the right." her legs squeezing around his waist in time with each rut from his hips. Growling, he carried her all the way, to the right room, biting and licking her neck while an eye kept track of his path. "Fuck, a bed."

She chuckled against his neck, "Yes, decent mattress." Her teeth pulled at his earlobe, and he shivered. "Real cushions." Her lips focussed on his bottom lip, sucking it into her warm mouth and letting go of it with a plop. "And no silencing charms needed."

He dumped her on the bed, less gently than she expected but Hermione was treated to the sight of a stripping Draco, admiring the glow of the sun on his abs and pecs, which he flexed with a wink. He straightened up after undoing his shoes and socks, and she claimed his cock in a swift move, fondling his balls with one hand, while the other followed the wet path of her mouth, pumping in synch with her lips.

Draco thrust his hips, fucking her mouth, a hand holding the bunch of hair out of his line of sight. He fought to keep his eyes open at the delicious view, lips slightly trailing behind she pulled back, taking him deeper each time. It was too intense, and he pulled her away, claiming her mouth while his hands held her under the legs to pull her deeper into the bed.

Making quick work of her clothes, he spread her legs wide to feast on her dripping core, lapping all her juices and using his tongue to circle with pressure her clit. Hermione bucked her hips, exhalting loudly, hands flying to her nipples to pinch them. He knew what he did, what she loved the most, how he could make her squirm with pleasure. He brought her in no time to a peak, seizing the moment of her walls squeezing to enter her pussy and ride her orgasm out with her.

"That's it...love...take my cock...oh, fuck…" Riding out the last waves, he pounded mercilessly into her, raising a leg to change the angle just enough to hit her in the perfect spot, while his eyes watched
his member pull back and sink right in, glimmering from her juices. She gave her all, head back, nails raking through his skin.

Switching swiftly from place, he assisted her movements while she rode his dick, burying his shaft into her with abandon. His hands kneaded the jiggling mounds, pulling her nipples the way she taught him, her moans affirming how close she was to a new explosion. He fought with all his restraint against his own release, but it turned out impossible to resist.

She slammed her ass hard against him so he could penetrate her the deepest, and he lost it all. Hermione felt him shiver and pulse inside her, pushing her right over the edge.

Lips, teeth and tongue clashed in a searing kiss, her hands demanding that he knead her tits harder, while her hips jerked against his groin.

It took them a while to land from their bliss, her weight pressing him deeper into her bed; he refused to let her go, despite a few attempts. His arms wrapped around her body, holding her tightly against his chest, the closest he could to his heart.

A shower later - which included a heated shag against the wall; a first for her, Ron wasn't so adventurous - and they were both back in the kitchen, while he helped her finish their meal, as much as he could.

His witch knew how to cook, and he devoured the mushroom and leek chicken breasts that she had created, licking the creamy gravy away with a chunk of bread.

The dirty dishes were divided between the two, she washed, and he dried, while he suggested having a house-elf help her with the cleaning. "I'm not saying to let him or her cook for you, Love. I know, and if you insist, free the elf, give him nice clothes and a wage. But these creatures love to serve, it's in their nature and by denying them this freedom, you hurt them."

His shirt was soaked by now, after the mean splash in retaliation. His first suggestion caused a physical reaction. "You cook, he cleans. Don't you see the advantage here?"

Hermione didn't like to clean, so his idea resonated in her mind. "I get to pay the elf and allow him to clean only?"

"And do the laundry, perhaps? So you can concentrate on other tasks? Like deciding which job you would like? Or giving me a nice blo-"

"Don't finish that!" Her face flushed under his suggestive wiggle of eyebrows. Breathing deeply in, she reconsidered, "Where do you find such an elf?"

"I can ask one of my mother's if they know of one who is looking for a job." He didn't tell her that he was going to ask his house-elf Tibby to relocate. Maybe he could come to terms with his elf about getting paid. But that was a thing he would assess later, now he had other matters to tackle.

"Will you ask your mother when she wants to meet? The sooner I have it behind me, the better." Returning to the Manor swirled around her thoughts, it was more the house itself than the issue of meeting his mother, that worried her.

"You can come tomorrow with me, make it less formal." Her nervous nod agreed with his suggestion.
Chapter Fifteen

"Hermione, can you please release some of the pressure, some of my fingers are going numb, love."
Hermione held onto his hand so tightly that her knuckles turned white and his fingers paler than usual.

"Sorry, Draco." She let go, a fraction of an inch.

He spent half the night figuring out how to bring her home: by using the long driveway from their gate, or directly into the house? Each possibility had its pros and cons, if he was honest. Walking down the path gave her the outside view, which was magnificent, the Manor was impressive; on the other hand, it could increase her anxiety and desire to run away at all. Apparating inside the house would be a cold shower, the quick pain, but possibly the most frightening of all, the drawing room was one of the centre places of the whole Manor.

Instead of deciding for her, he consulted with her, and she surprised him, by choosing the quickest: side apparition - the blood wards of the Manor might not allow her entry the first time. An issue he would be adjusting ASAP.

Now, they stood in the hallway, Draco wincing from the discomfort, and Hermione shaking like a leaf. "Mother!"

"In the gardens, Draco!" He took the longer path to reach his mother, avoiding the chamber of doom, fearing, foremost, loss of his hand completely, by lack of blood. Narcissa rose to meet him halfway, pleased that he didn't back down on his promise from yesterday. She stopped in her tracks, examining the witch following her son.

"Mother, meet my Hermione Granger. I don't think you have been properly introduced."

"No, we haven't son. Miss Granger, welcome to my home." She bowed slightly, following the etiquette. "Allow me first to apologise for the bad experience you endured inside these walls at the hands of my sister. I wish circumstances had been different and I could have done something to help you."

"As I said to Draco, Mrs. Malfoy, I don't blame you for what happened. Those who are to blame don't live any longer, and we move on." The nerves subsided, just a little bit.

"Please, call me Narcissa, or Cissa. Come and join me for tea, I believe Pansy will be down in a minute." Narcissa motioned to a set of cushioned seats while instructing an elf to bring drinks and some biscuits.

