### Mad Hatter

**Possible Warnings**
- **Rating:** Mature
- **Archive Warning:** Choose Not To Use Archive Warnings
- **Category:** F/F, F/M
- **Fandom:** Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
- **Relationship:** Hermione Granger/Draco Malfoy, Hermione Granger/Astoria Greengrass, Hermione Granger/Blaise Zabini, Draco Malfoy/Blaise Zabini, Hermione Granger/Other(s), Hermione Granger & Harry Potter
- **Character:** Hermione Granger, Draco Malfoy, Blaise Zabini, Astoria Greengrass, Harry Potter, Daphne Greengrass, Theodore Nott, Gregory Goyle
- **Additional Tags:** Non-Explicit Sex, Rape/Non-con Elements, Drug Use, Recreational Drug Use, Dark Hermione Granger, Sort Of, Caring Draco Malfoy, Depression, Panic Attacks, Implied/Referenced Self-Harm, Implied/Referenced Suicide, Not Canon Compliant, Past Hermione Granger/Ron Weasley, Adult Hermione Granger, Hermione Granger & Harry Potter Friendship, Falling out, Additional Warnings In Author’s Note, possibly

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**Summary**

Hermione Granger is a mess, everyone can see it. She hasn’t been sober in over a year, she’s cut ties with her best friends and she spends her nights partying with Blaise Zabini and his crowd of rich, ex-Slytherin cronies. She finds herself on the cover of Witch Weekly on a regular basis, in more and more compromising situations, and rarely remembers the night before. All in all, she’s an absolute wreck.

Draco Malfoy has spent the two years since leaving Hogwarts travelling the world, studying Muggle and Magical healing and finding himself. Upon returning to England, they find themselves crossing paths more and more often. Draco finds himself becoming more and more fascinated with this new version of Hermione Granger, and increasingly concerned that she might never be the same again. What happened to send her into such a horrific spiral? What could be so awful that she’s willing to kill herself to forget?

Watching from below as she stands on the precipice of an impossible fall, will he be able to catch her before she reaches the bottom of her rabbit hole?
The lights shone brighter than the sun as Hermione spun across the floor, flashing intermittently with the music, simultaneously blinding her and urging her on.

She was dripping with sweat, but that didn't matter, she had to keep moving. Her body swayed erotically to the music, pulsing with each and every thrum of the bass. She felt someone's hands grip her waist and instinctively leaned back, grinding against the unknown body, letting the music guide her as mysterious hands roamed her body.

When she felt the man's lips on her neck, she almost pulled away, almost allowed the rational part of her mind to take over. But it had been a long time since she had been rational, and before the needling voice in the back of her mind could get too loud, there was a shot glass in her hand and firewhiskey burning in her throat.

The song changed, heavy bass replaced by a slow, sensual beat that had Hermione turning slowly to face her dance partner, twining her leg around his. His hands continued to wander, from her waist to her hips, down to her ass. He ran a single finger up her thigh, hooking the hem of her dress and slowly dragging it along with him.

“How about another drink?” He suggested, his breath hot against her ear. He pulled her ear lobe into his mouth and nipped her, his tongue immediately soothing the bite and Hermione shivered, hiking her leg up so that it was around his hip.

“I don't think that will be necessary.” She hummed, tangling her fingers in his hair and forcing his head down to hers, their lips crashing together as the song came to a crescendo.

Locked in the dirty club bathroom, ignoring the people pounding on the door, Hermione gripped the top of the stall with one hand while the other stayed locked around the stranger's neck, anchoring herself as he pounded into her.

She threw her head back and closed her eyes, focusing on nothing but the sensations pulsing through her, the want, the need, the emptiness, the pleasure.

Moans and pants echoed against the concrete walls as they both worked towards completion, pushing against each other, trying to find that perfect angle, that perfect spot that made Hermione's toes curl and her spine fizzle.

She could feel it building, pulsing and ebbing through her, almost there, almost-

She reached one hand between them, determined to bring herself over the precipice.

She could hear her partner panting, speaking into her ear, but she wasn't listening. It didn't matter what he had to say, she didn't need him to speak, she just needed him to fuck. She needed him to keep it up just a little longer. She was so close. Her release was right there, she could practically taste it...

And then it was over, no waves, no crashing, no pleasure- just emptiness.

“Did you...?” Her partner panted, obviously fully sated.

“Mmhm,” Hermione lied. “Yeah, that was great.”

She unhooked her legs from his waist and disentangled herself, pulling her dress back into place and
running a hand through her hair.

“So, we should do this again.”

“I don't think so.” Hermione shook her head, and without waiting for a response turned and unlocked the door, letting in a wave of angry women and slipping back into the club.

It was time for another drink. Another dance. Another faceless stranger whose name she would never get. If she was lucky, she might even find something else to take the edge off, something to make her forget who she was. And in the morning, if she was very lucky, she wouldn’t remember any of it.
Chapter 1

Hermione woke with a shattering headache, her head resting on something hard and her arms asleep beneath her. She could vaguely feel the warmth of sunlight on her back, but the thought of opening her eyes and deciphering just where it was coming from seemed far too difficult a task. She could hear vague sounds of life around her, footsteps on hardwood floors, muffled voices in a hallway, the tick of a clock, but none of them sounded like the noises of her flat.

Hermione let out a groan and rolled over, flailing one of her numb, useless arms to cover her eyes as a ray of sunlight attempted to blind her through her closed lids, only to have the deadweight fall heavily on the bridge of her nose.

“Good, you’re alive.” A man's voice spoke up when she groaned again, startling Hermione, both because she hadn't thought she'd heard anyone in the room and because he was being exceptionally loud. She hissed a protest in the stranger's direction, willing her head to stop throbbing so she could at least open her eyes and figure out where she was.

“Bit of a sore head?” Her patron chuckled, his voice only slightly softer. “That's prone to happen when you drink your weight in Firewhiskey.”

His tone was full of condescension, but sounded vaguely familiar and Hermione cringed inwardly, forcing her eyes open. When the blinding pain that accompanied sitting up subsided and her eyes were able to focus, she found herself sitting opposite Charlie Weasley, the older brother of her ex-fiancé.

“And sitting up, even better!” Charlie smirked derisively. “There may be hope for you yet, Mione.”

“Would you stop talking so loud?” Hermione hissed sharply. “Honestly, I'm sitting right here.” She took a moment to gather herself, trying to establish what had happened the night before and how she had ended up wherever she was- and with Charlie Weasley. She was still wearing her dress, so that was something, and she was definitely not in a bed. Instead, she seemed to be stretched out on the most uncomfortable sofa she had ever felt, her heels hanging haphazardly from her feet and her hair gathered in a rat's nest of a bun behind her head- presumably a rush job while she had been throwing up.

“You're in my flat.” Charlie offered, obviously guessing what she was thinking. “I found you vomming in an alley outside the Green Jewel last night and brought you back here.”

“Wonderful.” Hermione grumbled, swinging her feet to the floor and putting her head in her hands.

“You weren't exactly in any state to apparate home,” he continued to explain. “And since I don't know where you've been living since moving out of Harry's, I figured this was the best place for you.”

Hermione only nodded, breathing slowly through her nose to quell the nausea that had settled on her. When she was sure she wasn't going to puke all over the floor, she opened her eyes properly and looked around. The flat was small, just three rooms from what she could tell, with a galley kitchen off the sparsely decorated living room. The sofa she was on was paired with an ancient looking armchair that had obviously been magically patched and repaired about a hundred times over, and across from her was a shabby coffee table that held her bag and wand. Reaching for the former, Hermione stuck her arm into the red canvas and felt around for the vial of hangover potion she always carried, rummaging through the books, clothes and numerous knick knacks that she carried
with her. Her fingers finally wrapping around the vial, she smiled tightly and pulled it out, popping the cork and gulping down the entirety of it in one quick motion, while her other hand continued to feel around for her other daily potion—her own version of the Morning After pill. From the corner of her eye, she could see Charlie watching her, his brow furrowed in confusion and concern, but she simply ignored him, choking down the second potion before disentangling the straps of her shoes and tossing them into the bag.

“Thanks for letting me crash on your couch,” she said, getting to her feet. “Hope I wasn’t too much trouble.” She grabbed her wand from the table and headed for the door, almost making it before Charlie regained his wits and launched himself in front of her, blocking her path.

“What the fuck, Hermione?! Where are you going?”

“Home,” she answered plainly. “I have to get to work soon.” “Are you kidding?!” Charlie scoffed. “You were off your tits drunk in the back alley of a nightclub last night, you had no clue who I was—or who you were for that matter. Anything could have happened if I hadn’t found you and brought you home!”

“But it didn’t, did it?” Hermione shrugged, almost seeming like she was upset about that. “You found me, let me sleep on your sofa like the gentleman that your mother raised you to be and now you’ve done your duty. You can tell people that you saved Hermione Granger for one night and be proud of yourself.” She tried to step around him, but Charlie wasn’t giving up that easy.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he demanded. “What is going on with you?!”

“Nothing that you need to concern yourself with,” she assured him. “I’m not involved with your little brother anymore, you don’t have to concern yourself with me. Thanks for the hospitality, but like I said, I’ve got to get to work.”

“So that’s it, you’re just going to go?”

“Should there be something else?” Hermione frowned. “Do you want a shag in the shower to repay you for the help? A quick blow, to start your day off right?”

“What?! No- I-” Charlie spluttered indignantly, his face turning red. “Of course not—”

“I didn’t think so,” Hermione nodded. “So, if you’ll excuse me, I’ll be on my way.”

“What am I supposed to tell Ron about all this?” Charlie demanded, still not moving.

“You can tell him whatever you want,” she shrugged. “It’s not as though my life is his problem—or a secret for that matter. I’m sure Witch Weekly got some fabulous pictures of me hacking up whatever it was Gregory Goyle slipped in my drink. I expect they’ll be on the front cover sometime later this week. If you want to tell Ronald that you safely carried me home after that, you go right ahead.” She patted his arm patronizingly and finally stepped around to the door, then, without even bothering to check if they were in a wizard or muggle building, she turned on the spot and disapparated.

When Draco Malfoy arrived in the Portkey Office of the British Ministry of Magic, he wasn't sure what to expect. After his trial, in which he'd been found Not Guilty thanks to Potter and Granger, he'd quickly realized that the court's decision meant nothing to the rest of Wizarding England, but
he’d been determined to finish his Hogwarts studies properly. As soon as he had his NEWT results in his hands, though, he had gotten the hell out of England. With his father in Azkaban and his mother serving her house arrest sentence in a carefully monitored Malfoy estate in France, there had been nothing left to hold him, so he had taken the first Portkey he could get his hands on and hadn’t looked back.

That was two years ago. In that time he had travelled across Asia, learning about different healing methods and traditions of old, spent time in South America discovering the secrets of early Muggle civilizations and spending some time as a curse breaker, made multiple stops in Italy and France to simply enjoy himself, and eventually travelled across a section of Africa where he learned about the ancient rituals of the tribes and studied under a very famous witch doctor. He’d attained just about every Wizarding degree there was in Healing, Potions and Curse-breaking.

Eventually, though, the call to return home had been too much to resist. Draco had enjoyed his time away immensely, he had learned and grown so much, he felt like an entirely different person to the boy he had been, but it was time. He missed his friends and his family. He was ready to go home and show the world that the Draco Malfoy they had known was gone, that elitist, pureblood prick of a boy had been replaced by a man who cared deeply about others and had made it his goal to learn how to help as many of them as possible. As a child, his only goal in life had been to make his father proud, now all he wanted was to make the man regret he’d ever had a son, and so far he’d been doing an excellent job.

After filling out the necessary paperwork informing the Ministry that he planned to remain in England for the foreseeable future, Draco made his way out to the main atrium, his head held high despite the many glances and whispers that seemed to follow him. He had nothing to be ashamed of anymore, why should he cower before these people?

“Draco!” A deep voice shouted his name across the atrium, and Draco looked around curiously for the source.

“Oi, over here!” Blaise Zabini waved his hands, jumping up and down to draw his friend's attention.

“Yes, I can see you.” Draco rolled his eyes, changing course to meet the dark-skinned Italian man.

“Would you stop that? You look ridiculous.”

“Aw, I missed you too!” Blaise grinned and pulled Draco into a hug, ignoring the blond's protests.

“What are you doing here, Blaise?” Draco asked, prying himself free. “Last I checked, you didn't know there was such a thing as morning.”

“Har, har,” Blaise rolled his eyes. “I'm here to meet you, you twat! Couldn't let my best friend wander around aimlessly on his first day back.”

“I would hardly call it wandering,” Draco scoffed. “I was on my way home.”

“And where is that, exactly?” Blaise frowned. “Because last I checked, you weren't stepping foot in the Manor.”

“It's been two years,” Draco grumbled quietly. “I can't avoid the place forever.”

“Says who?” Blaise questioned. “That place is nothing but nightmares and shadows. If it were me, I'd have burned it to the ground two years ago.”

“I know, you've told me multiple times,” Draco assured him. “Unlike you, however, I am not a pyromaniac and therefore do not feel the need to burn down my home simply because it holds bad
memories."

"You should try it," Blaise shrugged. "Worked wonders for me. Shall we go?"

"Go where?" Draco asked, rubbing his temples as though he had a headache.

"To my place, of course. I figured you could crash until you found a place of your own. Got the
guest room all ready for you, even let Mippy clean the sheets."

"Wow, that certainly sounds enticing," Draco said sarcastically.

"Knew you'd think so," Blaise smirked. "Right, let's go then."

Before Draco could protest, he grabbed his arm and yanked him into the floo, yelling out his address
and sending them on their way.

"There you are!" Astoria Greengrass grumbled uninterestedly, hanging upside down over the side of
Hermione's sofa. "I thought he'd really done it this time."

"Thought who'd done what?" Hermione asked, dumping her bag on the floor, completely unfazed
by the blonde woman on her sofa.

"Thought Goyle'd properly poisoned you." She flipped her legs over her head gracefully and got to
her feet, following Hermione into the kitchen. "Those drinks were proper deadly last night."

"I'm sure the lines of coke we did before said drinks didn't help." Hermione pointed out blandly,
making herself a tea. "What time is it?"

"Too early for me to be up," Astoria complained.

"Then why are you?"

"Because I'm a good friend!" She hip checked Hermione sharply. "I came to make sure you weren't
dead."

"You seemed to be putting quite a bit of effort into it," Hermione drawled, nodding to the sofa she
had just occupied.

"Well it's not like it's the first time you came home after sunrise," Astoria scoffed. "I was giving you
time to show before I went and got Blaise involved."

"Well I'm alive and well, so you can go back to bed," Hermione said dismissively.

"Merlin you're a bitch this morning," Astoria sneered. "What crawled up your arse and died?"

"Nothing," Hermione assured her. "I'm just hungover."

"Whatever," Astoria rolled her eyes. "Don't tell me. I'll find out anyways. Now, you're coming
tonight aren't you?"

"What's tonight?" Hermione asked, taking her tea and heading for her bedroom, leaving Astoria to
“Draco's welcome home party, remember?”

“No.” Hermione shook her head, stripping out of her dress and rummaging around for a pair of jeans.

“Well it's tonight, and you're coming,” Astoria said. “Blaise will be here at 9.”

“Good for him,” Hermione deadpanned. “Where in the fuck is my jumper?!”

“On the fucking floor!” Astoria copied her, picking up the offending garment and chucking it at Hermione's face. “Your night must really have been awful.”

“It certainly wasn't pleasant,” she muttered. “I have work to do, are you sleeping here?”

“Well it's not like you're going to.” Astoria reasoned, throwing herself onto Hermione's unmade bed. “Sure you don't want to join me? I could make it worth your while.”

She gave Hermione a lecherous grin, crooking a finger at her invitingly, but the brunette only rolled her eyes and headed for the door.

“Have a good day Sweetheart!” Astoria called after her, laughing when Hermione flipped her the bird in response.
Chapter 2

“It was like she was a totally different person!” Charlie railed, pacing back and forth across Harry’s living room.

“I know,” Harry assured him. “Believe me. She doesn't want help, though. Why do you think she moved out?”

“She needs help!” Charlie argued. “I know she's your best friend and all, but you didn't see her last night.”

“No, I saw her every other night,” Harry retorted. “You're not the first one to pick her up off an alley sidewalk, Charlie. I spent a year doing it, and I'd still be doing it if she hadn't threatened to disappear altogether if I didn't piss off. I can't make her accept help.”

“She's drowning!” Charlie insisted.

“I KNOW!” Harry roared. “But barring kidnapping her and locking her in the basement, there is nothing else I can do for her! So, thanks for helping her last night, and I'm sorry she was a right bitch to you, but there's nothing I can do to change that. My advice to you is to forget all about it. She certainly will.”

Charlie must have recognized by his tone that Harry was done talking about this, so instead of continuing to argue, he turned on his heel and stormed out.

Alone once again, Harry slumped defeatedly, resting his head in his hands and pulling anxiously at his hair. Charlie was right, he knew that, but it still didn't change the fact that there was nothing he could do about it.

It had been a year since Hermione had almost entirely pushed him out of her life, but time and space had done nothing to keep him from worrying.

When she’d started to spiral, he’d been by her side every night. He’d watch as she drank herself into unconsciousness and then he’d take her home and hold her hair while she threw up. He’d fought off the men that tried to take her home each night, using magic on more than one muggle when he had to. He’d watched as the alcohol stopped being enough to numb her, resulting in a switch to drugs of worse and worse degrees. He hadn’t said a word, though, aside from pleading with her to let him help. He was all she had left, and he couldn’t bring himself to be angry with her when she was so utterly broken.

He’d taken care of her when she had bad highs and he’d gotten her through three overdoses. It didn’t matter how much he tried to help, though, Hermione continually pushed him away. When she’d moved out, Harry had spent a week trying to find her. He’d staked out every bar and club that she liked to frequent, paid off every single dealer she’d ever bought from for information, but it was an article in Witch Weekly that had finally told him she was alive, at least.

Every time he’d seen her since then, Hermione had only told him to fuck off. Harry had respected that request, to a degree, keeping his distance and watching from afar as she spent her nights
partying, but he had refused to let go completely. Using his fame on more than one occasion, he’d acquired spies in the Witch Weekly offices, the Prophet and St. Mungo’s, who contacted him when she got herself into trouble. He had paid more for stories to disappear about Hermione than he had for anything else in his entire life, but it was the only thing he could do now to help her. As it was, he was forced to look at all kinds of articles about her in the press to keep her believing that he was staying away. The only things he could make disappear were the ones that were so bad that he knew she wouldn’t remember them at all- the ones that he knew had taken place when she was too high to remember her own name.

When she’d been enveloped into Blaise Zabini’s group of ‘Professional Partiers’ as he liked to call them, Harry had never imagined he could be so grateful for a Slytherin Pureblood. Even more miraculously, Zabini had reached out after witnessing Hermione suffer through a bad high, expressing concern. Blaise had agreed to keep Harry up to date on her from then on, promising to reach out any time she was really in trouble. While this had eased Harry’s concerns slightly, he still couldn’t help himself from reaching out to Hermione occasionally, which was how he ended up outside her potions lab an hour after Charlie left.