"Look who the cat dragged in. Hermione, it's nice to see you again so soon." Pansy entered the patio as if she owned the place. Hermione saw through the mask, despite the efforts to hide it. Both
witches kissed warmly.

"Have you talked to your mother again, Pans?" Draco poured some tea into the cups, asking Hermione silently how she liked it. One finger pointed at the sugar and pinching two to signal a small dash of the milk. Draco's question, however, upset her.

Pansy didn't lie, "Hermione, my mother forced me to choose between her and Ron. I refuse to be forced into anything anymore, so I asked Draco if I could stay here."

Hermione nodded, remembering hearing Draco mention such, though their conversation was interrupted by a certain orange kneazle.

"To answer your question, yes I have spoken to my mother by Floo, but her stance hasn't changed, neither has mine," Pansy spoke with conviction, though it hurt to admit to such extreme measures.

"Have you talked to Ron, Pans?" Hermione was sure that Molly would accept Pansy into her family without a second thought.

"Not yet, 'Mione. Oh, your name is too long…” She sipped and added two more spoons of sugar before tasting again. "I'm trying to keep Ronald out of this, he doesn't need to be treated this way by my parents."

Narcissa tapped her spoon against the cup, "I understand your need to shield him from your mother and you know that you are welcome to stay here as long as you like; on the other hand, he should know what his intended is going through. This is a battle you're fighting for him, Pansy, not telling him isn't the answer. How can he protect you, otherwise?"

"I can floo call him for you, Pansy? Ask if he wants to come over or if you should go to The Burrow?" Hermione agreed with Narcissa's advice.

The doubt on Pansy's face forced Draco into action, "I'll bring you to the Floo, Hermione. You can speak with Ron from there." It was in a safe area anyway.

"Hey, 'Mione. Do you need me?" Ron's goofy smile greeted her through the green flames.

"Not me, Pansy does." He was instantly cautious, waiting for Hermione to continue. "She spent the night here at the Malfoy Manor, after a bad run-in with her parents."

"Because of me, I'm sure." Hermione nodded, "Is she with you now?" She nodded again. "Give me a sec." After a few moments, he returned, "My mother told me to invite her over for brunch, two hours from now. Are you with Draco? Bring him too, Harry is here also with Daphne. We'll discuss what to do later." Ron didn't disappoint Hermione for a second.

"The Burrow?" Pansy got anxious, "I have no proper clothing for brunch."

Hermione chortled, "There's no dress code for brunch at The Burrow, Pansy." Narcissa lifted a sculpted eyebrow but refrained from comments. The Weasley's were still one of a kind. "And you are also invited, Draco, they are expecting us if you want."

He hesitated because of his mother.

Narcissa calmed him, "We can continue getting acquainted on another day, Draco. Pansy needs her friends now. And I still have an hour or so with you, before you have to leave."
"We can meet another day, Cissa."

Draco suggested, "Tomorrow for lunch?" Hermione agreed quickly, and Narcissa's face brightened obviously.

The two Slytherins felt out of place, upon arrival, George causing chaos with a flying wand pursuing a hysterical Fleur around the house. He interrupted his chase to peck a loud kiss on Hermione's face, "Hey, love. Where did you get that nice suntan of yours? My brother has more of a cooked lobster complexion."

She shoved him out of the way, laughing, "Through hard work, George, you should give it a try one of these days."

He ruffled her hair, "RON! HERMIONE IS HERE!"

Molly stormed out of the kitchen, "Haven't your father and I taught you any manners, George Weasley? I'm so glad to see you, Hermione. I missed you dearly too, you know?" Hermione's face flew against a large bosom, something she had grown used to. "You must be Pansy? Welcome to our home, dear. You too, Draco." She gestured for them to follow her into the garden where a big table was set to accommodate the large group, "Harry dear, Hermione has arrived!"

Ron approached, dawdling. His smile relaxed Pansy instantly, hugging her reassuringly. "Welcome to the biggest chaos you'll ever know. But we mean no harm." Ron kissed her gently; only then did he address Draco, "Welcome, Malfoy. Make yourself at home." A quick hug with Hermione and he led them to where Harry was talking, Arthur hung on his every word while hearing about the big Caterpillar.

"Oh, hey Draco. You must be Pansy, welcome to our home."

The meal developed as usual in the house of Weasley, bowls of home cooked food passed from hand to hand, the Slytherins unused to serving themselves this way. Hermione would get her hands on something delicious, help herself and give some to Draco, copying Harry and Ron's actions towards Pansy and Daphne. The difference was the size of the scoop, Ron scooped it as his own portion, but Pansy shook her head until he emptied the volume by half.

The three new additions had to admit, Molly was a great cook, and they understood why Ron ate so quickly. George would steal from Ron's plate if his were empty.

When the most significant hunger subsided and the chaos calmed down, Ron spoke. Aside from him, only the Slytherins, Hermione and Harry, plus Ron's parents, were still at the table. "What did your mother tell you, Pansy?"

"That I would be no Parkinson if I kept dating you." Saying it out loud hurt her even worse than listening to the hateful words for the first time.

Molly's face was an open book, but she kept her thoughts to herself. For now.

"What do you want to do, Pansy?"

Tears ran freely from the eyes of the dark-haired witch, "Do you think I'll give you up that easily, Ronald? I don't care if she calls you blood-traitor after all that happened. To me what really counts, is how you make me feel, how you don't care if I forget to apply makeup to my face or my hair isn't perfect first thing in the morning." She wiped some tears with the back of her hand. "I don't want to rush into anything, I want to learn first how to stand on my own two feet. By myself."
"You can come and live with me, Pansy." Hermione's face was red from the emotions, but she didn't care. "Draco is half staying with me - we haven't yet discussed how we see things moving forward - but my old room isn't being used, and we can adjust it to fit your taste, in the meantime, you sort yourself out."

"And Ron?"

"We've learned how to cast proper silencing charms this past month, I almost did it last night." Molly looked questionable as if she wondered 'do I want to know why?'

"Live in a Muggle neighbourhood? Me?"

"Where have we lived this past month again, Pans?" Draco interjected, "You'll grow bored of living with my mother at the Manor. Hermione is giving you a way out, to sort out your problems; decide what you want to do."