Even though she seemed to have taken up a life of endless partying, Hermione still held onto some semblance of her old self, and before all the parties and drugs and boys, she had opened an Apothecary that specialized in incorporating muggle medicines into the magical world. She had passed the everyday running of the business on almost as soon as she opened it, so that she could spend her time experimenting, which had become a sort of passion of hers after the war and had continued to keep her days occupied.

Standing outside the door to her lab, Harry had a silent argument with himself over whether or not he should knock. The decision was taken out of his hands, however, when Hermione threw the door open in a rage.

“Harry.” She stopped short when she saw him, a shocked look overtaking the anger that had seemed to be propelling her a moment earlier. “Wh-what are you doing here?”

“Charlie came to see me,” he dove right in.

And just like that, the wall that she had been keeping between them for the last year went up, her face became guarded, showing nothing beyond annoyance.

“He said you slept on his sofa last night,” Harry prompted, trying his best not to sound judgemental. “That he found you in an alley?”

“What do you want, Harry?” She asked, crossing her arms over her chest.

“Nothing,” he sighed. “I just... I was just worried about you.”

“Well I’m fine,” Hermione assured him sharply. “As you can see.”

“Right,” he nodded unhappily. “Look, Hermione, I know you don’t want me butting in or trying to help.”

“I don’t need help,” she interjected.
“I know,” Harry tried not to get angry with her. “I know. That doesn't change the fact that you're still my best friend, and I worry about you. So, I'm just here to say hi, and see for myself that you're alright.”

“Great, well, here I am.” Hermione gestured to herself dramatically. “All in one piece.”

“You told Charlie that Goyle spiked your drink.” Harry said, not willing to leave just yet. “Are you really alright?”

“He didn't spike my drink, he made the drinks and they were disgusting,” Hermione corrected. “Thank you for your concern, but I'm busy now. I'll see you around.”

Without missing a beat, Hermione closed the door in his face, leaving him alone in the back corridor of her shop once again.

Harry's shoulders slumped in defeat. “Yeah, sure,” he muttered to himself. “See you around.”

Upon returning to Blaise's house, Draco had gone directly to bed, still functioning a few hours behind Greenwich time. When he woke up and headed down to the kitchen, he didn't expect to happen upon anyone- Blaise hadn't mentioned any other house guests, and the man in question was sure to still be sleeping. The last person Draco could have possibly imagined finding in Blaise Zabini’s kitchen was Hermione Granger.

And yet, when he walked into the dining room, that was exactly who he found, her head bowed to the table in the middle of snorting a line of cocaine.

Draco stopped dead in his tracks, staring open mouthed at the sight in front of him. He knew that Blaise had become friendly with the Gryffindor witch in his absence, she'd been mentioned in his letters and they had been featured on the cover of Witch Weekly on more than one occasion. Draco was also aware of the fact that the Hermione Granger he had grown up with had changed drastically, no longer studious and private, but instead featured on the cover of gossip rags worldwide on a daily basis at some club or another. Gone were her days of fighting for House Elf rights and muggleborns, now she spent her days sleeping off hangovers and bad highs, her nights filled with as much debauchery as possible and regularly resulting in visits from Blaise's private healer.

Draco knew all this, he had read about it in great detail through his letters from Blaise and Astoria, and she certainly hadn't hidden any of it from the public, but that didn't stop him from being absolutely shocked to see the witch in person.

In the past, she had at least tried to control the bushy mane on her head, but now her curls fell as wildly as his Aunt Bellatrix's had, haphazardly flying this way and that, sprouting from a pigtail at the nape of her neck. Her clothes, always so pristine in the past, fell loosely off her thin frame, exposing shoulder blades and collar bones that seemed far too prominent to be considered healthy. When she sat up, Draco saw how hollow her face had become, the bags under her eyes looked to be as old as she was, and her cheekbones were far too prominent. Looking at her now, Draco was reminded of the shell of a girl that had laid unconscious on the Manor floor three years previously, beaten and tortured, simply waiting for death to come. The thought made him wince, and it was at that moment that she noticed him.

“Three seconds and you're already disgusted by me,” she drawled lazily. “I suppose I shouldn't be
surprised, though. Leopards and spots.”

“I'm not disgusted.” Draco responded quickly, schooling his features into a look of interest rather than shock. “I just didn't expect to find anyone down here.”

“If that's your story.” She scoffed, releasing her hair from it's tie and running a hand through it to push it away from her face, before getting up from her seat. “Don't worry, I'm not staying.”

“Don't leave on my account.” Draco forced himself to sound bored. “I was just looking for a cup of tea.”

“Good luck finding one,” Hermione sniffed. “This is the only thing Blaise keeps in.”

She gestured to the remaining powder in front of her, and Draco frowned.

“Picked up an affinity for Muggle drugs in my absence, has he?”

Hermione only nodded, obviously expecting Draco to revert to his former disdain for anything Muggle, but he only shrugged and continued towards the kitchen.

“I'm sure I'll be able to scrounge something. Can I get you a cup?”

“I'm not staying,” Hermione repeated. “Just ran out of my own supplies.”

Without another word, she turned and stepped into the floo, disappearing in a haze of green, leaving Draco very confused.

As soon as the drugs hit her, Hermione was back at work. She was currently developing a potion to make coming down off Ecstasy easier and so far, she hadn't had much success. The physical symptoms were easy enough to deal with- essence of ginger for the nausea, vitamins to boost the immune system, ashwaganda root to quell anxiety- it was the emotional symptoms that Hermione couldn't figure out how to counteract. It didn't matter how much artificial serotonin she manufactured, the days that followed her high were always the worst, forcing her to think about and remember all the things she worked so hard to forget each night- the loss of her parents, her break-up with Ron, the loss of the Weasley family, Harry's disappointment in her- they all came crashing down on her the moment the drugs left her system, suffocating and unescapable.

Today, though, she had a new potion to test, and what better place to do it than Draco Malfoy's welcome home party?
“Oh, you’re up.” Blaise remarked, wandering into his kitchen to find Draco leaning against the counter with a mug in hand.

“Some of us enjoy existence before the sun goes down,” Draco explained mockingly.

“Funny people, those,” Blaise frowned. “Nothing fun ever happens before sundown.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Draco shook his head. “Just a few minutes ago I stumbled upon none other than Hermione Granger sitting at your dining room table doing a line of coke.”

“Did you?” Blaise raised an eyebrow. “How odd. She doesn’t usually come by this early.”

“She does, however, make a habit of doing drugs at your dining room table?” Draco guessed.

“Among other places,” Blaise agreed. “But you knew that already.”

“Knowing it, and seeing it, are two very different things,” Draco shook his head. “It’s the kind of image that flips reality on its end.”

“Not exactly the way you remember her, is she?” Blaise smirked.

“Not so much.”

“Just wait till you see her tonight, you'll never think of her the same way again.”

“You say that like it's a good thing,” Draco frowned. “She barely looks human.”

“Yeah,” Blaise looked slightly ashamed. “Like I said, she's... different.”

“Is that what we're going to call it?” Draco scoffed. “Because I can think of quite a few words to describe her with, and ‘different’ isn’t even in the top twenty.”

“What do you want from me, mate?” Blaise grew slightly defensive. “I'm not her keeper.”

“Which begs the question, where is Potter? Shouldn't he and Weasley be forcing her into rehab or something?”

“She doesn’t really talk to Potter anymore,” Blaise shook his head. “She’s never really talked about it, but when she started coming out, Potter pushed back. She was living with him at the time and he was continually trying to track her down and get her sober, trying to help.”

“And that was a bad thing?” Draco’s frown deepened.

Blaise shrugged. “Apparently. Anyways, she pushed him away and pushed him away, and now he just sort of watches from a distance. Every once in a while, he'll pop up and try and get back in, but so far he’s been striking out.”

“So, what, you're her new Potter?” Draco asked.

“Ha!” Blaise shook his head, as though that were ridiculous. “I'm her dealer and occasional shag. Stori and her have gotten pretty close, though.”
“Didn’t Witch Weekly print an article saying they were dating?” Draco mused, remembering a cover he’d seen a few months previously.

“It did,” Blaise agreed. “But that was nothing. They just got high and snogged in a pub one night… as far as I know, at least.”

Draco’s face must have betrayed how shocked he was by this revelation, because Blaise began laughing hysterically.

“If you’re planning on sticking around, you’ll have to get used to it,” he said. “It happens quite a lot these days. Granger isn’t the prim and proper little Gryffindor you used to know.”

“That’s been made abundantly clear,” Draco assured him. “You said she’s coming tonight?”

“Definitely. Never misses a party, that one,” Blaise’s smile returned. “I know she looks grim, but it’s not as bad as you think. She was probably just coming down off a bad high.”

“Oddly enough, that doesn't make me feel any better,” Draco shook his head.

“Why do you care so much, anyways?” Blaise frowned. “I mean, I know you don't hate her anymore and you've been off finding yourself, or whatever, but really.”

“How can you look at her and not be concerned?” Draco responded sharply. “She looks like a ghost.”

“She's made it very clear that her life is none of my business,” Blaise raised his hands dismissively. “If she wants help, I'll give it to her, but for now she just wants to have a good time. Who are we to stop her?”

“You understand how absolutely idiotic that reasoning is, right?”

“I do,” Blaise assured him. “But it doesn't change anything. Now, did Granger happen to leave any goodies for me, or did she take it all for herself?”

“Oi, where the hell have you been?!” Blaise demanded. “I’ve been waiting for hours!”

“It's barely half past six.” Hermione rolled her eyes, stepping out of her fireplace and brushing the soot from her clothes. “What are you even doing here? Stori said 9.”

“Yes, but that was before you came and stole all my drugs without even saying hello,” he explained simply. “That’s not very good form, Mi.”

“I left you plenty,” Hermione argued. “And more to the point, they’re my drugs. I’m the one who got them.”

“With my galleons!” Blaise scoffed.

“It's good to share,” Hermione shrugged. “None of this explains what you're doing in my flat, though.”

“We thought we'd get dinner before getting appallingly drunk. Thought you'd like to come.”
“I'd rather just getting appallingly drunk,” Hermione shook her head. “But thanks.”

“See, I thought you'd say that,” Blaise nodded seriously. “Which is why I'm willing to make a counter offer. You come to dinner, we get appallingly drunk at the restaurant, and then you can run whatever little experiment you've got there, at the club.” He nodded knowingly to the vials peeking out of her purse, used to Hermione's proclivities for messing around with potions. In fact, he was one of the few people who knew just how good she was with them, being an investor in her shop and subsequent experimental lab.

“I'm not ready to go out, Blaise,” Hermione shook her head insistently. “I haven't even had time to shower since yesterday.”

“Luckily, I believe in being fashionably late,” Zabini smirked. “So, you go get yourself made up, and I'll help myself to whatever you've got in... unless you'd rather have company.” He looked over her lecherously, tongue peeking out between his lips as his eyes travelled up and down her body.

Hermione pursed her lips, arms crossing over her chest and hip jutting out as though she were about to tell him off- which Blaise was perfectly fine with- but then she seemed to change her mind. “Fine,” she huffed. “But you better be quick about it, I'm not in the mood to be teased.”

“As if I'd ever do that to you,” Blaise pretended to look shocked. “I'm nothing but a gentleman-”

“Do you want to fuck or not, Blaise?” Hermione demanded, stomping towards the bathroom. “I haven't got all day.”

“Well it certainly seems like you need it.” He quipped, trailing behind her. “Honestly, Mi, why you let yourself get worked up like this, I'll never know.”

“You know what, I changed my mind.” Hermione snapped, shoving him away as his arms went to encircle her waist. “I don't need anything, and you're a fucking prick.”

“That's kind of the idea, isn't it?” Blaise persisted, not at all put off by her mood. If there was one thing he'd gotten used to about Hermione Granger, it was her bitchy demeanour. The woman could be drunker than a distillery and still find something to be angry about, but that had never stopped her from having a good time, it only meant putting a little more effort into it.

“Come on Min.” Blaise cooed, successfully pulling her back to him and pressing his growing erection against her, his hand slipping beneath the waistband of her jeans. “You know you need this. What happened? Some drunk slag leave you out to dry last night?”

He knew he'd guessed correctly when she let out an angry growl and allowed herself to grind against his hand ever so slightly.

“Come on, let ol' Blaise take care of things.” He dipped his head down and without warning, bit the apex of her neck and shoulder.

Hermione moaned desperately, relishing in the sharp pain he brought, followed quickly by the soothing feel of his tongue across the mark. Any resolve she'd had about kicking Blaise out dissolved, and she gave herself over to him, letting her mind empty out and focussing entirely on the things he was doing to her body.
“You know, there’s fashionably late, and then there’s just rude,” Draco snarked as the doors to their private dining room opened to admit Blaise. “Have all the drugs finally done you in, or do you just not know how to read a clock?”

“I’ll have you know I was dealing with a very important matter.” Blaise replied smoothly, taking a seat at the table between Pansy Parkinson and Daphne Greengrass.

“What, did you run out of hangover potions?” Pansy asked sarcastically.

“I never run out of hangover potions! Granger keeps me well stocked- speak of the bitch!” He turned and offered Hermione a shit-eating grin as she entered the room, trailing behind because she’d needed to stop at the bar.

“Oh good, you’re here!” Astoria smiled brightly at her friend, waving at her to take the seat between herself and Draco. “Have you got anything in your bag? I was in a rush.”

“By which she means I wouldn’t give her any,” Daphne glared at her sister.

“And you call me a bitch.” Hermione quipped, dropping her bag into Astoria’s lap and taking a seat.

“Because you are one,” the blonde assured her. “But I love you anyways. Score!” She pulled a small tin out of the bag, followed by Hermione's keys.

“Did you bring enough for the whole class?” Pansy asked, eyeing Astoria jealously as she did a line.

“I thought you were above my muggle drugs,” Hermione sneered.

“I'm above that garbage you were trying to pass off as weed last week,” Pansy corrected. “We all know you've got the best coke.”

“Oi!” Blaise shouted in disapproval, but Pansy only laughed.

“What are you getting upset about? Granger's your dealer!”

“She is not my dealer,” he argued petulantly. “She simply knows the bloke that is.”

“She's your dealer.” Astoria rejoined the conversation. “You know it, she knows it, we all know it. So say thank you, and move the fuck on. Now, what was this important business you were dealing with?”

“Granger needed a shag,” Blaise shrugged lazily.

The sheer nonchalance and lack of reaction to this statement was almost enough to do Draco’s head in. Granger didn’t even blink, simply took her bag back from Astoria and started up a conversation with Theo Nott across the table, ignoring the fact that her sex life was being discussed around her.

“So, did Blaise shag you into submission or did you just remember you have to eat?” Theo asked Hermione jokingly.

“I eat,” she told him testily. “And he promised we could get sloshed before tonight.”

“And what's tonight?” Theo questioned, obviously assuming she meant more than just their celebration.

“Ecstacy.” She replied simply, as though it were totally normal.
“And whose couch do you expect to stay on for the three days that follow?” Pansy stuck her nose in once again.

“I won’t need a couch,” Hermione said. “I’ve got it this time.”

“Oh really?” Pansy challenged, her tone far too sweet to be meaningful. “Isn’t that what you said last time?”

“Don’t be a cow, Pans,” Astoria cut in. “Let her be.”

“I’m just saying,” the other girl shrugged. “It’s not like it’s a secret what happens.”

“Fuck off Parkinson,” Hermione snapped. “As if I haven't peeled you off enough floors. Find yourself in any wolf dens lately?”

A dangerous silence settled over the table as the two girls faced off, both rigid with anger and likely to rip the other to pieces if pushed even a little bit further.

“I think it’s time for a drink, Mi.” Blaise got to his feet, his tone eerily similar to the one Snape had used on them as boys when they were in trouble. “Why don’t we go down to the bar?”

“Why don’t you take her?” Hermione snarled, nodding at Pansy sharply. “I'm not your fucking pet, Zabini.”

“No, but you look like you could do with a few shots,” Blaise countered seriously. “And I promised to get you drunk. So, let's go.”

Without waiting for her answer, he rounded the table and yanked Hermione to her feet, holding tightly to her upper arm as he led her out of the room, Astoria following on their heels with an eager look on her face.

As soon as the trio had gone, the group fell back into easy conversation, as though nothing had happened. When Draco looked over at Theo for answers, the man only shrugged as though this were perfectly normal, and it struck Draco yet again that two years was a long time to be away.

The rest of dinner was fun, there was no question about it. They'd goaded him into going out to a muggle restaurant that Pansy liked, a high end place in the middle of London that catered to the rich and famous- and apparently didn't care if their customers did coke at the table. The food was excellent and the liquor top shelf, but Draco barely paid attention to any of it. He was too busy watching Granger. Upon returning from the bar she fell into the group seamlessly, no longer an outcast or a victim of their bullying, she seemed to be the best of friends with Astoria and Pansy- despite their earlier display- and it was clear that she was flirting with Theo. Blaise and her had the kind of easy friends-with-benefits relationship that Draco and Daphne had once enjoyed back at Hogwarts, continually sniping and jabbing at each other, yet obviously still friends and occasionally flirting.

Gregory Goyle and Padme Patil made up the rest of their group, though they seemed to be in their own little bubble, part of the group and not, all at once. It was clear that they were both welcome, but they didn't seem as effortlessly comfortable as the others. Draco had feared that he would be relegated to the same type of inclusion- sitting on the outskirts while the others bonded over inside jokes and old stories that he hadn't been apart of- but somehow that hadn't happened. Aside from the odd moment, Draco felt as though he hadn't missed a single day of his friends lives- a phenomenon he couldn't decide whether was due to his friends having been living the same lavish, frivolous way for years, or that they were all just so close that time didn't matter. He hoped that it was at least a
By the time they finished eating, everyone was comfortably buzzed, having all had multiple drinks. They had reached the perfect level of drunk to start their evening, which was why Draco was confused when Granger pulled out a sobering potion.

“I like to keep my highs separate.” She explained, noting the odd look he was giving her. “I’m a purist.”

“You're an obsessive-compulsive junkie,” Pansy corrected her.

Hermione gave a noncommittal shrug of agreement, then pulled another small tin from her bag like the one Astoria had taken out earlier, taking a small pill from it and putting it on her tongue.

“Anyone else?” she offered the tin.

Astoria made a grab for it, but Daphne knocked her hand away.

“You're fine!” she snapped, making her sister pout childishly.

“I'd be better with some E,” Astoria grumbled.

“You just did a line of coke, you're fine,” Daphne repeated. “Now, are we going or not?”

“God you can be a buzzkill,” Hermione laughed at the elder Greengrass. “Loosen up, Daph!”

“Do you see me killing your buzz, Granger?” Daphne challenged. “No, so stay out of it. She doesn't need your help.”

Behind her back, Hermione contorted her face into a mocking sneer, and Draco couldn't help but smile.

“Right you are, darling.” Blaise threw his arm around Daphne's shoulder and began guiding her out of the restaurant. “The Jewel waits for no man.”

“SHOTS!” Hermione squealed, throwing her hands in the air and earning a cheer from the rest of the bar patrons. Without waiting for anyone else to join her, Hermione slammed back three shots of firewhiskey in a row, receiving uproarious cheers from those around her.

Draco watched from a booth on the other side of the room as she slammed back another shot, then grabbed the closest wizard and dragged him onto the dancefloor. Apparently her preference to keep drugs and alcohol separate didn’t carry very far into the night.

“So, what's the story here?” Draco turned to Theo, who was seated next to him in a private booth.

“I'm not quite sure what you mean,” he frowned. “What story?”
“Granger,” Draco nodded his glass at the witch in question. “I'm just having a hard time wrapping my head around this.”

Theo nodded understandingly. “Well, she started popping up about a year and a half ago, always ready to have a good time. For the first few months Potter trailed after her trying to keep her in check, but eventually he stepped off. They had quite a few public spats and I guess he gave up.”

“Potter?” Draco scoffed. “Give up? I don't think so.”

“Well, he gave up on trying to keep her from partying,” Theo corrected himself. “Anyways, she got close with Astoria and Blaise, then she just kind of fell into the group.”

“That's it?” Draco frowned. “That's all you're giving me?”

“Mate, I don't know what you want. That's how it is,” Theo shrugged.

“She looks like a mess,” Draco observed, almost to himself.

“Oh, she is,” Theo assured. “She's a complete disaster, but what are you gonna do?”

“Seriously?” Draco stared at his friend in shock. “That's it?”

“She doesn't want help, Drake. She comes out to have a good time, and if you try to get to know her any better, she walks. I like her, mate, we all do, and if she wanted help we'd give it to her, but she doesn't. Look, you weren't here right after Potter stopped hanging around,” Theo shook his head sadly. “That was a mess. She was always high, usually drunk on top of it, and it didn't matter what anyone said or did, she went along. Potter made a deal with the Prophet, paid them off to keep them from printing the worst stories about her. I still don't think she knows about it- she probably can't remember most of the things she did anyways.”

“What reined her in?” Draco asked, watching the other side of the room, where Hermione and Astoria had climbed onto a table to dance.

“Blaise and Stori,” Theo chuckled, obviously knowing how ridiculous he sounded. “She was completely out of it one night, I mean, she didn't even know her own name. Stori found her in a bathroom with a group of guys, barely conscious, practically naked.”

“Shit,” Draco muttered.

“Like I said, complete mess,” Theo agreed. “They took her home and got her sobered up a bit, from then on she's been partying with us.”

“And Potter doesn't care about any of this?” Draco asked, still not believing it. “And what about Weasley? Wasn't she shagging one of them?”

“I wouldn't bring them up if I were you,” Theo warned. “Nobody knows what happened, but they broke up. That was about the time that Party Granger appeared. And as to Potter, he cares. We call him when she goes completely off the rails and he tries to keep in touch with her, but she's stubborn. Whatever happened, she isn't letting it go.”

“What was that thing with her and Pansy before dinner? What was she talking about?”

“Why are you so interested?” Theo turned the tables on Draco. “Last I checked, you hated Granger.”

“I'm not entirely sure.” The blond admitted, continuing to watch as Hermione jumped off the table
and found a new dance partner, practically shagging the man in the middle of the dancefloor. “I don’t hate her,” he continued quickly. “I haven’t hated her in a long time. That last year we did at Hogwarts, we made our peace. We weren’t friends exactly, but we studied together, and we got along.”

“Well, good luck finding that girl,” Theo slapped him on the leg encouragingly and got to his feet. “She doesn't come out too often these days.”

“You look like you're having an absolute shit time!” Blaise dropped into the seat next to Draco a while later, followed by a server carrying a tray of shots. “You need a drink!”

“I'm having a great time,” Draco assured his friend. “But I'll make you a deal.”

“Excellent,” Blaise smiled evilly. “Let's have it.”

“You tell me what that thing was earlier between Pans and Granger, and I'll do shots with you.”

“What thing?” Blaise frowned, taking a shot anyways.

“Seriously?” Draco scoffed. “You practically dragged Granger from the room to keep them from killing each other.”

“Ah, that!” Blaise nodded, recalling the event. “Just a tiff, my friend. Nothing to worry about.”

“What did Pansy mean about needing a sofa to crash on?” Draco pushed. “And last time?”

Blaise's frown deepened, a conflicted look in his eyes as he seemed to debate whether or not he should tell Draco the truth.

“Look, Theo filled me in on her story a bit,” Draco offered. “And I'm pretty sure I can fill in the blanks.”

“Okay,” Blaise huffed, still seeming unsure but deciding to tell Draco anyways. “I know you're not going to go telling anyone, so I'll tell you. It's not public knowledge, but after Hogwarts Mi started experimenting in potions. She plays around with wizard and muggle medicine, the Ministry has bought quite a few of her inventions.”

Draco nodded thoughtfully, surprised to find that Granger was following exactly the same career path as himself, and curious as to why she was being so hush hush about it.

“Lately she's been working on hangover potions,” Blaise continued. “Trying to improve effectiveness and creating new ones that counteract more than just alcohol. She's got one for cocaine, meth, and most of the hallucinogens you can get, but she's been trying to invent one that takes away the fallout effects of E.”

“And she hasn't had much luck?” Draco guessed.

“To put it lightly. Have we ever done E?” Blaise tried to recall.

“A few times,” Draco nodded. “The night after He came back?”
“Right!” Blaise remembered immediately. “Okay, so you remember what it's like after. It's not an easy come down.”

“No, it pretty much sucked,” Draco agreed.

“Well, Mi likes E- a lot- but coming down from it just about kills her.”

Draco was about to tell Blaise not to be so dramatic, but the look in his friend's eye told him that he was being completely serious.

“She's at her absolute worst in the come down- she will be tomorrow. It doesn't matter how many different mixtures she tries, it never makes it better. When it wears off tonight, she'll crash, and she'll crash hard.”

“So why not stop her from taking it?” Draco asked.

“Because if you tell her not to, she finds somewhere else to do it- somewhere where there isn't anyone that gives a fuck about her, and she gets hurt,” Blaise said harshly. “Ask Potter, he'll tell you all about it.”

“What the fuck happened to her, Blaise?” Draco demanded. He didn't know why it hurt him so much, but seeing her like this had stirred something in Draco, something deep in his soul that felt the need to reach out and catch Granger from whatever freefall she was in.

“She fought a war,” Blaise shrugged helplessly. “She got fucked up.”

“She wasn't fucked up like this after the war,” Draco argued. “I spent everyday with her for a year, she wasn't like this at all.”

“I don't know all her secrets, Drake. If you want answers, you'd have to convince Potter to talk to you,” Blaise told him, his tone suggesting that he wasn't going to discuss it anymore. “Now, you promised shots.”

“Yeah,” Draco sighed, trying to force Granger from his mind. “Yeah, shots. What are we drinking?”
Chapter 4

Daphne - the evening's sober companion - had somehow convinced Hermione to stay the night at Blaise's, despite her insistence that she was fine, and her potion would work. When Draco got up around 9 in the morning to use the bathroom, he saw why everyone had been so adamant.

He found her sitting on the floor in front of the sofa she'd crashed on, staring listlessly at the wall. Thinking she was just a little out of it, Draco went about his morning ablutions and got himself a hangover potion and a coffee. When he passed her again, she still hadn't moved, so Draco decided to check if she was alright.

“Morning, Granger,” he nodded in greeting.

Hermione didn't acknowledge him, continuing to stare at the wall, though her eyes didn't appear to be focused on anything.

“You alright there?” Draco asked, leaning over sideways to try and meet her eyes. “Hello? Anyone home?”

“She's not going to answer you.” Daphne stood leaning against the doorway.

“What's wrong with her?” Draco asked.

“She took ecstasy, took whatever new potion she was testing to counteract the come down, the potion didn't work and now she's dropped into a state of catatonic depression.” Daphne offered succinctly, obviously having been through this before.

“Shouldn't we, I don't know, do something?” Draco frowned. “Help her?”

“If you try to touch her or get any closer, she'll scream,” Daphne shook her head. “She'll move eventually. I'll get her some water for now.”

Draco didn't like this plan of action one bit, but he figured that for the time being her should let Daphne make that call.

“She'll snap out of it,” Daphne assured him. “Seriously, it's okay.”

“Nothing about this looks okay,” Draco argued roughly. “This seems like the definition of not okay.”

“Yeah, well, that pretty much sums up Hermione,” Daphne shrugged. “Just let her be, Draco. It's for the best.”

When he didn't move, Daphne took his arm and gently lead him away. Back in his room, however, Draco's mind wouldn't stray from the catatonic witch.

Draco had been telling the truth when he told Theo they'd made amends. That last year at Hogwarts, things had been so different. Very few students had returned to write their NEWTs, but of course Granger had been one of them. Potter and Weasley had taken a different approach to continuing
education, both choosing to take positions in the Auror department instead of returning to school, and it had been blatantly obvious that Granger was excited to completely focus on her education instead of keeping the two idiots alive.

When September 1st arrived, there had been only ten remaining students from Draco's year on Platform 9 3/4 aside from himself: Granger, Blaise, Longbottom, Daphne, Pansy, Hannah Abbot, Padme Patil, Justin Finch-Fletchley, Isobel MacDougal and Ernie Macmillan.

He had shared almost every class with Granger, aside from Muggle Studies, and they had formed a sort of partnership over the year.

That first night after the feast- a solemn affair- Draco had cornered her in the corridor and asked for a moment of her time. He had been more than a little surprised when Granger willingly agreed and suggested they go for a walk outside. Taking a lap around the courtyard, Draco had stammered out an apology for the years of abuse he had put her through and the torture she'd undergone in his home, assuring her that he had seen the error of his ways and bore her no ill will.

“Of course, you're under no obligation to forgive me.” He'd assured her, once he'd offered the sincerest apology he could conjure without bursting into tears. “No sane person would, after the things I've done. I just wanted to assure you that I won't be a bother to you in the future.”

“I forgive you,” Hermione had answered without pause. “I don't blame you for that night at the Manor, I'm thankful for what you did to try and help us. And as for the rest of it, you were a child. Everything has changed now, we've all changed. I need to let the past stay the past, so I forgive you.”

Without giving him a chance to respond to this, or even to fully comprehend what she was saying, she had given him a sharp nod, then turned and hurried back into the castle.

After that night, they seemed to start with a clean slate. Draco made a point to acknowledge her when their paths crossed, if only to say hello, and when they were partnered together in Potions and D.A.D.A neither one of them complained. Slowly, forced partnership morphed into selecting each other for paired assignments and from there, they began to study together in the library. They never really spoke, simply worked on their own things at the same table in a corner of the library where they were undisturbed by those less astute students.

It wasn't until after Christmas holidays that they spoke again as they had the first night of term.

Draco had elected to stay in the Castle over the break, as had the other returning Slytherins, but the rest of the eighth year- as they had been branded- went home to their families, Granger included. Which was why Draco was so surprised to stumble upon her in an abandoned corridor three days before classes were due to start again.

He had simply been strolling through the castle, trying to pass the time until dinner would be available in the Great Hall, not wanting to be in his common room anymore as his friends were playing some sort of drinking game that had made them even louder and more obnoxious than usual. In the hopes of finding some peace and quiet, perhaps even a window sill to read in, Draco had meandered towards the far corner of the castle that housed Professor Trelawney's classroom. He had just passed the portrait of Sir Cadogan, wishing the oafish knight ‘Merry Christmas’ and hoping that he wouldn't follow, when he spotted her in one of the many windows. She sat with her knees pulled up to her chest, elbows resting on top of them, a single window pane open, allowing small clouds of
smoke to escape.

“Granger?” Draco frowned, knowing her wild curls anywhere, but confused as to what she was doing there.

Hermione didn't look at him, but she nodded in acknowledgement. When she didn't say anything, Draco took a few steps closer. He could see now that she was wearing a heavy plaid shirt that looked about eight sizes too big, the sleeves covered at the ends by a pair of arm warmers, leaving her fingers free to hold a cigarette.

“What are you doing?” He frowned, leaning casually against the wall in front of her.

“Smoking.” She put the cigarette to her lips and breathed deeply, smoke billowing from her mouth and nose as she exhaled a moment later.

“I can see that,” Draco fought the urge to roll his eyes. “I meant, what are you doing here? I thought you'd gone home for the holidays.”

At the mention of home, Draco couldn't help but notice the way her entire body slumped, as though he had dealt her a physical blow. As he waited for her to answer him, he took a moment to study her. Her usually bright face seemed to have taken on a rather grey hue, dulling her ever so slightly. Her eyes, usually focussed and sharp, never straying from the person or thing she was speaking with, were downcast and the bags underneath them indicated a severe lack of sleep. Even her hair seemed duller than usual, the wild array of curls that usually held dozens of shades of brown and copper now seemed limp and plain. Everything about the woman in front of Draco screamed exhaustion and defeat.

“I had to come back early,” Hermione finally answered. “Change of plans and whatnot.”

Draco nodded, expecting that she would expand on this- she had never exactly been a witch of few words- but she simply put the cigarette to her lips and looked back out the window, exhaling a line of smoke into the gloomy winter afternoon.

“Well, did you at least enjoy the time you had away?” Draco asked, trying to keep the conversation afloat.

“It was fine,” Hermione shrugged. “Yours?”

“Also fine,” he nodded lamely.

They stayed in awkward silence for a few seconds, Hermione seemingly oblivious and Draco trying to decide what to say next. Eventually, he decided to question her new habit.

“I didn't know you smoked,” he said, wincing slightly at how stupid he sounded. “I thought it was bad for you.”

“It is,” Hermione agreed, taking another puff. “Blackens your lungs and rots your teeth, but I'm sure I'll come up with a solution for that.”

“Make a good independent potions study,” Draco nodded. “You don't seem the type to pick up such nasty habits, though.”

“Who's to say what type anyone is these days,” she mused philosophically. “Who's to say there even are types anymore.”
She ground out the end of her cigarette against the wall and flicked it out the window, shutting the pane as it fell and getting to her feet. With only a nod of farewell to Draco, she'd turned and started on her way in the direction of Gryffindor tower, arms wrapped tightly around herself as she walked. Draco had watched her until she'd disappeared from sight, confused and slightly worried about the shell of a witch he had just spoken to. The next morning, however, she had appeared to be her usual self once more, sitting at the Gryffindor table for breakfast and chatting animatedly with her housemates. When they passed each other in the corridors, she gave Draco the same warm smile that she gave everybody, as though he hadn't found her skulking in a dark corner of the castle, smoking and looking utterly shattered.

He'd never brought the subject up, and he'd never come across her in a similar situation again, but that night had stuck in Draco's head. The Hermione Granger that he had been faced with at that moment reminded him of himself more than he wished to acknowledge. There had been an air of self-loathing and deep sadness that seemed to cover her, feelings that Draco knew only too well. He had been fighting his inner demons for years, he could recognize the signs from a thousand kilometres away and Hermione Granger certainly had enough demons to choose from.

Now, it seemed that the demons were winning, and Granger had all but given up the fight.

She didn't move at all. Each time Draco passed through the room he found her sitting in the exact same spot, staring at the wall, though it was obvious she wasn't seeing anything. Daphne continued to warn Draco against approaching her, insisting that it would only result in a screaming fit on Hermione’s part, but Draco couldn’t help himself. Once everyone had gone to bed, he walked back out into the living room and sat down on the other side of the coffee table Hermione sat behind, directly in her sightline.

“You don’t look too hot, Granger,” he observed quietly. “Has anyone told you that?”

She simply continued to stare blankly, not even seeming to notice that Draco was there. He nodded slowly and tried to think of something to say. As he thought, he noticed that she was shivering ever so slightly. Without bothering to ask permission, Draco conjured an oversized plaid shirt and charmed it to fall over her shoulders. When she pulled the fabric tight around herself, Draco smiled. It seemed he’d done something right.

“Can I get you anything?” He offered quickly, hoping that this small movement meant she was coming back to herself. “Some water? Something to eat?”

He waited patiently for an answer, but Hermione only continued to stare.

“This isn’t healthy, Granger,” Draco sighed. “You know that, don’t you?”

He studied her face carefully, looking for any hint of recognition or agreement, but her eyes, which had once held a constant spark were now dull and empty.

Draco sat with her for another hour, not saying a word. Instead, he studied the girl in front of him, watching for any hint of the girl he had known. Eventually, Hermione pulled the shirt he’d given her even tighter around herself and laid down on the floor, still staring blankly at the wall.

“Get some sleep, Granger.” Draco sighed, getting to his feet. “Maybe you’ll feel better in the morning.”
He grabbed a blanket off the back of the sofa and covered her. He couldn’t see it, but as he left, Hermione closed her eyes and drifted off, pulling the flannel even tighter around her.

When Draco wandered through the living room the following afternoon, he found Blaise and Hermione passing a bong back and forth.

“Want a hit?” Blaise offered nasally, having just taken one himself.

Draco shrugged and sat down on the sofa beside Hermione. She took a hit herself, then passed the bong and lighter to Draco absently, leaning back and breathing out a cloud of smoke as her eyes rolled back in her head.

While Blaise babbled on and on about whatever seemed to pop into his head, Hermione was silent as they smoked their way through the bowl, only putting her head up when it was her turn to take a hit. When there was nothing left, she got up and went to the kitchen without a word, passing through again a moment later with a bag of crisps in one hand and a bottle of something in the other, before going out to the garden.

“What is she doing?” Draco asked absentmindedly. “It's bloody freezing outside.”

“Dunno,” Blaise shrugged. “She's an oddball, that one. Have you got any chips?”

“It's your house mate, you tell me.”

“Right, right,” Blaise nodded slowly. “MIPPY!!”

Draco groaned in protest and covered his ears, glaring at his friend.

“Yes, Master Blaise?” Mippy appeared before them, her arms crossed, a disapproving look on her tiny face.

“Have we got any chips in?!” Blaise asked, his voice far louder than it needed to be. “I'd kill for chips.”

“Yes Master,” Mippy nodded.

“Brilliant! Can you make some?!”

“Mippy is standing right here, Master,” the elf reproached him calmly. “There is no need for yelling. Mippy has already begun to prepare Master's lunch.”

“And there's going to be chips?” Blaise asked eagerly.

“Yes Master,” Mippy gave a long-suffering sigh. “There will be chips.”

“You're brilliant, you are Mippy. Do you know that?” Blaise beamed at the elf, his eyes full of adoration for the small creature.

“Mippy knows.” She nodded, making Draco laugh. “Master is telling Mippy every time he is taking in muggle herbs that make smoke.”
“Good, cause you are,” Blaise continued seriously. “You know, I love you Mippy. You're a right star, you are.”