"You could share the room with Ginny here at The Burrow if you prefer." Molly wasn't going to deny the girl a place to stay, though Hermione's idea sounded the best.

"With all due respect, and please don't be offended by what I'm about to say. But, The Burrow is a thing I have to get used to, in small doses." Laughter erupted following Pansy's declaration. "Do you really mean it, Hermione? I can come and live with you? I can't cook or clean."

"If I'm not into cooking, there's always take-away; I'll show you later, what that is. For the cleaning, Draco made a point about accepting help from a house-elf; plus we aren't talking about a permanent arrangement, just until you figure things out. Hopefully, your mother will see reason."

"Oh, Merlin, I don't deserve you." Pansy almost squeezed Hermione in a hug.

Pansy's introduction to Hermione's Muggle home was one for in the books. Side-eyeing the whole façade, she refrained from commenting about the size of the house, the fact that it was squeezed between two other houses, cars parked out in the driveway, and the small garden in the front.

The old neighbour woman waved from behind her window, and Pansy waved back awkwardly. "That's Mrs. Williams, she's the number one gossip source from our street, just be polite and never apparate in front of the house. Just in case."

Ron carried the bag Draco retrieved from the Manor. "I miss the smell of your mom's cookies."

"I'll bake an extra batch next time you visit us, just for you." Draco huffed, "No jealousy Draco, my dragon. It doesn't suit you."

Pansy eyed her new room, from top to bottom. "It's small... but cosy."

Hermione gave her a quick tour around the room, and the adjacent bathroom, "It's not a room at the Manor or whatever mansion you're used to. You can add a thing or two and enlarge the bed if you want, as long as it doesn't look like a dorm in the Slytherin dungeons."

Outside, a car pulled back really abruptly, and Pansy startled from the unfamiliar noise. "It's just a car using his brakes really heavily. You'll get used to it, happens every day."

In the end, there was much Pansy had to get accustomed to, though the witch said not a word, recognising Hermione's hospitality.
For dinner, Hermione took the three to a nearby Muggle pub with live music, to satisfy the longing for a roast beef with gravy and Yorkshire Pudding. Pansy sang a duet with Ron, horribly off-key to 'Hey Jude' by The Beatles.

Hermione nearly fell from her stool, when she learned that John Lennon had been a Muggle-born wizard and that the songs from the Liverpool's band were also top-rated within the Wizarding community. Not that she was enthusiastic to hear Ron sing again. His baritone voice hit the notes completely wrong, each time.

Draco was drawing runes on the skin of her back, enjoying the post-sex bliss. "I can't express in words, how grateful I am for what you did with Pansy."

"I feel bad for her, your parents shouldn't ever put you in that kind of spot. Ron isn't a criminal, no murderer. Just a goofy guy with a heart of gold." Her chin rested just above his heart.

"Not that I'm so happy to share a house with Weasley, in fact, I was happy to have privacy, so we could shag when and wherever we want. Now I'm back to casting silencing charms, and believe me, the ginger knows how to keep me awake with his snoring."

Hermione chuckled, "I know. It sounds like a buzz saw. I'll show it to you later, what one looks like."

"Do you think they'll stay together?"

"I can't speak for your Pansy, but my Ron is a loyal bloke. He adores her, you saw it yourself. I give them a good chance."

"And us?" She inclined her head, waiting for him to explain further, "How do you see us? Living here?"

"This is too small for your taste, and I'm not used to spying old bats, or cars pulling up that hard anymore. I see us getting to know each other better, here at this house, settle down in our lives, deciding what to become and then search for our own place, with a huge garden so you can fly."

"With a few extra bedrooms for a baby or two, three, and the eventual stray friend…"

"Nothing too Manor-ish, but much bigger than this." Her head rose with his deep breathe, "I...me and the Manor."

"It's not my home anymore, not since that snake-face commandeered it. Maybe we can find something in the neighbourhood, not too far from Mother. I wouldn't do that to you, force you to live inside a house that has meant nothing but pain to you." His arms snaked closer around her, wishing he could erase the experience wholly. "I like the way you see us, love. Two peas in a pod."

The whole Hogwarts team was gathered in the press room of the Ministry, upon invitation from the Minister of Magic, Kingsley Shacklebolt. The Daily Prophet and a few other media outlets wanted a more extensive interview with the group that left everything behind to help others in need on the other side of the world.

Hermione recognised a few faces, from earlier press moments and cringed at the front centre seat, occupied by none other than Rita Skeeter and her annoying quill. She held tight to Draco's hand, who tried but failed at calming her down. Both witches engaged in a staring contest, defiant and threatening.
The Minister cleared his throat. "Thank you for your attendance at this press moment, where we place the spotlight upon a group of youngsters who volunteered and offered assistance to less fortunate citizens, victims of a natural disaster. I cannot express enough the pride I feel, for their actions and kindness." Polite applause followed. "We invite you to ask your questions in a polite way, and tell our community all about these young adults, so they can be an example to our society."

Several hands went up, and the Minister chose one randomly, neglecting Rita completely.

"Where did this mission take place?"

Tanya, as mission leader also present, answered shortly, "We were assigned to the village Lugu, near the Nantou county."

"What have you done?"

"We have cleaned up the area, restored the water and power resources to the village, offered medical assistance -following the Muggle ways-and rebuilt or repaired homes for the local people."

"Have they all helped in an equal amount?"

Tanya frowned, riled up with the intention of the reporter. "What do you mean? Can you repeat the question?"

The man from the Daily Prophet rephrased, "Have all your volunteers helped in an equal way? Or were there some who worked less hard than others?"

"Mr.?"

"Mr. Quince, Daily Prophet, madam."

"Mr. Quince, from the Daft Puppet, all my volunteers have worked hard, equally. I don't understand what you are trying to imply."

"It's the Daily Prophet, miss. I wonder this because your group contained several members of the Sacred Twenty-Eight who have never worked in their lives. I guess some even have house-elves to raise their cups to their lips."

The snorts and huffs from the table echoed, offended at the question. Pansy, Daphne, Theo and foremost Draco felt called out. Tanya made a statement when she defended her team. "Mr. Q Daft Puppet, as I said, I don't know about their past lives, what I can say is that every youngster at this table, has worked and some have even risked their lives to save others. None of them, and allow me to emphasise, none of them can be accused of being lazy or of neglect."

"Even the Death Eater in your midst?"

Tanya was confused, not knowing who the annoying man referred to. Hermione had enough, "Even the Death Eater and his friends, yes. Satisfied now, Quince?"

Rita grasped the moment, "The rumours are that you now form a couple with the man, whose family tortured you inside his home, Miss Granger. Is this also true?"

Draco sank deeper into his chair but the determined look on Hermione's face forced him to sit up straight again. "Miss Skeeter." The sweet yet threatening tone surprised all those who didn't know Hermione that well. "The one accused of that crime does no longer live among us. I don't blame Draco nor his parents for the actions of a maniacal family member."
"But you don't deny being in a relationship with a former Death Eater."

"A DEATH EATER THAT HAD NO CHOICE!" Brown eyes spit fire. "If your own mother was being threatened with death, what would you or any other of you have done? Say, 'no thank you?" Yes, Draco made the wrong choices, but for the right reasons. Reasons, you daft woman, reasons that would have forced you to make the very same decisions." Hermione no longer sat down, but stood tall, looking Rita in the eye. "In Lugu, Draco risked his own life twice to save mine, a child's and another woman's life. Of his own fucking volition. So don't give me the death eater shite or I'll make you regret your words, bint."

Rita recoiled visibly, fearing an absolute truth to be revealed if she pushed the witch too hard. The woman in question was breathing hard, rage burning just below her skin.

Harry spoke calmly, but the anger was audible, "I second this. None of the purebloods sitting here with me, have sat by while others worked. They have worked hard to accomplish our goals, have given their best and more, and were trusted and loyal partners on the field. Attack one of them, and you attack all of us. And especially for Miss Skeeter, I say this: I consider Draco Malfoy a close friend."

Neville and Ron, until now silent, confirmed Harry's last words as they also applied to them.

After the outburst, the questions that followed were safe ground, Rita deciding to stay put.

At the end of the press conference, the Minister announced he would award this Hogwarts group with a Medal of Service, for participating in a volunteer mission and making a statement. The golden trio accepted it gratefully but coldly, Hermione's starting point was not to gain extra exposure.

The Slytherins, for their part, accepted the medal in awe. It symbolised the worth of their actions, for once in a favourable light. Draco was the most impressed, Kingsley made a point to hold his hand longer in his hold, looking the blond in the eye with empathic eyes and instead of disdain, real pride. To the Minister, if the young Malfoy could take such admirable action, then their community wasn't lost after all. There was hope for a better future.

"Can we go somewhere, where we can really be alone, Hermione?" He still shook like a leaf.

She took him to a fancy hotel in Muggle London, ordering a tray full of sweets and chocolate from room service. Hermione made him wait until the waiter brought the order, ushering the man swiftly out with a generous tip.

"Hermione, what you did back there…"

"Needed to be done, Draco. I won't allow a beetle to bring you down." She unwrapped a piece of chocolate and pushed it into his mouth. It was Remus' recipe for calming down.

He munched on it quickly, "Beetle?"

"Skeeter is an unregistered Animagus, who uses her animal form for her purposes. I kept her inside a jar for almost a year as payback for all her propaganda about Harry."

"I agree with Blaise, Slytherins are infamous, but witch, you are the ruthless one."

"I do whatever it takes to protect my loved ones." No room for doubt on her face, shrugging her shoulders. "Today she was attacking you for your past, not for your efforts during our mission. I couldn't let her get away with it."
She came again with a new chunk of chocolate, but he refused and cradled her face with his hands, "That's why I wanted to be alone with you. You were breathtakingly beautiful while you stood up for me. Woman, I don't deserve you." He pulled her towards him, desperate to feel her body against his. "I don't deserve you."

"Draco."

He kissed her passionately, whispering 'I love you' everytime he took a breath. Not in a million years, could he have imagined seeing Hermione fucking Granger defend his person. To hear her speak with such pride about his accomplishments, pride his father never showed during the full six years of Hogwarts. The woman he hurt at every corner, bullied and belittled for her seemingly inferior origin, was the one who made him feel like a man, today.

No mountain too high, no ocean too deep, he would give her the moon and the stars, would be her partner, her other half as long as she wanted him and even beyond.

He worshipped her body, no body part forgotten, some overindulged to give her the most pleasure. In his head, he was a few steps ahead, thinking about his future at her side, his ring around her finger, his heir in her womb. At her pace, but his goal nonetheless; he would make her his in every sense of the word. She owned his heart.

Forced to print nothing but an overly positive article about the voluntary mission, The Daily Prophet succeeded in changing the perception of the community into a favourable light. Rita Skeeter had been muted, to avoid a society turning against their newspaper, disgusted with the distortion of facts, by employing lies for the sake of sensation.

Gone was the look of disdain thrown at the Slytherins in their newest travels down Diagon Alley, gone were the pointed fingers and the gossip behind their backs.

Instead, young adults came to ask questions, wondering if they could join a similar mission and be someone's light in the darkness.

Proud of the achievements from every single student, Professor McGonagall, now the Headmistress at Hogwarts, invited them to come and speak about their adventures, first, all together in the Great Hall and later in the common rooms of their specific house. So they could be the example of what you can achieve if the will is there. The warm way she greeted the alumni Slytherins, broke the shields the snakes had erected before their arrival, unsure of how they would be welcomed.

In particular towards Draco, the most nervous of the group, she showed him a small, tentative smile, holding his hand longer than the others. Probably, thanking him for not having committed the crime he had been urged on threat of worst penalty.

"Son." Narcissa opened a small jewellery box, containing a blue sapphire surrounded by platinum and rose-gold. "This belongs to the Black heritance, meant to be passed from mother to daughter. I had a house-elf bring it to the Goblins to have it double checked for any curse, and they confirmed it to be safe. Use it when you are ready to ask her." She shoved it towards him, "My friends speak of nothing else, the heated way Hermione defended you. I even abused it to rub it in the Parkinson's noses, to make her see that the Weasley boy also stood up for you. I hope it helps Pansy."