“Thank you Master,” Mippy nodded along. “Mippy is very fond of Master as well. Mippy is needing to return to the kitchens now.” Without waiting to be dismissed, the elf disapparated, leaving Blaise to carry on his soliloquy about how wonderful she was.

Deciding to leave him to it, Draco went in search of Hermione. He found her laying on a lounge chair that she had haphazardly brushed the snow from, staring up at the sky and drinking from the bottle she had taken with her. Originally, he had thought it was sparkling water, but Draco could now see that it was a bottle of incredibly cheap wine- a half empty bottle to be exact.

“Hair of the dog?” He tried to joke as he approached her.

“Five o'clock somewhere,” Hermione countered, taking a deep drink.

Draco shrugged in agreement and used his wand to clear off the chair next to her, not wanting to end up with the wet patches on his clothing that Hermione seemed to be dealing with. “What are you doing out here? It's freezing.”

“Is it?” Hermione shrugged. “I hadn't noticed.”

Draco found that rather hard to believe, seeing as there was snow all over the place and she was wearing nothing but a thin shirt and leggings, both of which had very large wet patches.

“It's November, things tend to get cold around this time.” He waved his wand again and dried her clothes and chair, then cast a warming charm around the both of them.

“What do you want something?” Hermione frowned at the change of temperature.

“Not at all,” Draco shook his head. “Just wanted some air and thought you looked cold.”

Hermione pursed her lips disbelievingly but said nothing, going back to staring at the sky.

“Knut for your thoughts,” Draco offered after a few more minutes of silence.

Hermione lifted the bottle of wine to her lips and drained the rest of its contents, then closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

“They're not even worth a sickle.”
“Buy you a drink?” Draco leaned against the bar next to Hermione’s stool at the Jewel. He’d been watching her dance with a thoroughly shifty looking wizard all night and was eager to steer her away from the bloke before he drugged her and stuffed her in a large bag.

“I’ve already got one,” she held up her gin and tonic and allowed the ice to jingle against the side for a moment.

“I’m pretty sure that absolute catch you’ve been dancing with drugged it,” Draco informed her, reaching for the glass.

“All the more reason to drink it then.” Hermione lifted the drink to her lips and chugged it. “Mmm, rohypnol.” She smacked her lips together and gave Draco a sarcastic smile.

“You’re a real piece of work, Granger,” he shook his head.

“So I’ve been told. Goyle!” She stood on the crossbar of her stool and waved aggressively at the hefty man, who was serving a customer a few stools down. When he held a hand up to tell her to wait, she took the orange peel out of her glass and threw it at him, hitting him square in the eye.

“Were you aiming for his eye?” Draco asked, rather impressed.

“Of course I was,” she smiled at him. “Just because I’m a girl, doesn’t mean I can’t throw.”

“I was more thinking because that’s your fourth drink, but okay,” Draco nodded appreciatively, ignoring the glare she gave him for counting her drinks.

“For fucks sakes Granger, wait your bloody turn!” Goyle growled as he walked over, cleaning his eye with a wet rag.

“You were taking forever!” Hermione complained brattily, slumping against the bar. “I need another drink.”

“I just gave you one.”

“And now it’s gone,” she pointed to her empty glass. “I’ll take whatever you’re trying to convince people is really a drink this evening.”

She smiled brightly and batted her eyelashes in a thoroughly obvious and comical way that made Draco burst out laughing, resulting in her stamping her stiletto into his foot painfully. Goyle didn’t seem to be buying the sweet and serene act either, shaking his head disapprovingly, but he also wasn’t about to turn down a chance to serve one of his ‘signature drinks’ as he called them, so he reached for a clean glass and set to mixing while Draco cursed at Hermione for breaking his foot.

“You’re not even going to have a bruise,” she scoffed unfeelingly. “Be a man.”

“You just stabbed me in the foot!” Draco shot back, seriously concerned that he might have a gaping hole through his shoe when he looked down.

“You’re being a child,” Hermione shook her head. “I barely touched you.”

“You must be drunker than I thought if you think that was barely touching me,” Draco argued. “Your right hook didn’t hurt that much!”
“Shall we double check and see?” Hermione challenged, her right hand tightening into a fist.

“Ooh Min’s getting violent!” Astoria squealed, skipping over and disrupting them before she could take a swing. “Who did you wrong, baby?” She flung her arms around Hermione and pulled her into a comically dramatic hug, cradling her head on her breasts and attempting to stroke her hair, only to pull her off the stool and send them both toppling to the ground.

“Well this took an interesting turn,” Goyle noted, putting Hermione’s drink on the bar and peering over to watch Astoria straddle her on the floor.

“Want to make him jealous?” the blonde crooned, rocking her hips against Hermione’s seductively. “I’ll do you right here.”

“An excellent offer,” Hermione grinned, sitting up. “But the floor is sticky.”

“Ugh!” Astoria screeched and hopped back to her feet, drunkenly helping Hermione up and looping her arm around her waist. “Nevermind, we’ll make him jealous on the dance floor.”

Without bothering to take her drink, Hermione stumbled off, giggling about something Astoria whispered in her ear.

Two hours later, Draco, Hermione and Astoria were the only members of their group still in the club. Blaise had gone home with a woman who may or may not have been part vampire and Daphne had gone home to bed, claiming an early morning, so it was left to Draco to wrangle the two drunken witches out of the Jewel and back to Blaise’s for the night, and for the first time in his life he was thankful for Hagrid’s tenure as the Care of Magical Creatures professor. An entire semester of Blastended Skrewts was the only thing that could have prepared him for the task.

“I was talking to someone!” Granger complained, trying to pull away from Draco as he led her from the bar, his arm wrapped in a vice-like grip around her waist as he tried to locate Astoria. “God, Malfoy, why do you have to be such a cunt!”

“It’s just what I’m good at,” he shrugged distractedly, zeroing in on Astoria making out with a girl on the other side of the room. “Aha!”

Ignoring Hermione’s shouts of protest and threats that she would cry rape or kidnap, he pulled her along beside him and made a B-line across the room.

“Oi, break it up!” He ordered loudly, grabbing Astoria’s wrist and giving it a sharp tug, successfully ripping the two witches apart.

“What?!?” Astoria whined, reeling slightly as she tried to look at him. “Geez Malfoy, did you clone yourself?”

“No, you’re just sloshed,” he informed her seriously. “It’s time to go.”

“I don’t want to go!” Hermione whined, trying to pull away from him once again. “I was making friends! Why do you have to be such a cockblock?”
“You were talking to Goyle,” Draco rolled his eyes. “The man is in a happy relationship. I did nothing but offer to get you home without splinching. Astoria, say goodnight and let’s go.”

“Goodnights are so boring,” Astoria attempted to roll her eyes, succeeding only in rolling her head in a full circle ending in her forehead slamming into Draco’s shoulder. “Owww!”

Draco closed his eyes and took a deep, calming breath, trying to recall the many meditation methods he’d studied in Thailand. He just had to get them outside, and then he could apparate back to the house, that was all.

“Going so soon?!” A deep voice spoke behind him and Draco felt Granger slip free.

“Hm, have you got a better offer?” she hummed, draping herself languidly over the sketchy wizard she’d been dancing with earlier.

“I know of a good afterparty,” the bloke leered at her. “We could keep this little party going.”

“An excellent idea,” Hermione grinned.

“No, it’s not,” Draco spoke up. “Granger, you’re coming home with me.”

“Sod off, Malfoy,” she sneered. “You’re not my keeper.”

“Perhaps, but I’m also not gonna let you run off with a man that makes Mundungus Fletcher look posh. Now, we’re going.” Draco walked over and promptly disentangled her from the other man’s grasp, not at all bothered when he let out a pained protest at the amount of force used. “Go find a gutter to sleep in,” Draco dismissed the wanker, waving him off with a sneer.

When he turned to grab Astoria again, he found her face plastered onto her partner’s face was again and let out an angry snarl. “OI!” he snapped his fingers next to her face irritatedly.

“What? You said to say goodnight, I was saying goodnight,” Astoria whined, giving the witch a pretty smile.

“Say it, not shove your tongue down her throat and spell it,” Draco snarled. “Now, let’s go.”

Astoria gave a long, huffy sigh, but nodded and turned away from the witch. Somewhere in the process of turning, though, she crossed her ankles together and tripped over herself, falling face first into a booth. Granger seemed to think this was the funniest thing to have ever happened, because she burst into a bout of uproarious laughter, hanging off Draco’s arm and threatening that she was going to pee herself.

“How the two of you have managed getting home at night before now is astonishing,” Draco muttered to himself as he pulled Astoria to her feet and promptly tossed her over his shoulder, holding onto her legs to keep her from sliding onto the floor.

“Mione, look!” Astoria squealed. “I’m upside down!”

This sent the pair into another bout of giggles, which certainly didn’t help Hermione maintain her upright position as Draco half carried her to the door.

The minute they were through the door, he tugged Hermione tight against him, turned on the spot and apparated into the foyer of Blaise’s house, where she dropped unceremoniously to the floor, looking rather confused by the whole affair.
Astoria whooped gleefully as Draco bent down and set her back on her feet, catching her around the waist when she stumbled back a few steps, but not bothering to hold her upright when she dropped onto the floor next to Hermione.

“Stori!” Hermione smiled brightly as the blonde girl laid down and put her head in her lap. “Hi!”

“Hey, Min,” Astoria smiled back, her eyes already closing sleepily.

“Right,” Draco huffed, shaking his head at the pair of them. “You’re in, you’re in one piece, I’m going to bed.”

“Want some help?” Hermione offered cheekily, looking up from stroking Astoria’s hair to smirk at him. “We’re very good at helping in bed.”

“We are,” Astoria agreed immediately.

“I don’t doubt it,” Draco rolled his eyes patronizingly. “But I think I’ll let you two keep each other company tonight. Do you need help finding your beds?”

“Beds are for closers,” Hermione scoffed. “Besides, this is a very comfy spot right here.”

She laid back on the marble floor and stretched her arms above her head, forcing her tank top to ride up over her taut stomach. Astoria lay beside her and began to lick at the exposed skin, humming something about vanilla, and Draco decided it would be best to leave while they were distracted, slipping quickly out of the entryway and up the stairs to his own room.

“Are you alright, love?” A kindly man in his late fifties, dressed in a porter’s uniform crouched down to speak to the little girl stood on his platform. She had big frizzy curls and eyes that seemed to be taking in every little thing around her, soaking it all in and storing it away for later use. She couldn’t have been more than 12, but she seemed to be all alone as she scanned the crowds, carefully studying each passerby.

“Are you lost?” The man asked.

“No,” the girl spoke calmly, her voice full of certainty. “I’m just waiting for my parents. I’ve been away at school.”

“Ah, home for the holidays,” the man nodded gently. “Excited to be back?”

“Oh yes,” she smiled brightly at him, revealing large, crooked teeth. The smile might have seemed awkward on most children, making them self-conscious, but this girl seemed perfectly at ease and so it made her all the more endearing, and the man felt his own smile grow.

“Are you sure your parents have the right day marked?” he inquired. “It’s just I’ve noticed you’ve been waiting here quite a while, perhaps they got confused.”

“I’m sure they’ve just run into some traffic or such,” the girl shrugged easily. “They’re dentists, you know, and they have a practice of their own. Perhaps they had a particularly difficult case.”

“Dentists, you say? A noble profession indeed. I’ll tell you what, how about I wait with you until they get here?” the man offered.
“Oh, that’s alright,” the little girl shook her head quickly, the smallest hint of nervousness creeping in. “I wouldn’t want to keep you from your job. I’m sure you’re very busy.”

“Not at all,” he shook his head and offered his hand, guiding her over to a nearby bench and taking a seat. The girl didn’t quite seem to believe him, her eyes showing a hint of fear, not wanting to be a bother, but the man simply smiled warmly and patted the seat next to him.

“I’m Walter,” he introduced himself.

She put her hand out and shook his primly. “A pleasure to meet you.”

“You as well,” Walter chuckled warmly. “Have you enjoyed being away at school? My granddaughter went off last year, but she didn’t seem to care for it at first.”

Slowly, the little girl began to loosen up, chatting brightly with Walter about his grandchildren and her own family, explaining that she wanted to go into law when she grew up to help those less fortunate. Before Walter knew it, three quarters of an hour had gone by, and there was still no sign of the girl’s parents.

“Do you think perhaps we should try telephoning?” He suggested calmly, not wanting to worry the girl when she seemed so at ease. “Perhaps they’ve simply lost track of the time?”

Before she could give her answer, however, a harried man in his late forties came blustering onto the platform, his eyes settling on the girl and narrowing ever so slightly.

“Dad!” she beamed and jumped to her feet, rushing forward to hug him. “I’ve missed you!”

Her arms wrapped tightly around his waist, but Walter watched in concern as the man only patted her on the back dispassionately.

“Sorry to be late,” he apologized tersely. “Got caught up at work. Who’s this?”

He nodded to Walter and the older man stood, joining the father and daughter and offering his hand genially.

“Walter, sir,” he introduced himself. “I’ve just been keeping your daughter company until you arrived. You’ve a bright girl there.”

“Thank you,” the man nodded, but instead of the usual proud gleam one would expect of a father, his expression remained neutral. “Come along, dear.”

“It was lovely to meet you Walter,” the little girl smiled brightly, obviously not at all affected by her father’s seeming disinterest. “Thank you for waiting with me.”

“It was an absolute pleasure,” Walter lifted his cap to her and she giggled slightly, a pink blush colouring her cheeks.

“Come along.” Her father repeated sternly, taking her arm and leading her off the platform.
Hermione woke with a start, a familiar aching in her chest. She’d had another dream. They’d been happening ever since the war ended, no doubt a side effect of all the horrors that she had witnessed. Unlike her nightmares of Bellatrix or Voldemort and the final battle, however, she never remembered these dreams. They were so vivid at the time, enough so that they always evoked physical and emotional responses, but the moment she woke she forgot them almost entirely, left only with vague shapes and shadows to piece together.

Opening her eyes, she realized that she was still very drunk and alone in her room at Blaise’s. Not fancying being alone, she stumbled out of bed, dragging her comforter behind her, and down the hall to Blaise’s room, next door.

“Granger?” A voice rough with sleep questioned her as she prodded their body softly, urging them to move over.

“Had a bad dream,” Hermione mumbled, crawling into the space they’d made and snuggling into the body, falling back asleep almost immediately.

Draco Malfoy frowned, confused for a moment as to why Granger had decided to crawl into bed with him and not one of the other members of the household. He didn’t waste much time trying to work it out, however, as she snuggled closer to him, burrowing against his chest comfortably. The feeling of her small body tucked into his was rather calming, and before he knew it, he had fallen back asleep as well, smirking at the sound of her quiet snores.
Chapter 6

Hermione woke to her head absolutely pounding and groaned. *Salazar’s tits! She had to stop drinking Goyle’s ‘signature drink’.*

With far more effort than should have been necessary, she slowly opened her eyes and started feeling around for her wand, praying that she hadn’t dropped it somewhere and lost it again. She was getting really tired of having to ask Daphne to summon it for her.

“Has anyone ever told you that you snore?”

Hermione let out a terrified squeak, and immediately winced at the high-pitched sound, cursing herself.

“In a little pain, are you?” Draco chuckled, his voice mercifully quiet. “Here.”

He reached out and put a hand on her shoulder, rolling her over onto her back and setting a vial in her hand. She gave him a quick grunt of thanks, then tipped the contents into her mouth, relishing in the bitter taste that she knew would get rid of the pain throbbing through her entire body.

“Can we just let the record show that I did warn you that drink was spiked,” Draco spoke again once she’d finished.

“It was not,” Hermione said, her voice thick with sleep. “This is entirely Goyle’s fault.”

She opened her eyes properly and let out a gasp as she realized that she was in bed with Draco Malfoy!

“What the fuck are you doing?!” she demanded, pulling a blanket up and around herself before realizing that she was wearing one of Harry’s old quidditch jerseys.

“You’re the one who climbed into bed with me, Granger,” Draco informed her coolly. “You’ll notice that we’re in *my* room.”

He waved around to indicate the walls plastered in quidditch posters and Slytherin banners, leftover from his childhood. He and Blaise had each had a room in the others home growing up.

“Gods, how smashed was I?” Hermione groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose in distress.

“What the fuck are you doing?!” she demanded, pulling a blanket up and around herself before realizing that she was wearing one of Harry’s old quidditch jerseys.

“You’re the one who climbed into bed with me, Granger,” Draco informed her coolly. “You’ll notice that we’re in my room.”

He waved around to indicate the walls plastered in quidditch posters and Slytherin banners, leftover from his childhood. He and Blaise had each had a room in the others home growing up.

“How smashed was I?” Hermione groaned, pinching the bridge of her nose in distress.

“Pretty smashed,” Draco assured her. “I thought you’d gone to bed with Stori, but then you showed up here.”

“She sleeps with Daphne when she’s drunk,” Hermione shook her head. “When she can find her, at least.”

Draco shrugged. “All I know is that you crawled in here sometime around four, mumbled something about a bad dream and cuddled up before promptly falling asleep and beginning to snore like a Crumple-Horned Snorkack.”

“I do not snore,” Hermione muttered, her face paling at the mention of bad dreams.

“You do,” Draco assured her. “Like a small train.”

“Nobody’s ever complained before,” she snapped testily.
“Could that possibly be because your bedmates are usually as wasted as you are?” Draco mused, a teasing glint in his eye.

“If it was so bothersome you could have just kicked me out,” Hermione snarled.

“I could have,” Draco agreed. “But I never say no to a cuddle.”

While Hermione sat gaping at him for this admission, Draco smirked and got up, pulling a ratty sweatshirt on over his bare chest and grabbing a pair of socks.

“I’m going to get some breakfast. Coffee?”

“T-tea,” Hermione requested shyly, still surprised.

“Coming right up.” Draco nodded and headed off to the kitchen, leaving Hermione to wonder what in Merlin’s name had just happened.

In the weeks that followed, Draco didn’t have much contact with Hermione. Having been out of the country for so long, there was a quite a bit of work he had to do to settle back into England. He’d been spending his days in meetings with Malfoy companies and shareholders, checking on the status of the empire bequeathed to him upon his father’s imprisonment. He hadn’t been too chuffed about the comings and goings of things while he was away, but he figured that now he was back he should ensure that things were still running smoothly—this was his mother’s livelihood after all. Not that they couldn’t live more than comfortably on the money that was already in their vaults, there was enough to finance their lavish lifestyle ten times over, but he wasn’t about to let his family’s entire life’s work fall to pieces. He may not agree with their moral barometer, but he still had pride in his name—at least he did now.

When he’d first left England, he’d been running. Running from the sneers and glares, the whispers that trailed behind him in the streets, the malicious, vile sound of his name on people’s lips: “Draco Malfoy, Death Eater.”