Draco gave her a half-smile. "Pansy is enjoying her stay in Muggle London, Mother. I don't know if she can survive again inside the Pureblood customs. Courtesy of my Hermione."
"Oh, that promises more fireworks." The smirk was hidden behind a hand. "Make her a Malfoy, son. She's one of us now."

"It's my intention, Mother."

"Will you come back to the Manor and live here?"

"No, Mother, I'm sorry."

"I figured that much. I hope you find a place not far away from here, London is so far…"

"That's the plan, Mother. Hermione agrees with me." Her radiant smile was contagious.

Chapter End Notes

A.N.:

Next chapter will be the epilogue.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

The end of this story.

I loved to write its journey and I'm eternally grateful for Magzillasaurus, she was my side-kick, my enthusiastic beta, a pleasure to work with.

Last, thank you, my dear and loyal readers. Your reviews, big or small, always brightened my day. Your energy makes me keep on writing.

"Broken Dragon Wings" - thriller romance; and "Searching for a perfect husband" - marriage law with humour, are my currently WIP fics. Check them out if you haven't yet!

Enjoy the big ending.

Epilogue

*A year later*

The hand-painted lanterns with Chinese calligraphy, rocked by the wind, between several bamboo wind chimes. The wooden sound had something of idyllic.

The several slings decorated the garden set up at the Nott Manor, one of Luna's wishes that were immediately approved by Theo, to make up for the one he denied with fervour; she asked first to perform the handfasting ritual naked, as Wiccans used to do before the High Priest. He was no prude, but getting married in his Adam costume under the scrutinising stares of his friends and a few other guests? Like his best friends mother, Narcissa? Not in this lifetime.

Adjusting for the umpteenth time his tie, he shuffled his feet, again. Draco put his hand on the wizard's shoulder to bring him some peace of mind. "Calm down, Theo, you'll have a breakdown at this rate."

The wizard gave his friend a short nod, "Wait until next month, your turn is just around the corner, Draco."

"Tell that to Hermione, she calls my mother, Cruella."

"Cruella?"

"After some terrorising woman in a dogs movie. She showed me a picture on her mobile, and I can't say Hermione is wrong, there are moments when my mother, indeed, resembles her." The blond chuckled, thinking about how often he had to calm down his fiancée, after a new suggestion from his mother. Usually, a pureblood custom to impress the guests, but ultimately the opposite of Hermione's spirit.
Speaking of his witch, Hermione entered the aisle in her simple shoulderless light pink dress, her curls dancing down her back at the pace of her steps, a few front tresses pinned in the back, laced with flowers.

It gave her an angelic look, one it made him beam with pride.

Gasp rose, as the bride made her appearance following Hermione. There was something ethereal when the blonde stepped down the aisle, in a cream lace off shoulder dress, a small train trailing behind. Theo tried to dry a rebel tear, that, unfortunately, didn't escape Draco's eye. The blond wizard refrained from comment, unsure if he would do much better at his own ceremony.

The vows, the handfasting, in short, the whole ceremony passed in a blur. What everyone spoke of, was the worshipping look of the groom towards his bride, who looked back with pure adoration to her future husband. The kiss they shared was a delicate one, her hand lingering at his face, while their lips touched.

The feast that followed was wholly a par with who the newlyweds were: two people who didn't care for rules but rather chose to start making their own traditions. The meal consisted of finger food and self-serving, in a true walking-dinner style. The bride feeding the groom cake with her bare hands, he licked the frosting off her fingers, unabashedly. No assigned seats, no static affair, but a relaxed gathering of people celebrating this union. Free, untroubled.

Theo and Luna were the second pair to enter in matrimony, Neville setting it in train two months ago at The Burrow, promising eternal love and faithfulness to his sweet Tracey. It wasn't going to be the only marriage celebrated in the grounds of the house of the Weasley family, Pansy and Ron's wedding was set for two months after Draco and Hermione's.

Pansy's parents changed their tune. At first, thanks to the article in The Daily Prophet, yet mostly because Pansy's determination forced them to accept Ron, or risk a complete break with their only daughter. The understanding was still fragile, Ron and manners probably the biggest issue, albeit, the way he cared for Pansy softened the hearts of the haughty Pureblood family.

At the Malfoy Manor, a thing or two had to find common ground first before peace was reached.

Narcissa wanted the wedding of the century, Hermione preferred an intimate gathering. The original guest list from the Matriarch was cut down with a chopping knife; his mother wanted to make a statement towards her former socialite friends, invite every member of the Ministry who meant something to the community. Until his fiancée threatened to elope after his mother suggested to ask UK's Prime Minister.

Draco could not disagree. His mother was exaggerating. They counted already on the presence of Minister Shacklebolt, who was going to officiate their vows, so why invite a Muggle PM no one knew? After the threat that nobody-talks-about-anymore, Narcissa toned down, erased three-quarters of the original guest list - with a pained face - reducing it down to their closest friends, Professor McGonagall and Professor Pomfrey, and, the entire Weasley family, plus Tanya, David and Henry from the NGO.

The official request from Lucius to attend the wedding was refused by Draco himself. He was rising up the ladder at the Department for Magical Law Enforcement, research section when Kingsley came to him to ask for his opinion. Draco refused with a short and determined 'no'. The man was no longer part of the family, in Draco's view.

Hermione, from her side, started first at the Department for the Regulation of Magical Creatures - the
word 'control' was the first thing she killed by the root. Alas, she grew tired of running against closed
doors no matter how hard she knocked and was now actively studying to become a lawyer and fight
the rigid institution from within.

Harry joined the Auror programme, following in the steps everyone expected him to choose. Ron
prefered to become a partner at his brother's shop, another eyesore for Pansy's parents; a short-lived
one as Pansy told her parents what they could do with their opinion. Pansy's mother huffed, as
elegantly as possible, but refrained from further comment.

In the aftermath, a seed remained behind, inside all of them who partaken in their mission.

The sense of meaning something to someone in need.

While relationships solidified - apart from Ginny with Blaise who remained adrift with each other,
constantly on on-again-off-again - and couples moved in together leading to the weddings in the
short future, the extraordinary experience they gone through, left a pang of hunger behind for more.