It didn’t matter that he had been declared innocent, that he had openly apologized for his family and promised the wizarding population that he didn’t share his father’s beliefs, they only saw his name—and that name was too shrouded in darkness for people to let it go. He had wanted nothing more than to set Malfoy Manor ablaze with fiendfyre and watch the entire legacy burn. He had been ready to disown that side of his family completely and adopt his mother’s house—Black. Narcissa had begged him not to, however. Malfoy Manor was still her home, she had told him, and she was still a Malfoy. Despite his flaws—and there were many, to that she could agree—she had still loved her husband deeply. She had taken his name by choice, and it was a choice that she would stand by to her dying breath. It was only her insistence that had kept Draco from leaving it all to return to dust, but now that he’d had the time and space to think on it, he was happy that he had agreed.

As a child, he had been proud to be a Malfoy, it was only as he grew older and came to realize that his father’s ideals were so wrong that he had become ashamed. Now that his father was gone, however, it was Draco and his mother that bore the family name and it was them that held the power to redeem it. One day, Draco hoped that he would have children of his own to pass the name onto and should that happen he didn’t want them to be ashamed of their heritage. He wanted them to be
able to say they were Malfoys with the same pride that he had on his first night at Hogwarts, and so he had decided that he would make the Malfoy name into one worthy of pride once again.

In each and every one of the meetings he held, he made sure his personal ideals were made abundantly clear- the bigoted days of Lucius Malfoy’s reign were over, anyone who couldn’t leave the past behind could take their leave.

Thankfully, there hadn’t been too many high-level people that refused to accept these changes, and those that had were quickly and easily replaced. With all his underlings on board, Draco moved his focus to charity. His mother had, of course, been active in many charities as a society wife, but Draco was interested in more than the occasional donation. At his order, a portion of earnings from each and every company under the Malfoy umbrella was relocated to a different charity, ranging from funding for Hogwarts to centres to aid Muggle parents in adjusting to wizard culture. He was even in talks about forming his own charity, but he couldn’t think of what exactly he would like to raise funds for as of yet.

Between company meetings, Draco also met with several people about remodeling Malfoy Manor. He would be discussing the issue further with his mother when he visited her for Christmas, but he wanted to have plans that he could get her opinion on. One day, he did want to move back into his family home, but before that could happen there needed to be drastic changes. He was having the entire wing that Voldemort had inhabited demolished and rebuilt, to begin with. It was the only way he would be able to begin to clean the manor of the horrific memories it now held. The rest of the manor was to be redecorated as well, the cold, dark vibe that echoed from it’s every corner to be replaced with a light, warm atmosphere. There had been a time when the Manor had been a home, Draco wanted it to feel that way again.

It would take work, of course, and more than a couple curse breakers to help him clear out all the ancient dark magic that was held within, but Draco was determined. When he was done, no matter how long that took, no one would be able to tell that the darkest wizard to ever live had haunted the halls- least of all Draco. Until then, he had decided to stay at Blaise’s.

“What’s the point in buying a house or renting a shitty flat when you’ve got all this!” His friend had drunkenly argued, spinning in a circle with his arms thrust out to indicate the house they stood in. He had subsequently fallen flat on his ass, giving Draco a good chuckle, and convincing him to stay for the entertainment value, if nothing else.

He would have been lying, though, if he hadn’t admitted that part of the draw to staying at Blaise’s was the possibility of stumbling upon Granger at any moment. From that first night he had been home, Draco had found himself drawn to her. She was so different than he remembered, and yet surprisingly the same, all at once. She was just as stubborn and argumentative as ever, ready to pick a fight at any moment and fully equipped with well-rounded arguments no matter the subject or her level of intoxication.

She was also still a bookworm, though Draco doubted that many people would realize that. He only knew because he had stumbled upon her in Blaise’s family library a few times, her nose buried in a book so completely that she never knew he was there. Those moments usually occurred in the wee hours of the morning, when Draco woke up and could not get back to sleep- an affliction he had suffered from his entire life but had been made understandably worse by the return of Voldemort when he was fifteen. On those nights, he had always found it best to seek the comfort of books, allowing himself to be engrossed by the words on the pages so that he forgot about whatever had been ailing his mind. It seemed that Granger shared the same affinity for late night reading and on the nights that he stumbled upon her Draco, always took the opportunity to study the witch. From behind a nearby shelf, he would observe the way she sat curled into a ball in the corner of an
armchair—always the same exact position, in the same exact chair. The position didn’t look at all comfortable to Draco, she always seemed so cramped, but she never moved. Beside her, just close enough to be useful, a candle hovered offering the least amount of light possible to read under. Her hair fell loosely around her shoulders, occasionally drifting into her eyes, forcing her to push it away so she could focus. She always seemed annoyed by the strands, but she never tied them back or made any attempt to keep them away from her eyes, despite the always present hairband on her wrist. And she was always wearing a plaid shirt—the same one that he had seen her wearing that night at Hogwarts when he’d caught her smoking.

Draco wasn’t sure what brought her to the library on those nights—they were never nights that he had seen her in the house beforehand—but he never interrupted her to ask. The silence and solitude that a person sought from a library in the middle of the night was something he could respect, he wasn’t going to deny it to her when he craved it so much himself. He did, however, bring it up to Blaise a few weeks into his return, having run into Granger for the fifth time.

“She comes and goes as she pleases,” the Italian had shrugged. “I don’t know when she’s here and when she’s not here half the time.”

“She didn’t come home with you last night, though, did she?” Draco asked.

“Nah, she went off with some muggle bloke I think. Must not have been a very good shag.” Blaise smiled smugly to himself and went back to his lunch, not having answered Draco’s questions at all.

“It was nearly three in the morning and Draco had been watching her for about half an hour, sat on the floor a few shelves away with a book in his lap. As usual, she hadn’t even flinched when he walked into the library, so Draco was a little taken aback when she spoke. He recovered quickly, however, setting his book down slowly and giving up the pretense of reading.

“And you’re telling me this so that I’ll stop?” he asked calmly.

“Merely letting you know,” she replied blandly. “Do what you want.”

“What are you reading an old potions book for?” Draco asked, taking this as an invitation.

“Shits and giggles,” Hermione drawled.

“Just because I keep ignoring you, it doesn’t mean I don’t know you’re watching me.” Hermione spoke in a monotone, not looking up from the potions book she was reading.

“On the planet? At Blaise’s? In England?” Draco mused. “You’ll have to be a bit more specific.”

“In this library, dipshit,” Hermione rolled her eyes. “At 3 in the morning.”

“Trouble sleeping,” he answered simply. “And you?”
“Drug fueled insomnia.”

“You know, I hear there’s a fix for that,” Draco quipped.

“Not one that’s worth the side effects.”

They fell into silence once again, Hermione still reading her potions book and Draco still sitting on the floor watching her. This was the most he’d talked to her in three years, and he had a feeling that if he said too much he would jinx things and she’d clam up. So instead, he waited. He didn’t know why exactly, but something told him that if he was patient she would keep speaking. He was rewarded for his silence when she shut her book and glared at him.

“What?” Hermione asked exasperatedly. “What is so fucking interesting about me that you feel the need to sit there all the fucking time and study me?”

Draco thought carefully about his answer, tipping his head to the side and frowning slightly. “You never used to be so vulgar,” he observed. “It’s odd hearing you curse.”

“Shouldn’t be too foreign,” she scoffed. “We both know I’ve cursed people before.”

Though he knew that she was trying to sound nonchalant, Draco could hear the vague hint of anger in the back of her throat and he saw a flash of hatred in her eyes, but that same gut feeling that had ordered him to be patient told him that she didn’t hate him. No, the hate in her eyes was only for herself.

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Draco discovered the potions shop solely on accident. Having been away from Wizarding England for so long, he found himself rather turned around in the greatly changed labyrinth that was Diagon Alley. He had only planned on being there for an hour, he was going to pick up a few potions ingredients he needed, swing by Madam Malkins for some new work robes and perhaps sniff around the bookstore for a few minutes. Three hours after stepping through the Leaky Cauldron, though, he was still wandering the streets in a daze. Madam Malkins had been easy, the woman had known him since he was 5 and took all of ten seconds to ensure that his measurements hadn’t changed since he’d last shopped with her before sending him on his way and promising to send him the robes and the bill when she was finished, but where the hell had the potions shop gone?! He had to have wandered through the entire alley twice now, the looks he was getting from passersby were absolutely accusatory and he couldn’t even blame them- it certainly looked like he was casing the joint.

He’d been about to just stuff it all and make Blaise come with him the next day when he noticed the shop jutting out from a corner he hadn’t remembered seeing before. A narrow looking building of old bricks, it sat right on the edge of the corner where Diagon and Nocturn Alley crossed. He’d pointedly been staying away from the dark street, not wanting to give anyone the impression that he was still involved with dark magic, but the little shop was exactly what he’d been looking for. The sign that hung over the pristine white door read: Potions and Supplies. Figuring that this must have replaced Slug and Jiggers Draco shrugged and turned the handle, a tiny bell above the door signalling his entrance.

The shop may have seemed small from the outside, but as soon as Draco stepped through the door,
he realized how misleading an appearance it had been. The place was bigger than the ballroom in Malfoy Manor - possibly even bigger than the Great Hall at Hogwarts. The walls were lined with shelves holding potions and salves and pills for anything a person could possibly want, and things they’d never even known they could have. Displays and samples were offered across the floor at small kiosks like the ones Draco had seen in American shopping malls, each counter manned by a witch or wizard. A large serving counter at the rear of the shop seemed to offer personalized potions, prepared and bottled right before their eyes, and kitty corner to it was a large sign declaring a separate area of the shop just for ingredients.

The sheer vastness of the place was enough to take Draco’s breath away, and then he caught sight of some of the potions they were carrying - Pox-B-Gone: For the Dragon Pox that just won’t quit; Better Not Bitter: Cold Remedies that don’t make you cringe; Puss-B-Gone: Spattergroit Salve. The array of products seemed to cover just about every ailment he’d ever heard of, Wizarding and Muggle, and a few that he hadn’t known existed. As he perused the store, studying its many offerings closely, a stalky wizard who didn’t look like he could have been out of Hogwarts more than a year sidled towards him donning a blue apron and a nametag that read: Hello my name is Richie, how may I help you?

The uniform was pointedly muggle, and Draco felt the inkling of suspicion creeping into his mind.

“Help you find anything?” Richie asked.

“Just browsing,” Draco started to dismiss him, then noticed the display of hangover potions behind him and changed his mind. “Those are quite amazing.”

Richie smiled brightly. “They’re a real godsend some mornings. We’ve actually got some more in back of a more… delicate nature, shall we say?”

“Delicate?” Draco frowned, certain he knew exactly what the boy meant, but wondering just how he was planning to explain it.

“They cover substances that aren’t as openly purchased, if you know what I mean,” Richie expanded, giving Draco a quick ‘nudge, nudge’ in the most awkward possible way.

“Right,” Draco nodded, trying not to look at the boy like he was an imbecile. “I’ve been away for a while, so this is my first time here, who’s your provider?”

“Oh, we make it all in house,” Richie said proudly. “Right here in the building.”

“Really?” Draco raised an eyebrow in feigned surprise, wondering just how lucky he had gotten wandering into the shop. “And who does the brewing?”

“We have a professional potioneer and a group of apprentices that work under her,” Richie explained. “They work just over the other end of the shop, back through where you can find the ingredients. You can even watch them brew your potions.”

“Interesting,” Draco nodded slowly. “And who is your potioneer? She must be truly talented to have invented something like this.”

“She, uh, prefers to remain anonymous,” Richie paled slightly and began to shuffle his feet, obviously not used to people asking about his boss. Draco smirked victoriously - this was Granger’s business.

“The magic in these is really amazing, I’d really like to speak with her. Is she here?” he asked innocently, looking towards the brewing area Richie had alluded to.
“Oh, um, no, uh, she doesn’t really, uh, work in the shop,” Richie stammered, his gaze focussed squarely on his shuffling feet.

“But surely you can get a hold of her,” Draco reasoned. “She should be on hand to answer any in-depth questions.”

“Well, we, uh-“

Before he could stammer and stutter his way through another lie, Richie was saved by a willowy blonde witch in a purple apron, who was obviously some sort of supervisor. 

“Hello, is there anything I can help you with, sir?” She smiled tightly at Draco, her eyes darting to Richie’s nervous form and wrinkling into a small frown. “Richie, are you alright?”

“I was just asking to speak with the potion maker,” Draco explained to the witch easily. “The magic is absolutely astounding, I’d like to ask about her brewing methods.”

“Unfortunately, they work alone,” the blonde’s smile grew slightly forced, and Draco took note of the way she avoided using a gender specific pronoun.

“I was just explaining that,” Richie piped up.

“You’re welcome to speak with our First Apprentice, Gertrude, if you like,” the woman offered. “You’ll find her in the brewing room, just through there.”

She pointed Draco in the correct direction and made to walk away, taking Richie with her, but Draco wasn’t so easily put off.

“I really must insist.” He put on his most lordly tone, internally cringing at how much he sounded like his father. “I’d like to know the exact process that goes into the brewing.”

The blonde witch, who Draco could now see wore a nametag that read Harmony, set her jaw and turned to Draco with an irritated crease in her brow. “I’m sorry sir, but it’s just not possible for you to speak with our Head Potioneer. Their work is incredibly private and done in a separate space, where they are not to be disturbed.”

Draco’s smirk only widened as he leaned forward to speak to Harmony quietly. “Tell her that a ferret would like a word,” he ordered, giving the witch a knowing look and nodding when he saw her frown deepen. “I’ll just go look over the ingredients while I wait.”

While the two employees whispered furiously to one another, Draco strolled off to the other section of the shop, grabbing a basket as he took in the Supermarket-like set up.

He’d just finished selecting some fresh Eye of Newt when Harmony approached him again.

“I was told to tell you to fuck off,” she muttered, obviously uncomfortable speaking to a customer in such a way.

“I thought you might be,” Draco smirked. “Thank you for your help. Where can I get these rung up?”

“J-just over there,” Harmony stammered, pointing to a check-out counter across from the door, obviously surprised at his perfectly calm reaction.

“Great, thanks very much.” Draco gave her his most dashing smile and went about his shopping
happily. Perhaps it hadn’t been such a useless day after all.

Draco spent the next week studying Granger’s shop, examining each and every product and speaking with all the employees, each time trying to get someone to admit it was her place and each time failing. He quickly learned that there was only a select few who actually knew their employer, many of them simply shrugged and pointed him towards Harmony, who he’d learned was the manager. When he’d spoken with the Apprentices, they had pointed him to a collection of handwritten books that contained their brewing instructions. None of them had ever worked with the Head Potioneer, but they all seemed to worship at her feet nonetheless. The amount of cloak and dagger mystery that surrounded the building had Draco at a loss, he just didn’t understand why Granger was so opposed to anyone knowing it was hers. It was amazing, the things she had done, anyone else would have been publishing papers and textbooks and screaming their accomplishments from the rooftops, but Granger remained absolutely silent.

After his first failed attempt to get her to see him, he took to sending members of staff to speak with her on a regular basis, each time receiving further and more prolific profanity strewn responses. When he saw Granger at Blaise’s later in the week, she’d pointedly told him to leave her alone and stop coming to her shop scaring her employees, before doing a line of coke and disappearing into Blaise’s bedroom. The next morning, Draco had been waiting when Harmony came to open up at 6.

“God, you’re like a rash that just won’t go away!” she huffed, maneuvering around him to unlock the door. “Don’t you have anything better to do with your time?”

“Not really,” Draco shrugged. “I’m currently between jobs and I quite enjoy hanging around here. It’s very educational.”

“You know she’s threatening to ward you from the building,” Harmony warned.

“She’s told me,” Draco smirked. “It’s only made me more interested in what she’s got hidden in here. Now, be honest, there’s another way in isn’t there?”

Harmony glared at him and shoved open the door, attempting to close it behind her, but Draco simply strolled past her and hopped up onto the counter.

“Come on, Harmony. Do me a solid,” he begged. “I won’t tell her it was you.”

“You won’t need to, because I’m not telling you.”

“It is my right as a consumer to know how the products I am purchasing are being made,” Draco recited haughtily. “It’s the law.”

“You do know how they’re made, you’ve read the potions book,” she glared at him accusingly. “Which you’re not supposed to do. Quit flirting with my employees to get them to do things for you!”

“I did not flirt,” Draco scoffed. “I simply asked nicely.”

“GOD FUCKING DAMMIT!” Hermione’s pissed off shriek made Draco and Harmony both jump,
and they turned to see the witch storming at them with her wand out, a furious look in her eye.

“Oh, Merlin, Hermione I’m sorry, I was just trying to get rid of him,” Harmony apologized immediately, looking absolutely terrified.

Draco, on the other hand, grinned. “Morning Granger, you look positively radiant today. Are you doing something new with your hair?”

Hermione sneered at him, waving her wand and conjuring a number of angry birds, sending them flying at Draco’s head.

“See you later, then!” He continued smiling as he ran for the door.

“What has you so obsessed with her?!” Blaise demanded as he listened to Draco recount his morning. “She obviously doesn’t want to hang out with you.”

“She fascinates me,” Draco shrugged, sipping lazily at a cup of coffee.

Blaise scoffed and began reaching around for a lighter, deciding to take a few hits from a half-filled bong. “You fancy her,” he argued, breathing out a cloud of smoke.

“I do not fancy her,” Draco shook his head.

“You fancy the pants off of her,” Blaise laughed. “As you should, she’s a fantastic shag!”

“Please don’t say things like that,” Draco cringed slightly. “I don’t want to know.”

“Because you fancy her,” Blaise smirked, putting his head down to the smoking apparatus once again.

Draco simply rolled his eyes, not about to get into an argument about it. He didn’t fancy Granger- he worried about her, he was interested in her as a person, but he didn’t fancy her.

A week later, Draco had been to the shop three more times, each time asking for Granger and each time being sent on his way, but at some point, the cursing had stopped, and the denials had become slightly more civil- either that or her employees were too scared to repeat the expletives she was inventing. Either way, when he came across her in the library once again, he decided to have a go and try to talk to her.

“What are you doing reading old potions book?” he asked. “Every time I find you in here, you’re looking at old books. What’s the point when you probably know all the potions by heart?”

Hermione frowned at him for a minute, seemingly weighing the options of blowing him off again or throwing him a bone. Apparently ignoring him was getting boring, as she settled on the latter.
“Research,” she grumbled. “I’m working on something.”

“For your shop?”

When she gave a sharp nod of acknowledgement, Draco decided to press his luck.

“Why is it a secret?” he asked. “Your shop, I mean. Blaise said that the ministry has bought patents for some of your stuff, why not tell people you’re the one who did it?”

“Why should I tell them I did?” she countered testily. “What does it matter?”

“I suppose it doesn’t,” Draco shrugged, backing off the subject. “What are you researching?” He asked, hoping he didn’t sound too interested. It seemed that that was what triggered Granger’s defenses, anything more than idle chitchat forced a protective wall up around her, sheathing her in anger and evasiveness.