With the assistance of Tanya, the Hogwarts group created the Dumbledore's World Aid, shortcut
DWA, formed of a large number of volunteers who would assist people abroad, a victim of natural
disasters.

The funds for the DWA were quickly gathered, as donations came effortlessly in, no solely from
Sacred Twenty-eight families but broader, confident that their money would be employed where it
indeed was needed.

They acquired decent sleeping tents with sanitary facilities - water hose showers weren't among the
favourite - all kinds of small machinery to help clear up rubble. Ron and Draco learned how to deal
with electricity, thanks to a crash course from Henry.

Hermione folded double when she visited one of those lessons to find her blond's hair high up in the
air, full of static energy. He looked at her as the wizard version of Albert Einstein, wide-eyed and
smile from ear to ear. "This is fun, Hermione. Want to try?"

To lend support in the medical field, Neville, Hannah, Daphne and Tracey dived into the knowledge
of healing, especially a more intensive first-aid support. They were far from skilled healers, yet by the
end of a very intensive course, they could perform decent emergency assistance, including the use of
needles and primary medicine.

Neville combined this with his love for herbology, a passion he shared with Tracey, becoming
experts in finding similar results with the aid of plants. More often than not, they would partner with
Draco to see if they could find the potion version of Muggle medicines.

Blaise and Ron went a step further and took driving lessons to work with a Caterpillar, their big toy.
Hermione sought a way for them, and with the help of David, soon Ron and Blaise became experts.
Outside Hermione's knowledge, they partake in competitions with Muggles, so thrilled they were
behind the driving wheel of a colossus.

*Two weeks after Theo's wedding*

Kent

Harry guided everyone into the paddock at the Brands Hatch circuit in Kent. As he assigned seats to
the girls and inquired what they would like to drink, he signalled to the male side of the group to
follow him and help him carry the refreshments. After all, they were among a considerable mass of Muggles and levitating a plate full of beakers would draw unnecessary attention.

"Are you sure Hermione has no idea why she's here?" The twinkle in Harry's eye gave away his excitement. Not only because he was there to support his friends in their first big truck race, but also to see Hermione's surprise, learning about Ron and Blaise's new hobby.

They learned to drive the CAT, but the big machine was just the beginning of a new interest. David taught them how to drive MAN trucks, and so they became involved in this type of racing. Today it was their first in a real circuit, the famous Brands Hatch track.

With cups in hands and popcorn held between arm and body, the boys returned to their respective counterparts.

"Are we waiting for Blaise and Ron, too?" Hermione noticed the absence of the two. She slurped loudly from her Fanta. "Ron would love this, I know that."

"They'll be here any minute." Draco tasted carefully from his own orange drink, trusting Hermione's taste. He was pleasantly surprised, stealing some popcorn from her basket.

In the meantime, the roaring of the big engines filled the air, exciting the whole crowd.

Harry's arm pointed out, "There they come." Hermione looked in front and behind her, between the crowd to see if she spotted the familiar ginger.

"I don't see them. Where are they, Harry?" Daphne started crying loud, waving with big gestures towards the racetrack.

Draco shifted Hermione's jaw gently, towards a yellow and a black truck, covered with sponsor stickers. "There love, look into the drivers' seats, numbers 84 and 79."

Her jaw fell open, "What?" Two overly enthusiastic men waved back, grins competing for the widest. "They know how to drive one of these? Holly shit. Look at them, like tots during Christmas."

"David taught them, as they enjoyed driving the CAT so much. They even went for a drivers licence, love." He found her so adorable in her unrestrained contentment.

"A Muggle one?" His nod made Hermione laugh harder, wiping the tears away with a finger "Pansy, no shit, that's amazing!"

The Slytherin witch rolled her eyes, "You should see his new collection, instead of Quidditch players cards, he collects now the small versions of such trucks. He's such a tot."

Ginny rolled her eyes. "Like Blaise is any better. I have to threaten with no-sex if he can't shut up about the capabilities of such a big monster."

Hermione wondered, "Why did you hide this from me?"

"He had to, I asked him." Harry came to Draco's rescue, the blond hated to keep anything from her and Harry had forced him to, until this race. He was enjoying a good Ale, the evidence, beer foam, remaining on his whiskers.

Ginny hushed them, "Look, they are lining up! Baby, YOU CAN DO IT!"
Hermione leaned against Draco, "Don't tell me you're cheering for Ron."

"I learned to like your friend, but don't ask for miracles. My snake brother is going to nail it, he has good reflexes." He was bumped from behind, some wild fan cheering for another trucker, and was showered with smelly beer. Before he could act, Hermione had already hexed the girl in her leg - who screamed loudly thinking a bee stung her, and cast a scourgify over her fiancée. He smirked, "Thank you, my lady. You're my hero." He pecked her quickly on the lips.

Seconds later, the light jumped to green, and all the trucks took off with squealing tires. The cheers were as loud as the growling of the engines, each supporting their favourite racers.

Until halfway through the race, both wizards kept themselves in the middle group, not falling much behind the leader, yet not pushing the gas too hard as long as they didn't have a grip on the track, with its renowned corner: the Paddock Bend Corner and the hairpin shortly after known as the Druids.

David had instructed them to get a feel of how to brake and power back before going entirely for the win. After lap 8, both men began to overtake the leaders.

Sitting on the paddock, the Hogwarts cheerleading team was, above all, the witches who screamed the loudest, Tracey, Luna and Daphne supportive for both boys, while their counterparts were shouting out their champions.

"C'mon Ron, show them what you're worth, buddy!"

"Blaise, you cunning snake! Nail this, mate!"

Hermione engaged in it as a form of foreplay, cheering extremely obviously for Ron to rile up her Draco. To her, if Blaise won it was just as good as if Ron did, what mattered was the winner should be one of theirs.

"Ron will kick your brother's arse, Malfoy!"

"Ten Galleon's for Blaise teaching your ginger-head a lesson, Potter."

"You're on, ferret!"

"I'll love to take your Galleons, scarhead!"

The girls side-eyed the display of testosterone. Theo and Neville followed the whole show, amused.

It was lap nine and Blaise stepped up his attack, Ron on his tail. Only three trucks ahead.