“Hangover potions,” she supplied tersely.

“I hate to tell you this, but they’ve already invented those,” he joked. “Been around quite a while actually.”

“I’m aware,” Hermione snarled at him.

“And you seem to have perfected them,” Draco continued. “I’ve seen all the varieties you’ve got in the shop. You’ve even got them narrowed down to specific types of alcohol.”

“I’ve got one left.” She snapped, still not looking up from her book, and Draco remembered what Blaise had said when he told him that Granger was a Potioneer.

“Ecstasy?” he guessed.

Her silence and pursed lips were answer enough.

“Maybe I could help,” Draco mused, shocking himself almost as much as he seemed to have shocked Granger, who finally glanced at him over her book. Sure, he’d enjoyed annoying her by nosing around her shop, and yes, he was certainly interested in her techniques, but he hadn’t even thought about offering to work with her until now… the thought wasn’t at all unappealing, however. Granger may have been an insufferable swot in their youth, but he had actually enjoyed working on projects with her throughout Eighth year, and the thought of working together again had him feeling slightly giddy. As long as he could convince her to say yes.

“I’ve spent the last two years studying healing, perhaps I could offer some as unfounded insight to your cause.” Draco added, hoping that he didn’t sound too desperate, because the more he thought about it, the more he liked the idea.

Silence settled over the room once more as Hermione mulled over his offer, her face giving absolutely nothing away. As the silence grew tenser and awkward, Draco almost opened his mouth to take the offer back, realizing that he may have pushed a bit too far, then Hermione got to her feet and headed for the door.

“I’ll think about it.” She spoke over her shoulder, and without giving Draco a chance to answer, closed the door behind her and left.
Chapter 7

It always started with a drink. It didn't matter how drunk she was, or how obvious it was that she was already rolling, they always wanted to buy her a drink- and she let them. Who was she to say no to free drinks?

So, they go to the bar and he'd order some sort of beer and then turn to her with a questioning look.

"Gin and tonic," she told the bartender. "Light on the tonic."

The bartender nodded, and the new guy smirked- he knew an easy lay when he saw one.

Once they had their drinks, he would lead her to a secluded section of the bar and pretend he wanted to get to know her, asking the obvious questions: What's your name? Come here often? What do you do?

Tonight, she decided to answer.

"I'm a chemist," she tells the muggle.

She can tell immediately that he's doubting his initial judgments- smart girls aren't easy lays. She smiles seductively and knocks back the rest of her G&T, then quirks her head as the song changes.

"Come on," she holds her hand out. "Dance with me."

The muggle smiles and finishes his own drink, then allows her to lead him back to the dancefloor.

By the time last call goes out, she's drunk off her tits and horny as fuck, and he doesn't have any trouble convincing her to come home with him.

The sex is sloppy- is there any other kind when you're drunk? - but the muggle is surprisingly good, and Hermione can feel herself fading when they're done. She should reach for her bag and take a sobering potion, so she can go home, but she doesn't. Instead, she allows the fog of exhaustion to pull her in.

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Obliviate... Avada Kedavra... Crucio!... Obliviate... Obliviate... Obliviate...

'Can I help you?' Monica Wilkins smiled warmly, standing at the cash register in the florist shop.

'Are you alright, dear?'

Hermione can only stare, it's like looking at a ghost.

'Dear?' Monica Wilkins frowns and makes to move towards her.

Hermione shakes her head and forces a smile. 'Sorry, you just looked familiar,' she lies. 'Caught me off guard, is all. I was hoping to order an arrangement for my mum.'

'Aren't you sweet,' Monica smiles. 'Well, let's see what we can do. What kind of flowers does she like?'
'She's rather partial to Hermione Roses.'

'A woman after my own heart,' Monica laughs. 'I have to say, those are my favourites too. Always thought Hermione would be a lovely name for a daughter.'

Hermione smiled tightly and nodded, unable to speak due to the lump in her throat.

While Monica is distracted, she magics the door shut and flips the sign to 'Closed', then raises her wand unsteadily and whispers the reversing spell.

'Hermione?!” her mothers gasps, looking around her in confusion. 'What- Where? Hermione, where are we?'

'Hi Mum,' she chokes back tears, willing herself to keep it together. 'How are you?'

'I'm bloody confused,' Jean Granger replies testily. 'What on earth is going on?'

'We should have a chat,' Hermione offered. 'Come on, this way.'

With a forced air of confidence, she leads her mother past a curtain behind the register and up a flight of stairs to the flat above the flower shop her parents have been running for the last year. With a flick of her wand, the door opens to reveal her father sitting at a kitchen table, hunched over a pile of paperwork.

'Monica, dear, would you mind fetching me the calculator?' Wendell Wilkins asks, not looking up. 'I seem to have confused this one.'

'Monica?' Hermione's mother turns to her questioningly. 'Who in the hell is Monica?!

Before Wendell can respond, Hermione points her wand and mutters the same incantation as before. He drops the pencil he was holding and gasps, looking around in confusion.

'What the hell?' he frowns and looks up, noticing his daughter and wife. 'Hermione? Jean? What's going on?'

'We need to talk,' Hermione says seriously, gesturing for them all to sit. Without waiting, she takes the closest chair and begins to speak. 'This might take a while,' she prefaxes. 'There's... there's quite a lot you need to know, and for it to make sense I have to start at the beginning.'

Her parents only watch her suspiciously.

'You remember my friend Harry, don't you?' When they nod tersely, she continues. 'What you have to understand about Harry, is that he's very special in our world. He's... he's our saviour.'

She tells them everything, then. Relating each and every adventure she's accompanied Harry on, trying to explain the situation that she'd found herself in. And then she tells them what she did to them, and their suspicion turns to anger.

'You have to understand, they would have killed you,' she tried to explain herself. 'This was the only way.'

'How dare you!' her father cries. 'I always knew that this magic shit would come to no good.'

The look of disgust on his face is enough to make Hermione reel back in shock, and when she looks over to find the same exact look on her mother's face, she doesn't know what to make of it. They'd always been so supportive, so loving and encouraging. They'd told her they were proud to have a
witch in the family- they'd never been so proud of her in all their lives.

'I told you Jean, the moment that blasted letter arrived I told you!' Mr. Granger continued angrily. 'But no, you thought we should give it a chance. Well, here's what your chance got us- an ungrateful child that plays with our minds. What else have you taken away, I wonder?' He sneered at Hermione. 'How long have we been living this lovely little life you thought up?'

'I-I- Hermione stammered, trying to wrap her mind around what was happening. This wasn't right. Her parents loved her, they were proud of her, they would understand what she'd done and why she'd done it. She'd just been trying to protect them!

'You think you've got the right to play God?' her father continued. 'Just because you've got some sort of demonic powers, you haven't got the right to go playing with people's minds. How dare you do this!'

'Please,' Hermione begged, turning to her mother in desperation. 'That's not how it was. I was trying to protect you!'

'The only thing we need protection from is you,' Jean spat. 'To think, we took care of you for all those years, let you live in our house and associate with our family. Have you been playing games with them too? Hm? Is this what you lot do with your 'precious gifts'?'

Her tone made it perfectly clear that she didn't think it was a gift at all.

'I've had enough of this!' Mr. Granger roared suddenly, getting to his feet. 'I'm going to do what I've wanted to since the day we found out what a demonic creature you are. You're not going to get to manipulate us anymore.'

He got to his feet and picked up the phone, dialing triple 0.

'What are you doing?' Hermione choked, fighting back desperate sobs. 'Please, stop!'

'Sit back down, or so help me!' Her father growled, a dangerous look in his eyes. 'Yes, I'd like to report a crime—'

Hermione didn't wait to hear what kind of crime he was going to accuse her of. Shaking from fear and shock, she turned on the spot and apparated back to her hotel room in Melbourne, where she collapsed on the bed and broke down in tears.

'Hey… Hey, are you alright?'

Hermione's eyes snapped open at the feel of a hand shaking her, she rolled over and pinned her attacker's hands down above his head, straddling him and pressing an arm to his windpipe. When she reached for her wand, the man turned the tables and rolled on top of her, now it was her hands that were pinned.

"Hey!" the man snapped sleepily as she tried to free herself. He didn't sound like a Death Eater, there was nothing muffling his voice- no mask, then…

Slowly, the night started coming back to her- the bar, the muggle, the drinks- she looked up and stilled, realizing what was happening.

"Christ!" the muggle cursed and rolled off of her, releasing her hands. "What the fuck was that?"

Hermione didn't bother answering. Free from his hold, she quickly pulled a shirt over her head and
got up, feeling around for the rest of her things.

"Hey, wait!" the muggle argued. "I didn't mean to be an arse. What are you doing?"

She ignored him, having located her trousers and underpants. She found her purse and shoes a moment later and pulled out her wand. She wishes she'd found her bra, but she wasn't about to spend any more time looking for it, she'd just have to write it off as a loss. Behind her, she could hear the muggle getting out of bed, trying to follow her. Just as he reached the bedroom door, she rushed out the front and disapparated.

Back in her own flat, she crumpled. Dropping to the floor in the middle of the living room, she put her head in her hands and sobbed.

When the tears passed, she changed into her pyjamas- a pair of shorts and a plaid shirt- and flooed to Blaise's.

"Good Evening Miss." Mippy popped into the entry room upon her arrival.

"Hi Mippy." Hermione nodded in greeting, wondering if the elf ever slept- she always seemed to be up when Hermione arrived, no matter the hour.

"Is Miss wanting a candle?" the elf asked knowingly, conjuring one.

"Thank you," Hermione took it and waved her hand to light the wick. "Have a good night, Mippy."

The elf nodded and left Hermione to her own devices, disappearing with another pop.

In the library, Hermione selected one of the many ancient tomes she had set aside to study for her inventions and curled up in her chair. It was the least comfortable piece of furniture in the library, a highbacked piece that was about a hundred and fifty years old, stuffed with hay and broken springs that had a habit of digging into whoever chose to sit on them. She placed a pillow against one of the sharp wooden armrests and sat sideways, her knees pulled up to her chest. There was no way for her to fall asleep now, if she moved even slightly something would start digging into her body and force her awake. Rolling up the sleeves of her shirt, she opened her book and began to read.

The first time Draco had come in, Hermione honestly hadn't noticed him. She had been in the middle of charming a large section from the book she was reading to her research notebook, which was under lock and key in her lab. She only realized that he was there when she got up to leave, noting the quick flash of movement around the corner as she stood up and immediately recognizing his bleach blonde hair. The next time it happened, she continued to ignore him, but she could feel him watching her. Figuring he would get bored if she did nothing, she simply kept reading her book, forcing her face to remain impartial. He didn't get bored, though, and after three weeks, she couldn't help but say something. It was getting downright ridiculous.

She'd been surprised by how warmly he'd responded to her accusatory tone, simply chuckling fondly
at her excuse for reading old textbooks as though they were the best of friends. For a moment, he'd sounded like- a sharp pain cut through her chest as she pushed away the thought. They were not friends. He was simply a guy who hung around with the same people she did.

She'd scolded herself and returned to the page she was in the middle of, trying to focus her attention on the outdated reviving potion she was reading about. It was hard to focus, though, when she could still feel him watching her- now that she'd spoken to him, quite openly. He seemed to be waiting for something- waiting for her, she supposed, but why? They weren't friends. He kept watching and she finally snapped, looking up from her book and meeting his questioning eyes.

"What? What is so fucking interesting about me that you feel the need to sit there and study me all the fucking time?!"

She'd expected him to back down, to apologize for bothering her and leave. Instead, he seemed to look at her even more closely, his head tilting to the side thoughtfully.

"You never used to be so vulgar," he observed. "It's odd hearing you curse."

"Shouldn't be too foreign," Hermione scoffed. "We both know I've cursed people before."

Even as she felt the words leave her mouth, Hermione instantly regretted them. She just had to open her big mouth, didn't she? God, all those brains people kept telling her she had, and she couldn't even find a way to filter one fucking thought. What good was that? She could already feel her heart speeding up, her flippant comment bringing all kinds of horrid memories to the surface, but the most vivid was of her parents- the way they'd looked at her when she'd restored their memories.

She didn't know if Draco had continued speaking, she didn't care. Without hesitating, she dropped the book onto the sofa and walked purposefully out of the room. Her mind was absolutely buzzing, running ten miles a minute, and hammering at her like a Bludger locked in it's cage. Without realizing it, she'd made her way through the house to Blaise's room, pausing outside his door for only a second before bursting inside.

"Wha-" he grumbled groggily at the sound of the door slamming open and rubbed his eyes, frowning. "What time is it?"

"Don't know," Hermione shrugged, shutting the door again behind her and lighting the end of her wand.

"What's wrong?" Blaise asked, sitting up a little in bed.

"Nothing."

He glared at her, obviously not buying it, but she didn't care. Everything was too loud, too fast, too angry. Her mind wouldn't turn off- she needed it to turn off. Looking around the room for something to help, her eyes narrowed in on a bottle of pills. Recognizing the label as a muggle prescription, she snatched it up and perused the contents, hoping that they were downers.

"It's oxycodone," Blaise informed her sleepily. "Are you just here for drugs, because if so, I'd like to go back to sleep."

Hermione twisted the cap off the bottle and shook three pills into her hand, swallowing them dry, then stripped off her shirt and shorts and climbed into bed, straddling Blaise's hips.

"Not just for drugs," she muttered, leaning down and pressing her lips to his.
Blaise was quick to shrug off his sleep and toss Hermione on her back, sinfully making use of her body as the wave of euphoria took her, quieting her mind until there was nothing but black.

When the knock came at her lab, she expected to find Harry. He'd been trying to reach out quite a bit lately, with the holidays approaching, and this was usually the place where he would ambush her. She was fully prepared to slam the door in his face the moment she opened it, but instead of her former best friend, she found Harmony- her store manager- nervously wringing her hands.

"There's a gentleman in the store asking for you," she explained without prompting. "I tried to put him off and told him to talk to Gertrude, but he was insistent. He said to tell you that a ferret wanted to see you?"

*What the fuck is he doing here?* Hermione frowned. *How does he even know it's my shop?*

Deciding that she didn't care about the answer to either question, she instructed Harmony to tell him to fuck off, then closed the door before she could argue.

When the knock came the fifth day, she was in the middle of mixing a highly explosive potion. The loud rap ruined her concentration and instead of adding a pin head's worth of skrewt oil she accidentally added an entire dropper's worth, which proceeded to blow up in her face- literally.

She let out a pained screech as the acidic mixture covered her and ran to the decontamination shower she'd installed for instances just like this. It didn't do much to help with the pain, but it kept her from getting permanent scars as the water was mixed with a healing potion. When the knock came again a few seconds later, obviously hesitant, Hermione stormed through the smoke, soaked to the bone and wrenched it open, releasing a cloud of green smoke into the corridor.

"What?!!" she snapped, glaring through the smoke to see who was there.

"I- I'm sorry Miss Granger." Richie, the youngest of her employees stood trembling before her, his eyes watering from the smoke and a look of sheer terror on his face. "It's just, th-there's a bloke in the shop-"

"ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?!!" Hermione screeched, knowing full well who was looking for her.

Why in the name of Morgana and all her children, was Draco Malfoy so set on driving her insane? He'd been there every single fucking day this week and she was moments away from apparating straight to Blaise's and Sectum Sempering him.

"I-I'm really sorry, Miss, but h-he said it was important, and-"

"You go tell him that he can bugger the fuck off and crawl back to whatever shitforsaken snake den he spawned from and leave me alone before I rip out his testicles and use them for brewing, understand?!"
Richie nodded his head frantically, turned tail and ran, whimpering a little as he went.

He'd continued coming into the shop and asking for her, though, even after she threatened to rip out his tonsils and feed them to Astoria's cat. In fact, the very next morning after said threat, she'd found him trying to sweet talk Harmony before they were even open and had proceeded to set a flock of angry canaries on him, but he'd simply laughed and run off. She would give him this, he was certainly persistent. Why he insisted on trying to be friends with her, however, she had no idea.

She'd decided that she would try ignoring him instead of violently cursing him out through her employees that week, and she thought it had been working until he strolled into the library and dropped into the chair across from her, not even bothering to pretend he was letting her be, before diving right in.

"What are you doing reading an old potions book?"

"Research."

"For your shop?"

Hermione ignored him, trying to focus on the possible interactions between eye of hare and dirigible root.

"Why is it a secret?" He asked, obviously taking her silence as an invitation to continue talking. "Your shop. Blaise says the ministry has bought patents for some of your stuff, why not tell people you're the one who did it?"

Because if I did, they'd never take it, Hermione thought to herself.

Who was going to risk trying a cure that was invented by a junkie? The work she did was saving lives, if she came clean, she'd be responsible for even more deaths than she already was. Nobody was going to buy their miracles from the girl they just saw passed out naked, on the cover of Witch Weekly. She couldn't tell Malfoy that, though, so she'd simply snarled at him that it didn't matter. She'd expected him to argue, to try and convince her that it did, but he'd simply shrugged and let it go. It was such an unexpected response that Hermione couldn't even bring herself to storm out in annoyance as she'd planned just a moment before. Instead, she stayed in her seat, giving him the chance to ask another question.

"What are you researching?"

She'd answered without even thinking about it, giving him the same vague answer that she gave her employees when they risked asking: "Hangover potions."

"I hate to tell you this," Draco smirked. "But they've already invented those. Been around quite a while, actually."

"I'm aware," she snarled at him testily.

"You seem to have perfected them," he added. "I've seen all the varieties you've got in the shop. You've even got them narrowed down to specific types of alcohol."
Seemingly unable to stop herself, refusing to accept anything but perfection, Hermione informed him that she still had one more she was working on.

"Ecstasy?" Draco guessed knowingly.

Hermione pursed her lips angrily. How the hell did he know that? She cast her mind back, trying to remember the last time she'd done a test, but came up blank. Not that she was surprised, that oxycodone she'd taken from Blaise last week had done quite a number on her, she had more than a few blank spots over the last few weeks, but she vaguely remembered a night a few weeks earlier that might have involved a test. She didn't remember Malfoy being there, but she supposed that didn't mean much, her memory wasn't exactly a girl's best friend. It remembered all the things she longed to forget, but left her high and dry when she could actually use it…

"Maybe I could help," Draco offered, startling Hermione from her thoughts and making her frown. "I've spent the last two years studying healing methods, perhaps I could offer some, as yet unfounded, insight to your cause."

What? Malfoy was offering to help her get high? No, that did not compute. But she'd definitely heard him right, she was sober as all get out right now. He had to know why she was making the potions if he knew about them, it's not like it wasn't obvious, but why would he offer? As far as she knew, he'd been out finding himself, coming to grips with his own humanity or whatever bullshit Blaise had gone on about when she'd asked. He'd been studying healing and medicine, why would he willingly help her poison herself? Why do you care? The tiny junkie in the back of her mind spoke up. If he helps you and you get it right, you can roll right into the sunset. Wham bam, thank you Ma'am. With that thought, Hermione got to her feet and nodded.