The commentator's voice echoed through the speakers. "Number 79 has just surpassed number 23, 84 also catching up pretty fast. 79 is punching his gas pedal hard, folks, number 31 is almost losing second place. Watch it...watch it...it's the hairpin folks. Oh, 79 just went on two wheels, that's a nasty turn there. What a racer! But 84 is catching up fast, but now 84's cut off by 79 in a bold move, those two aren't giving each other any room... 79 is on the trail of the first place, 56."

Ginny jumped overexcited in her seat, Blaise with his number 79, was about to catch up to the leader. Ron was just a wheel's length behind. Even Hermione sat at the edge of her seat, the energy flowing around.

"56 is losing his gain, the Paddock Bend Corner is coming up again, ladies and gentlemen. This is lap 10, two more to go and risks are being taken. 84 accelerates boldly forward using the inner side
of the bend to catch up to the two trucks at the time. This race is heart attack inducing, folks, calm yourselves. In the lead now 84, followed closely by 79. The difference, folks, is just the size of the cabin. By the looks, these two drivers know each other. The Druids is closing in and shit. Holy mother of Jesus, I think 79 is trying to flip his truck on the side, this man is suicidal."

Draco shook his head, "No, he's not suicidal. Just a son of a bitch without fear for his own skin. This shite is as exciting as watching the Quidditch World Cup, Harry."

The Gryffindor nodded, without taking away his eyes from the track. It was apparent who was going for driving lessons next; Hermione even bet that Draco might be interested.

"Last lap, folks, 79 and 84 at each other's necks. The last curve will be deciding…There they come…side by side, 79 in the lead, no now 84, again 79 wait, 84 is squeezing his engine for dear…79…84…and it's…it's…79! The winner is number 79, ladies and gentlemen! Look at that driver, he's out of his mind with joy!

Draco screamed his lungs out, Blaise won in a breathtaking finale. "Yeah!" He crunched Hermione's lips in a searing kiss, "My brother won! Slytherin's at the top, baby! We're good! We are awesome!"

"You're on, Malfoy. You and me next, after we both learn how to drive those monsters." Harry challenged Draco where it poked the most, the silver eyes twinkling from excitement at the prospect. Daphne and Hermione shook their heads, there was one thing that would never change, no matter how tight they become.

As soon as they met with Blaise, Draco flew towards the wizard and gave him a brotherly hug, clapping on the man's back. Hands flew around the tanned wizard, shaking his face. "You did it, mate. I can't believe it. I'm so fucking proud of you!"

His cheering was interrupted by a red-haired witch who claimed her wizard's lips. She tongue-kissed him unabashedly. Ron had no reason to complain, his difference between both trucks was hair thin, the photo-finish was consulted for confirmation. The hug Draco gave Blaise was copied by Harry and Ron, yet Pansy's kiss was more controlled.

The big silver cup stood proudly in the middle of their table, while they enjoyed dinner at a nearby pub. Blaise let Ron touch it, for a mere minute. Just to feel it.

But the girls saw it coming. Next time, the battle between Slytherin and Gryffindor was going down on four wheels. Their popcorn was ready.

*Two weeks later*

Wiltshire

It was a lovely sunny day, a small band of magical violins played in the corner right behind a pergola decorated in white fabric and white flowers, the very same as the bride's bouquet.

Pansy entered the aisle, first, as the bridesmaid, dressed in a soft lilac long gown. Hermione joined the pathway on the arm of Arthur, her fatherly figure since her Hogwarts adventure started all those years ago. A gentleman's handshake occurred before the bride was handed over to a stealthily teary groom.

Narcissa surprised everyone with a sob, accepting Molly's handkerchief, the Weasley Matriarch herself using a second for herself. Both admiring the beautiful bride in her ankle-length, short sleeve
dress that sparked from the sequins adorning the lace which covered the full gown.

It had the allure of a fairy tale, the Golden Princes, with a shine of gold in her hair, looking up to her Silver Prince, white platinum hair shining brightly. The groom's best man was a compromise. Harry stood by Draco, to compensate for Pansy's participation. Blaise would be the godfather of their first born in return, as Draco once promised, never thinking that it might become a reality.

Promises, vows, handfasting and magical binds were used, Draco bound Hermione to him in every way possible, but one - for now. If it was up to him, their firstborn was going to be the short-term plan, just the case of employing his Malfoy charm on his wife, the one she couldn't resist.

His mother drove her nuts talking about how much this wedding was going to be the celebration of the year. It became the wedding of the century, the symbol of hope. If a Slytherin Pureblood wizard succeeded in marrying a Gryffindor Muggle-Born witch, then anything was possible.

Professor McGonagall showed herself from the most emotional side, when she caressed Draco's cheek, wishing them the best.

Everything was possible.

June 2001

Peru, earthquake of 8.4 magnitude kills 40 and injures almost 450.

The Dumbledore's World Aid team was departure ready within two weeks after the earthquake, destination small coast town Arica, also affected by a subsequent tsunami.

The full Hogwarts team, including its highly skilled medical team, assisted by a few Healers from St. Mungo's, a few employees from the Ministry and other civilians, motivated by the exemplary behaviour from the original DWA team during Taiwan's mission and the small ones that followed.

A great deal of their medical supply was supplied by Hogwarts, who secretly started to stock up on the most essential potions.

The atrium at Heathrow was crowded by the DWA and Tanya's NGO, a particular flight chartered for both, courtesy of the Ministry's funding.

"How long is this flight?"

"More than twelve hours," Hermione whispered smiling fondly at Draco.

"This time, the window seat is mine, love. No stealing allowed or punishment follows."

"I'm so scared!" She couldn't mock more, "See who's first."

Harry bumped into Draco. "Still at odds about a chair? I'm a lucky bloke then, Daphne doesn't care about the window, only about my bag of pretzels."

"You bribe her?"

"And Slytherins call themselves cunning?"

"Who's the winner? The one with her extra bag of snacks or the guy with his favourite spot." Hermione gave her best know-it-all look.
"Love, I think it depends on the point-of-view. They are both winners. Love, care for an extra bag of salty crackers?" Draco thought he was the smartass. He learned it the hard way, how Slytherin his wife truly was.