"I'll think about it," she told him, turning and leaving the library to go back to her flat.

If he offered again, she'd give him a chance. If he didn't, well, who gave a fuck? She'd figure it out eventually, and then… Wham bam, thank you Ma'am, whispered the voice. They'd float right into the sunset, laughing all the way…
“I wasn’t kidding when I said she was going to ban you.” Harmony scoffed, finding Draco stood in front of the apothecary waiting for the doors to be unlocked, a takeaway tray in hand. “She was at the ministry a few days ago, she’s probably got the paperwork all ready to file.”

“She doesn’t need paperwork,” Draco rolled his eyes. “If she really wanted to get rid of me, she’d put a hex on the doors to keep me out.”

“And you’re just planning on pushing your luck until that happens?” Harmony frowned.

“Well it’s certainly fun,” he shrugged. “But I’ll have you know that I’ve been invited this time- to her secret lair, no less.”

“Have you?” Harmony nodded sarcastically. “And just how wasted were you when you imagined that happening? Or better, how wasted was she?”

“Har, har,” Draco mocked. “We were both perfectly sober at the time, thank you very much.”

Harmony didn’t look like she believed him in any way, but she didn’t stop him from following her when she pushed open the doors. “Did she happen to tell you the location of her secret lair, or is the coffee what you plan on using to bribe me for it?”

“No bribery necessary,” Draco shook his head. “Today is the first of the month. She’s going to come in here and get the ledgers at some point, and when she does, I will be waiting.”

Harmony narrowed her eyes at him, thinking that plan sounded an awful lot like what he’d been doing for the last three weeks, but she said nothing. Seemingly ignoring him for the next hour, she went about lighting the cauldrons and setting up the sample tables and cash registers in preparation for the day. When Hermione slumped through the doors at 8:15, her hair tied haphazardly atop her head and dark sunglasses over her eyes, she waved at her in greeting but didn’t say a word.

“Morning,” Draco drawled, taking in her bedraggled appearance with a weary gaze. “You look awful.”

“Get out,” Hermione groaned, not even bothering to curse at him as she moped over to the counter and began digging around for the books. She grabbed a stray hangover potion as well and downed it without bothering to check the label.

“Rough night?” Draco asked cheerily.

Hermione ignored him, continuing to feel around under the counter for whatever it was she was looking for, muttering under her breath about how disorganized everything was.

“Have you even slept yet?” he continued to question her. “Because if you have, you should ask for a refund.”

Hermione flipped him off and moved over to the next section of counter, growing angrier and angrier.

“I brought you a tea.” Draco offered, taking the cup from his tray and waving it over her head tantalizingly.
This at least got her attention, as she drew herself up to her entire height and snatched the cup from him, eyeing it warily for a moment before taking a sip.

Draco smirked satisfactorily when she quirked an eyebrow in surprise. He’d been taking note of how she liked to make her tea and seemed to have gotten it right.

“I thought you might like to indulge yourself of my expertise,” he explained after she’d taken another sip. “Let me have a look-see at your little experiment?”

Hermione gave him a withering gaze, and he smiled at her warmly.

“I brought donuts too,” he held up the bag and swung it from side to side. “They’ve got bacon in them.”

“That’s disgusting,” she screwed her face up, looking at him like he was insane.

“I’ve been told that it’s life-changing,” Draco countered. “Besides, it can’t be any worse than whatever Goyle was serving last night.”

This argument was enough to get him a shrug, then she reached out for the bag, only to have Draco raise it above his head.

“Ah ah,” he scolded softly. “I brought donuts to share after we’ve done some work. They’re a reward, if you will.”

“How about I let you walk out instead of sending you face first into the nearest building?” Hermione countered, glaring at him in disdain.

“I’m very good at cushioning charms,” he shook his head, waving the bag enticingly. “I much prefer a treat after a job well done.”

He levelled his gaze with hers, unblinkingly rising to her challenge and matching her glare. When it became clear that he was determined not to give up, Hermione growled stubbornly and crossed her arms in a tiny fit.

“Fine,” she snapped. “But you’re giving me the donuts now.”

Draco smiled victoriously and hopped down from the counter, offering her the bag. “Excellent. Shall we?”

Draco had never seen anything so sophisticated in his life- not even the potions lab his father had built for him in the manor. Hermione’s lab was nearly as big as the Slytherin common room back at Hogwarts, filled with gleaming metal and granite table tops, specimen jars and ingredients sitting in perfect rows on shelves that went all around the room. There were six different cauldrons going at the moment, but plenty of room for more should she need them. Her tools and utensils were all carefully organized beneath the tables, or in cabinets around the room, and everything was clearly labelled and accessible. In short, it was a potion maker’s dream.

“Sev would have loved this,” Draco breathed, unable to stop himself.

Hermione frowned at him for a moment, but said nothing, which Draco appreciated. He still had a
hard time talking about the loss of his Godfather, even close to four years later, and he couldn’t stand when people spoke ill of him. Severus Snape had been Draco’s hero from an early age, and later had become the father figure he so desperately needed. He was the reason Draco had decided to spend so much time studying healing- he knew that it would have made the man proud.

While Draco studied the room more closely, his Godfather close in mind, Hermione made her way to the other end of the room and began fiddling with something on the floor beside a large desk. After a minute, she opened a small door and removed a notebook.

“What’s that?” Draco asked, unable to quell his curiosity. It looked like a miniature Gringotts vault, but instead of locks and keys, there were buttons and something that turned.

“It’s a muggle vault,” she explained. “It can’t be opened with magic and only I know the code.”

“What if you forget?” Draco asked, wondering how good her memory could really be with all the drugs she usually had in her system.

Hermione didn’t answer, simply handed over the journal she’d removed and locked the safe back up. “This is all my research to date. That’s the last batch, it’s got a stasis charm on it,” she pointed to a cauldron in the farthest corner of the room. “Have at it.”

She turned away from him and sat down at the desk, digging a bottle of pills from a drawer and shaking a few into her hand. A little more digging uncovered an opened bottle of champagne with just enough left to swallow the pills with.

“I thought you were having donuts for breakfast?” Draco questioned, though he didn’t look up from her notebook as he did.

In answer, she summoned the bag from across the room and pulled out a pastry, examining it closely before taking a tentative bite.

“Well?”

“Just as disgusting as I thought they’d be,” she spoke with her mouth full.

“And yet you’re still eating,” Draco observed as she took another bite.

She shrugged disinterestedly, obviously unbothered by her own hypocrisy. Twenty minutes and two donuts later, Hermione rose from her desk and began puttering around. From the corner of his eye, Draco watched as she tended the other cauldrons in the room, occasionally taking her wand from her pocket and stirring, or summoning a specimen jar to add new ingredients.

When she finally settled at a single cauldron, retrieving another notebook from her safe and using it to record observations, Draco turned his full attention back to his own assigned project. He couldn’t help but marvel at the extensive research she’d done- she had notes on everything from muggle chemistry to alchemy and runes. More than once he had to sit down and scribble his way through an arithmancy equation she’d written on a separate piece of parchment to try and understand it. How he could ever have doubted that she was better than him, Draco didn’t know. The woman was an absolute genius- the brightest witch of any age in his opinion. Which was why he didn’t understand where she was going wrong. The further into her journal he got, the more sense the formula made, and yet time after time her potions failed. What the hell was going wrong?
Across the room, Hermione gnashed her teeth aggressively, chewing the inside of her mouth to bits as she tried not to talk. She shouldn’t have taken all that Adderall, she knew that it made her chatty, but she’d been so exhausted. Now she was paying for it, though. She should have just put her feet up and taken a nap or something, but then she might have had nightmares and Malfoy might have seen.

*Why do you care if he sees?* The voice in the back of her head asked. *Who gives a fuck?*

I do! Hermione snapped back at it. He was too interested as it was, she didn’t need him questioning her about her sleeping habits.

Looking up from her aimless scribbles, she saw him doing what looked like Arithmancy equations on a free sheet of paper and smirked, knowing that she’d stumped him. A moment later, he nodded though, and turned back to the journal pages, his forehead wrinkled in concentration.

*He’s rather handsome when he looks like that,* the traitorous voice mused, and Hermione physically recoiled from the thought. No! He is not handsome, he is Draco Malfoy. Draco Malfoy is not handsome.

*He’s handsome,* the voice scoffed. *You’ve always thought so.*

Hermione hissed at the voice angrily and Draco lifted his head, giving her a questioning look. Hermione ducked her head back to the page she was drawing on and pretended to be working until he looked away.

*Oh, for fuck’s sakes, just admit that he’s handsome and get on with it,* the voice scolded.

Hermione continued to ignore it, though, forcing her mind to put the drugs to better use and focussing on the healing potion she was working on, letting the rest of the room disintegrate until the only thing left was her workspace.
The Christmas tree had appeared out of nowhere.

Sure, Hermione had noticed the decorations around London and Diagon Alley, they were hard to miss, but Blaise’s had been a holiday free zone. Now, though, two days before Christmas, he seemed to have decided that the house needed a little holiday cheer and so had bought a tree. Mippy was in the middle of decorating it when Hermione had walked into the living room, searching for a bong. She’d been stuck in a meeting with the Ministry all morning and was desperate for a hit.

“Happy Christmas, Miss!” Mippy beamed at her, balancing on the back of a chair to hang ornaments.

It occurred to Hermione that the elf could just snap her fingers and be done with it, but she made a habit of never questioning Mippy, it only ever ended in getting a lecture. Instead, she nodded and forced a tight smile onto her lips, though she didn’t repeat the sentiment as she scanned the room. Coming up with nothing, she made her way to the kitchen.

“Granger,” Draco smiled warmly as she walked in. “What brings you to this cursed abode?”

“Where’s Blaise?” Hermione snapped, not in the mood to be pleasant with him. “I need something.”

“Something like…?” Draco asked, gesturing for her to continue.

“Something like a fucking hit of something!”

“I hear the sounds of withdrawal!” Blaise sang, wandering into the kitchen, a festive pair of antlers on his head. “How you doing, there, Min?”
Her fiendfyrisht glare was enough of an answer and he quickly pulled a premade joint from a jar in a cupboard.

“What’s the magic word?” He asked, holding it above his head childishly when she reached for it, obviously forgetting the look she’d given him only seconds earlier.

Hermione stomped over, kneed him in the jewels and snatched the joint from his fingers as he buckled in pain, lighting the end with a snap of her fingers and taking a deep drag.

“You know, I don’t think it works faster if you smoke it all in one go.” Draco mused, smirking at her effective way of dealing with Blaise.

“Bitch!” the Italian groaned, still bent over. “Give me that.”

“What’s the magic word?” Hermione mocked.

“Fuck you, apparently,” he snarled. “Give it!”

Hermione took another long drag before relinquishing it, then helped herself to another jar in the cupboard, pulling out a baggie and some papers.

“Merlin, what’s got your panties in a twist?” Blaise complained once he’d finally righted himself. “Don’t you have your own drugs?”

“I’m out,” Hermione shrugged indifferently, rolling a fresh joint.

“You’re an alchemist, make more!”

“I’m a potioneer,” she corrected. “A chemist, not an alchemist. There’s a difference.”

“Whatever, you know what I meant,” Blaise waved off her oncoming lecture. “You can make your own drugs. You don’t have to steal mine.”

“I’m not starting a meth lab.” She glared at him as though they’d discussed the issue before. “And I’m not a botanist, either. Besides, sharing is caring.”

She took a drag off the new joint, then offered it to Draco, who was still standing next to them watching with interest as they argued.

“Nah,” he shrugged at her offer. “Got to keep a clear head today. I’m off to visit Mummy dearest.”

Hermione snorted at the reference to the muggle film, then noticed that Draco was smiling too and couldn’t help but ask. “As in…?”

“No wire hangers!” Draco bellowed the line dramatically, and Hermione buckled over laughing.

“What in the name of fuck?” Blaise muttered, completely lost. “Are you having some sort of fit?”

“It’s from a film,” Draco explained, smiling brightly as Hermione continued to laugh. “About a muggle actress.”

“Whatever,” Blaise shook his head, backing away. “I’m going back to my decorating now…” He gave the pair one last look of confusion, then shook his head once more and left, muttering about how weird they both were.

“You alright there, Granger?” Draco chuckled, bending slightly at the waist to see her face, as she
leaned against a chair to catch her breath.

“Brilliant,” she smiled, wiping a tear from her eye. “Merlin, I don’t know what got into me there.”

“Some very fast acting cannabis, it seems,” Draco reasoned. “Seemed like you could do with a good laugh, though. Rough day?”

He was so casual about it, as though they discussed their days together all the time, that Hermione was telling him about it before she even realized she’d opened her mouth.

“Just a long morning at the ministry, they want me to sign a contract allowing St Mungo’s to turn my new hangover potions into overdose treatments, but they’re being right bastards about my methodology,” she ranted. “It’s not like they fucking need them, I’ve made it just fine with the current treatments.”

Realizing what she’d just said, Hermione clamped down and schooled her face into an expression of bitchy indifference, mentally cursing herself for letting the marijuana do her talking.

To his credit, Draco only raised an eyebrow at the mention of her overdoses before swiftly changing subjects. “I’ve got a few hours before my portkey,” he offered hesitantly. “I was wondering if I might take another stab at your potion. If you wanted, that is. I don’t want to step on your toes.”

Hermione frowned at him suspiciously. She still didn’t understand why he was offering to help her, but he seemed sincere, and she certainly needed it. She wasn’t about to spend Christmas sober, and if she could spend it rolling, that was even better.

“Okay,” she nodded. “If you want.”

“Have you got a floo, or do we need to apparate again?” Draco asked, trying not to let it show how happy he was that she’d agreed.

“We can floo.”

“After you, then.” Draco gestured for her to go ahead of him, following her back to the entry hall, not missing the way she pointedly ignored the Christmas tree when they passed it.

“Do you mind if I try some things?” Draco asked, motioning towards the cauldron when they stepped into the lab. “I’ve had a few ideas.”

Hermione shrugged lazily, waving him on as she made a B-line for her desk. She sat down and unlocked her safe, taking out the journal Draco would need and sending it over to him, then pulled out a ledger, a rolled-up piece of paper, a card of some sort and a small baggy. As she went about making a line of the white substance on the desktop, she felt his eyes on her, but she didn’t stop what she was doing, taking up the paper and putting her head down.

“It helps me get through the accounts without dying of boredom,” she explained when she’d finished.

“Sure,” Draco shrugged amicably. “I mean, personally, I prefer Bertie Bott’s beans, but to each their own.”
“This has a far higher success rate,” Hermione sniffed. “And there’s no chance of ear wax.”

“Fair point,” Draco allowed, turning back to the journal.

Three hours later, he had hit a wall- as had Granger, who was passed out on top of her desk, apparently not having taken a big enough dose. Not wanting to leave without saying goodbye, or to leave her in the uncomfortable sleeping position she was in, Draco decided to risk waking her.

“Granger,” he shook her shoulder softly, not wanting to startle her. “Hermione?”

She sat bolt upright and gripped her wand, a panicked look flashing in her eyes before she could take in her surroundings. Draco instinctively stepped back, giving her space and keeping his hands where she could see them. “You fell asleep on your desk,” he explained when she looked at him. “Didn’t look very comfortable.”

Hermione frowned and rubbed her neck, her shoulders relaxing slightly. "It's not," she assured him.

“I’ve got to get going,” Draco continued. “Portkey to catch, but I left all my notes for you over there. I got a little further, but I don’t think it did anything much.”


“Sure,” he nodded. “I’ll be back next week, maybe we could work on it together?”

Hermione gave a sort of noncommittal nod, her facial expression exceptionally guarded.

“Just let me know,” Draco shrugged easily. “Anyways, I’ll see you when I get back. Happy Christmas, Granger.”

He smiled warmly and waved as he headed back out to the fireplace they’d entered through, and while Hermione echoed the sentiment, her voice was devoid of any emotion.

Harry had sent more letters in the two weeks leading up to Christmas than the rest of the year combined- not that Hermione didn’t know why. The previous Christmas had been a disaster- they all had been since Eighth year, each one progressively worse. She didn’t have a single memory of last Christmas, she only remembered waking up in a hospital somewhere in America. A MCUSA liaison officer had been sitting by her bed, waiting for her to regain consciousness so they could find out who she was. The hospital had sedated her heavily and given her a small dose of Veritaserum to get her personal information. She didn’t remember giving them her name, but the next time she woke up Harry had been by her bedside. It had been the first time she’d seen him in three months. Which was why he had sent letters every day this December.

Hermione hadn’t read a single one. She knew what they were going to say- that he was worried about her, that he wished she would let him help, that he was thinking of her, that she wasn’t alone,
that he loved her. She knew exactly what they would say, and she knew that it didn’t matter. Nothing Harry could say would make things any better, they only made everything hurt more. So, each letter went straight into the fire, still sealed, and the owls were sent back empty handed, a quickly dwindling bottle of bourbon raised to them in salute.

When Hermione got to her flat the night of December 23rd, she found yet another letter waiting. This time however, it was different, and she cursed Harry Potter as she realized why. He knew she wasn’t reading his letters and so he’d sent a howler- now she had no choice but to listen.

She huffed in annoyance and broke the seal on the red envelope- there was no point putting off the inevitable.

“Hey Hermione!” Harry’s voice floated from the hovering parchment, far quieter than she would have expected, leaning more towards a tone of excitement than shouts of anger. “I know this is supposed to be a howler, but I don’t want to howl at you, I just want to make sure you know I’m thinking about you! And yes, I know you don’t want me to, but tough shit! You’re my best friend, and I’ll think about you if I want to think about you, so there!”

Hermione could tell from his tone that he had been smiling nervously and she felt a sharp tug in her chest, reminding her just how much of an absolute cunt she was. She reached for the bottle of bourbon and drained it in one go.

“I just need you to know that I’m here, Hermione!” The howler continued. “Any time, any day, any place! I love you and I’m here for you, always! I wish that you would come spend Christmas with us, but I know that’s probably not going to happen! That being said, please come! Don’t be alone! You’re always welcome here! I love you, Hermione, no matter what! You’re my sister, and I love you!” With this final heart wrenching reminder, the howler burst into flames and disintegrated without a trace, and Hermione spun around and punched a hole through her living room wall.

She’d gone to a muggle pub that night, where she sat alone at a bar and drank whiskey until the bartender cut her off, then she’d gone out the side door and smoked in the alley until someone came and offered her something better. The something better had been tainted, and Hermione had found herself crashing through her lab an hour later looking for an antidote, sleeping on the floor in a pool of her vomit.

The next night she’d gone to one of her regular dealers and ended up spending the rest of the week following him around. He wasn’t the festive type, and he had an unlimited supply of whatever she wanted, Hermione was more than happy to give him whatever he pleased in return. When he’d found a different girl to play with, though, she had been cast aside without a second glance. He knew that she would keep coming back, no matter how badly he treated her.