However, she taught him the meaning of the Mile High Club mid-air. A disillusionment charm and a muffliato came in handy to hide their activities below a blanket. Only the necessary was undressed, for the course of action.

It started all when a particular moment happened during the in-flight movie, bringing Hermione some ideas. Her hand trailing secretly under the blanket towards his groin, finding there a half-hard member, also aroused by images. He struggled at first, embarrassed by her boldness and their location. He had already considered dragging her into one of those lavatories until he remembered how small they were.

But her hand performed naughty things a man could only resist for so long, especially when she guided his hand towards her mound. His fingers were in tune with the pace of her hand, running up and down his hard member; her hips rocking against his hand demanding an increased rhythm. It became too much for him, and turning her so he could enter her from behind, he spooned around her, using his core strength to thrust into her, mercilessly.

It was a high, coming in her quim at such height, while her walls squeezed him inside, pulsing hot waves with need. Her deep moan consumed by his hungry mouth.

He was a fan of this Mile High Club, he would not refuse another go, wondering if he should tip off his snake brothers. Draco didn't, if it came out, it might embarrass his wife, after all, how did he know about such a club?

London

A month after their Peruvian mission, the DWA returned home with an extra life-changing experience. Victims of earthquakes were one thing; discovering what water does to a body an entirely different beast.

At the end of their mission, they left again with the same rewarding feeling in their hearts, the one of fulfilment. It was still basic needs only, but this time with better facilities. They also left with a broad knowledge of Spanish, probably the best-known word was *cerveza*.

The Latin dances also were more interesting, much more passionate in their execution with interesting consequences. As it would turn out later, probably two or three babies might have been conceived after a night of Cuban salsa, too much tequila and forgotten anti-conception spells.

Overall, this deployment was the proof that DWA worked and was motivational. The number of volunteers increased upon an article in the Daily Prophet, relating the day to day developments on the field, from a reporter that joined their mission for this purpose.

Their funding hit record numbers that year, and part of it was donated in the form of material goods to the locals: clothing, household articles and scholarships.

October 2001

A small group returned to Lugu, curious to know how their Taiwan friends did, two years after their earthquake. Draco and Hermione, Harry with Daphne, Theo and his Luna, and Pansy with a reluctant Ron stayed in the local hotel, renovated a while after their departure.
What didn't change was how they got there, the Jeep ride, again, a journey from hell.

Also unchanged, the way they were greeted by Chen, Huan and the little Yi-Hsuan, who turned into a bit of a know-it-all who talked the ears off Draco in a broken English. Her intentions to marry him were still there, too.

They were all welcomed as family members not seen in a long time, warmly greeted and overly excited to have them just in time to celebrate this year's Mid-Autumn Festival. The decoration of the lanterns was done together with the villagers, Luna using the same calligraphic letters as during her wedding, which meant wishes of love, peace and health.

Huan showed her how to add a good luck mark, for a healthy baby, a design that Daphne also copied on her own lantern, caressing the small bump in between. Luna smiled gently, knowing, both in the same boat for that matter. They promised each other to stay away from tequila from now on.

Watching Hermione closely, Huan motioned her to paint the same mark on her lantern. Hermione shook her head in denial, she wasn't pregnant.

But the older woman kept insisting, Draco following amusedly until his wife grew anxious, confidence faltering at this point. Daphne approached the pair, wand close by, as Hermione gasped at Huan's hand on her belly.

"Are you sure Hermione?"

"I think so, Daphne, I mean, I'm on the potion."

"Potions could be faulty, or tequila might intervene, look at me." Daphne conferred with Draco, asking him to use a disillusionment charm to mask her actions, using a spell to solve the doubt. A golden glow confirmed Huan's assessment. "Join the club, sweetheart. Look this way, our three children will attend Hogwarts together."

Hermione was still recovering from the shock, when Draco took her in his arms, hiding his face in her neck to conceal his tears. "I love you so much, Hermione." Loud cheering applause erupted around them, but it didn't register straight away.

After they both recovered from the news and accepted everyone's congratulations, Draco personally painted on his and her lantern the relevant sign. His dream was finally coming true.

Later that night, he asked concerned, "Does it hurt the baby if we make love?"

"Will you sacrifice yourself for the upcoming months, Draco?"

"I would hate it if something happened to the baby because of me."

"You should be scared of me instead for denying me any part of your body where there's no need for it." She straddled him, rubbing her core against his cock. "The baby is safely protected, don't worry. Worry about making me come instead."

"Happy to comply, my lady." He kissed her ferociously, "Have I told you how much I love you?"

"Will you fuck me instead, my dragon? Your wife has needs."

March 2002

The maternity ward at St. Mungo's was busy. Luna and Daphne had been admitted almost
simultaneously, to give birth to their respective daughter and son. If people didn't know better, they would guess that the wizards were experiencing the most significant pain, by the panicked way they acted around the healers.

James Sirius Potter was born thirty minutes before Mei-He Nott, named after a newborn they met, during their last visit to Taiwan, meaning beautiful lotus flower.

Both babies were worshipped by a vast family, Blaise entering the double room with his little Vin Zabini, named after their lost companion Vincent Crabbe, born three weeks earlier ten days too early; out of wedlock. Ginny refused to settle down, much to Molly's despair.

Ron followed inside, with little Rose Weasley in his arms, the first of the group to have a baby. Tracey was due later that year.

Draco admired his goddaughter, showing Hermione how well he could hold a newborn, "See what I good father I'll be?"

"First survive a nasty diaper, then we talk."

"There's always our Tibby, love."

---

Scorpius Draco Malfoy was born after the intense labour of thirteen hours, ending with a desperate father begging his son to make it quick, because mummy couldn't take anymore pain.

Hermione had refused pain potions but ended up regretting her decision when it was too late.

He didn't leave her bed for a moment, crying openly when the baby was laid on Hermione's belly, scrunched red face, screaming his lungs out, a blond tuft of hair on the top of his head.

"He's gorgeous, love. See how perfect, ten toes, ten little fingers." She was too exhausted to truly appreciate his adoration. He kissed her time and time again, thanking her, telling her how much he loved her, how lucky he was to have her by his side.

Life had a way of finding its path. Even if it takes an earthquake to find your other half.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!