A club had opened in Berlin the next night, and Hermione had been more than happy to christen it. Dressed to impress in her highest heels and tiniest dress, she had christened each bathroom stall, counter and dark corner the place had to offer, and when the drugs had run out and the liquor had become too much, she’d happily followed the bartender home and christened his bedroom floor.

The bartender had been a good time for a day, but when the E wore off and the darkness set in, Hermione hadn’t been able to fight it. Taking only her wand, she’d apparated back to her flat and simply let it take her, hoping that this time it would be for good.
“A witch?” The man repeated, staring at the matronly woman who sat on his sofa, as prim and proper as could be despite the absolute insanity coming from her mouth.

“That is correct,” the woman replied in a stern, Scottish brogue.

“That’s- that’s ridiculous!” The man’s wife scoffed. “That’s just- no, I’m sorry, that’s absolutely ridiculous. Look, I don’t know what you think you’re doing, but I think you should go.”

“I assure you it’s quite true,” the woman insisted. “Tell me, has she ever done something that simply can’t be explained? An angry fit causing things to be thrown around the room seemingly of their own accord, perhaps? A treat kept hidden on the highest shelf, suddenly in her hands without explanation?”

The man and wife shared a nervous look.

“As I thought,” the Scottish woman nodded. “Those events are acts of accidental magic. They are usually a response to strong emotion- anger or want, perhaps. Without proper training, or a wand to tether itself to, the magic simply releases into the world and… improvises.”

The man protested once more, shouting angrily, but the strange woman simply sat quietly and indulged him, not at all phased. From the corner of her eye, she could see a bushy-haired child crouching on the stairs, listening to the conversation just out of her parents’ sight. Minerva winked at the girl, almost imperceptibly, then turned her attention back to the angry parents before her, insisting that she leave.

“Without proper training, the girl will continue to have these… accidents, shall we call them,” Minerva responded plainly. “They will only get worse over time. She needs to come to Hogwarts and learn how to use her magic properly. There’s no other solution.”

“What do you mean they’ll get worse?” The wife asked nervously. “How could they be worse?”

“As she grows older, so does her magic grow stronger,” Minerva explained. “And as puberty sets in, so as hormones and emotions, the magic will become more and more unstable. Reactions that, say, might cause a book to fly of a shelf now, will grow to responses such as entire pieces of furniture flying around. The chances of someone being hurt, of your daughter hurting herself, only become stronger as time goes on. It’s why we start their training so early.”

On the stairs, the little girl sat listening closely, praying that her parents would say yes. If what this woman was saying was true, then there were people out there who wouldn’t think she was odd. There was somewhere where she would fit in, where she could find friends. God, how nice it would be to have friends!

If only they would just agree, things would be better. She wouldn’t be so odd, so impulsive. She would learn control, she’d be a good girl, she’d make her parents so proud.
She hadn’t noticed it, but the air in the house seemed to change, draping a sense of calm over the abode and quieting the voices in the sitting room. And then the strange woman had stepped into the entry way and smiled up at her curiously, holding out her hand.

“I’m Professor McGonagall, Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.”

They’d shook hands, and the Professor had invited her into the sitting room and explained to her what it meant to be a witch, all while her parents sat silently. She hadn’t seen it then, but the fear in her mother’s eyes and the anger hidden behind her father’s seemed to pierce the very depths of her soul now, bringing with them a searing pain that seemed to know no bounds.

Hermione had absolutely no idea how long ago it had been since she’d passed out, all she knew was that her throat was on fire and her head was absolutely pounding.

Through her post-comedown haze, she realized that she was laying on her living room floor in a thoroughly uncomfortable position that she assumed made her look like a pretzel. There were a few beams of light coming through the window, though it was probably cloudy outside, if not completely dark. She could also hear a persistent tapping, indicating that there was an owl waiting for her attention somewhere outside the flat.

With a groan, she carefully unfolded herself and got to her feet, using a nearby chair to steady her. Blinking a few times and rubbing her eyes to remove the make-up that had sealed them shut, she looked around and located the owl in question at her kitchen window, a thoroughly displeased look on its face as it continuously tapped at the glass. Hermione stumbled gracelessly through the flat, bumping into each and every piece of furniture she owned before finally leaning over the counter to unlatch the window, allowing the angry bird in.

Without so much as a glance in her direction, the beast dropped its letter and soared through the flat to find somewhere comfortable to perch, obviously not planning to leave anytime soon.

Hermione sighed testily and lifted the unfurled parchment to her face, squinting to read its contents.

**Granger, dinner at the house. Attendance mandatory. Happy Christmas!**

She didn’t need to look at the seal at the bottom to know that it was from Blaise. He was the only person she knew that wouldn’t cow at giving her such orders. She also knew that if she didn’t attend, he would show up and drag her back by the hair if necessary.

“Fucker,” she muttered to herself, setting the note ablaze.

Looking around the kitchen, her eyes settled on the clock on the stove- 21:33. *Bollocks*, he would be there any moment demanding to know where she’d been.

As if on cue, the fireplace roared to life, expelling an immaculately dressed wizard- though not the one she’d been expecting.

“Malfoy?” She frowned as the blond man shook the soot from his clothes lazily. “What are you
“I’ve been sent to ensure you’re still alive.” He replied, eyes scanning her curiously. “I’m not quite sure how I should respond, though.”

“Charming,” Hermione rolled her eyes. “Aren’t you supposed to be in France?”

“I got back yesterday,” Draco informed her. “Figured I’d spend New Years here.”

“New Years?” Hermione repeated the words before she could stop herself, utterly confused. She could have sworn it was only just Christmas…

“Yes,” Draco frowned. “Tonight is New Years Eve.”

The look on her face must have betrayed the fact that she was completely unaware of this, because his frown deepened.

“What day do you think it is?” he asked, taking a step towards her.

“I know what day it is!” Hermione snapped. “I’m not an imbecile, Malfoy.”

“Of course not,” Draco agreed, raising his hands innocently. “You just seemed confused for a moment, my mistake. So, are you going to get ready? I’ve been told I’m not to return without you.”

“By who, exactly?” She frowned, busying herself with making a cup of tea.

“Blaise, Daphne, Astoria, Pansy, Theo- “

“Alright,” she cut him off, not needing to hear the entire list. “Fine. I might be a while, though. I’ve just gotten home.”

Draco raised an eyebrow questioningly at this statement, but then shrugged and took a seat on her sofa, putting his feet up on the coffee table and picking up the closest book.

“Take your time,” he drawled. “I’m in no rush.”

Hermione glared at him for a minute, debating telling him to fuck off and sending him on his way, but before she could form a more eloquent way of saying it the kettle clicked off and her attention was drawn back to her tea.

“Fine.” She grumbled, pouring hot water over two bags and adding a disgusting amount of milk and sugar. Taking the mug with her, she stomped into the bathroom and ran herself a shower, wondering just how long it had been since she’d had one…

They were ringing in the new year in a muggle club. Blaise wanted to watch the ball drop on television and insisted that the muggles threw a better party over all. Hermione had simply shrugged and grabbed a flute of champagne off a passing tray, gulping it down in one go.

“Good you’re here, I need someone to snog at midnight,” Astoria said in way of greeting. “The prospects here are laughable.”
“Always happy to oblige.” Draco smiled chivalrously at the girl, only to have her laugh in his face.

“I was talking to Mi, you self-involved prick,” she scoffed. “Go kiss Blaise.”

“Pfft, I have standards,” Draco drawled in response. “Perhaps your more attractive sister will oblige me.”

Astoria made a face and shoved the blond away, sending him hurtling to the bar, then turned to Hermione. “You’ve been a fucking ghost. What the hell?”

“I’ve been busy,” Hermione frowned. “I thought this was supposed to be dinner.”

“Five hours ago,” Astoria nodded. “But you’re late, so now there’s just booze and snogging.”

“In that case, it sounds like I’m right on time.” Hermione smirked and headed to the bar herself, elbowing her way through the crowd to wind up beside Malfoy once again.

“Buy you a drink?” He offered, not looking over at her. Hermione shrugged, and he flagged down the bartender.

“Whiskey, make it a triple,” she ordered.

The bartender gave her a surprised once over, then nodded and set a glass in front of her, filling it. She’d emptied half of it by the time he turned back around with a napkin.

“You alright, Granger?” Draco asked, eyeing the witch in concern.

“Brilliant,” she deadpanned. “Thanks for the drink.”

Without another word she disappeared, melting back into the crowd in search of a good time. Oppositely, Draco remained at the bar, sitting alone in a corner and keeping an eye on the witch as she floated through the crowd, her silver dress catching the light with every move she made. Milking a glass of scotch, Draco watched as she smiled and laughed, throwing her head back and letting her hair down as she danced on a table with Astoria.

Throughout the evening there had been quite a few men that had tried to pry the pair apart, but each time they went to get the girls another drink, Draco ever so quietly made them disappear, be it by locking them in a janitor’s cupboard or shoving them out an emergency exit in the hopes that they wouldn’t be allowed re-entry. Despite her level of inebriation, Hermione didn’t miss the fact that her possible conquests kept disappearing. Joining Draco at the bar to get herself a Gin and tonic, she glared at him warily, looking him up and down for signs of a scuffle.

“Alright there, Granger?” he asked innocently. “You look a little lost.”

“Fine,” she answered tersely. “I’ve noticed that the drinks I keep being promised don’t seem to be making their way over, though. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“Not a clue,” Draco shook his head. “Perhaps you’re just sending the wrong blokes over. Not all men are as intelligent and trustworthy as I am, yours must have forgotten where they were going.”

“Hmm.” Hermione pursed her lips, not believing him, but before she could accuse him of anything specific her drink arrived and her problem was forgotten as she danced her way back to Astoria.

To the outside world, she must have looked like she didn’t have a care in the world… but Draco knew better. He saw the way she guzzled down each drink, quickly losing track of how many flutes
of champagne she’d consumed, and he watched as her smile flickered, as though it was a flame about to be blown out in the wind.

When the countdown began, she faithfully shouted along with the rest of the room, her face lit up with excitement and hope, but when she turned to kiss Astoria, he could see that her eyes were empty.

Draco would have been lying if he said he wasn’t turned on by the spectacle they made. The kiss the two women shared was anything but chaste, full of wandering hands and wickedly sensual movements. When they broke apart, there were more than a few men turning to adjust themselves, not bothering to hide the lusty grins on their faces. Astoria smiled like the cat who’d got the cream and pecked Hermione on the lips once more, whispering something that made the other girl smirk. For a moment, Draco thought they were going to leave together, but then Hermione stepped away and began to head for the door while Astoria sidled up to one of the many men that had been gawking at them and began to flirt. Raising an eyebrow in suspicion, Draco threw a few bills onto the bar to pay his tab and began pushing his way to the door.

Outside the club, Hermione pulled her winter coat tightly around herself and began to walk, teetering on her too high heels as she made her way down the uneven sidewalk. Careful not to let himself be seen, Draco followed. She was in no state to be walking the streets of London on her own, but he knew that if she spotted him she’d have a fit.

They seemed to walk the entire city and Draco would have assumed that she was simply wandering if there hadn’t been such strong determination in her steps. No, Hermione was definitely heading to a specific destination, Draco just couldn’t imagine where. He was also rather confused as to why she didn’t just apparate there, but figured it was probably for the best. In the state she was in, she’d more than likely splinch herself.

They walked from the club in the centre of town all through the City of London, passing through dozens of crowds of muggle tourists, all gathering to ring in the new year in the heart of England. Granger didn’t seem to care about any of that, though, as she continued on her way through Regent’s Park. The only time she paused was when she wanted to light a cigarette, and even then, she merely slowed down for a moment before hurtling on.

When she finally stopped, it was on a plain residential street in Hampstead, nearly four hours after leaving the club. Standing practically in the middle of the road, she turned to face a house that looked no different than any other on the street- a detached home of a good size (at least by muggle standards, Draco presumed) obviously not belonging to anyone well to do, but certainly not to someone poor either.

There didn’t seem to be anything remarkable about the house at all… but even as the thought passed through his mind, Draco caught sight of the slightest shimmer. Magic, he realized, it had been charmed to look this way. Wrinkling his brow in concentration, Draco fought to see past the glamour charms and found the house to be significantly more run down that he had originally thought. It looked as though it had been abandoned for years.

Hermione continued to stand in the street and stare at the house for nearly an hour, and it occurred to
Draco that her feet must be killing her. They’d just walked half the city and she was in a pair of heels so high that she was practically catapulting off them, her feet bent at such an ungodly angle that Draco almost didn’t think it should be possible to walk. It didn’t seem to bother her, though, and he had to wonder if she even realized how painful they were. He’d been following her all night and she hadn’t so much as blinked in his direction, perhaps she wasn’t aware of anything at all.

He’d been only moments away from approaching her, ready to simply apparate her back to Blaise’s and coax her into going to bed, when she practically threw herself the final steps to the porch and lay down, sobbing. The glamours enveloped her, blocking her from sight of the rest of the street and resetting themselves so that even Draco couldn’t see past them anymore. In the silence of the empty street, though, he could hear her. He knew that only a few feet away, she was falling apart, laying in front of a nondescript house, on a nondescript street, hidden from everyone and everything around her.

Listening to her cry, it was the first time Draco felt he was seeing the real Hermione Granger.
Hey everyone, I know that it's all in the tags, but I just wanted to drop a quick warning, things are going to be getting rather dark from here on in. There are mentions of suicidal thoughts/attempts and dubious consent on more than one occasion. So, this is your heads up, if that's not something you're comfortable with or whatever, maybe tread carefully from here on in?
Otherwise, I hope you enjoy! And get ready, because shit is about to hit the fan...

“Everybody on their feet! We’re going out!” Pansy screeched, skipping into Blaise's living room on January 1st. “There is partying to be done!”

“We partied last night.” Astoria groaned, prostrated on the floor as though she were dying. “We’re recovering.”

“Since when?” Pansy scoffed. “Come on, up you get. I just got word of a pop-up show in Paris.”

“A pop-up show for who?” Blaise asked, wandering in to find out what all the commotion was about.

“The Weird Sisters, of course,” Pansy rolled her eyes. “Now, get moving! We’ve got to get to the club before anyone else finds out.”

“How did you find out?” Astoria asked, sitting up on her elbows. “You’re not usually in the know.”

“Of course I am!” Pansy sneered. “I know everything!”

“Yes, and Hermione is sober,” Blaise said sarcastically. “Out with it, Parkinson. Where’d you get your information?”

“None of your business,” she snapped. “All that matters is it’s good, and there’s a club that requires our patronage. So, get your faces on and let’s go. Where’s Granger?”

“Who the hell knows,” Blaise shrugged. “You know what she’s like. If you’re looking for a hit, though, I think there’s some coke on the table.”

“Perfect.” Pansy beamed and made a dash for the dining room.

“I’ll find Mi and tell her where we’re going,” Astoria hauled herself up. “I think I saw her outside.”

Hermione was in fact outside, laying on the stone railing of the library balcony, one arm dangling over the edge, a cigarette in hand.

She had stumbled into the mansion some time around noon and holed herself up in the library, scaring off anyone who dared to talk to her with a dangerous glare, until Blaise appeared with a packed bong and a pint of ice cream and ordered her to ‘chill the fuck out’.

“Oi!” Astoria called up to her. “Weird Sisters pop-up in Paris. You coming?!”
The dangling hand rose to put the filter to her lips, indicating that she was thinking about it, then she exhaled a cloud of smoke and sat up, swinging her legs over the edge so she could look down at her friend.

“Where in Paris?”

“Does it matter?” Astoria challenged breezily. “You won’t remember it by tomorrow anyways.”

Hermione gave a non-committal nod of acquiescence, then took another puff, mulling over her options.

“Yeah, alright,” she finally agreed. “Fine.”

Without another word, she lifted her legs back over the barrier and stood, tossing the half smoked cig to the patio below, before heading inside to floo home.

When she got to her flat, there was an owl sitting on the window ledge, tapping its beak against the glass impatiently.

“Alright, alright,” she crossed the room to let the creature in. “What have you got then?”

With far more attitude than was necessary, the bird held out its leg to allow Hermione to remove the missive it carried. Once she had done so, it nipped her sharply and flew back out the way it had come, ignoring the curses Hermione called after it.

“Little cunt,” she snarled finally, rolling opening the scroll it had left her. Inside, she found a note from Harry expressing his concern over her wellbeing. Hermione crumpled the paper and tossed it in the bin without bothering to read it.

She was sure that one of her friends was tattling on her, running to Harry whenever they thought she was becoming a danger to herself. How silly they were- she was a danger to everyone, all the time.

Putting Harry Potter out of her mind, Hermione made her way to her bedroom and began rifling through her wardrobe, searching for the perfect thing to wear. They were going to a club in Paris, and with a concert to boot there would be plenty of Wizards to choose from, at least one of them would be a good shag. Selecting a leather miniskirt and ripped up Joy Division shirt, Hermione quickly showered and dressed, adding a chain belt and wickedly high heeled boots that came up over her thighs to complete her outfit. She tamed her hair into a manageably wild mass of curls, painted her face with an excessive amount of make-up to hide the bags under her eyes, and applied a thick layer of eyeliner.

As she traced her eyes with kohl, though, Hermione felt her reflection stare back, scrutinizing her.

Who do you think you’re fooling? Mirror Hermione sneered. You think a little make-up is going to make you any less of a shit show?

“Shut up,” Hermione snarled, trying not to meet the reflection’s eyes.

You can make your eyeliner as pointed as you want, the reflection continued. But then you’ll let some boy shove his cock down your throat and put it back to rights. You can’t hide what you really
are- just another whore for them to play with. Hermione Granger, Brightest witch of the age, look at you now. What a life you lead…

“I said shut up!” Hermione screamed, picking up the closest thing she could find and hurling it at the mirror, causing it to shatter, fragmenting her image into a thousand smaller ones, all of which were giving her with the same disgusted looks.

The night had started out fine. They’d arrived at the Paris club with enough time to get enjoyably tipsy before the band went on, alternating between dancing and drinking. When everyone began crowding onto the floor to watch the show, they lost track of each other for a while.

Draco and Theo had taken up places at the bar, more than happy to enjoy the show with drinks in their hands, as opposed to crushed against the stage, while Blaise was working on wooing a girl who Draco would have sworn was part Veela, and the girls had disappeared in the crowd- all except for Hermione.

By the time the band started playing, she was already well past drunk, her drink of choice for the night being expensive scotch. She couldn’t remember when the man had joined her, but at some point between drinks she’d ended up seated in the lap of a wizard with wavy black hair that fell to his shoulders and a body like a Greek god. She could feel his muscles rippling against her each time he moved, speaking quietly into her ear. His hands were wandering over her aimlessly and Hermione could feel herself slowly relaxing into him, allowing his hands to wander further and further.

When she finally stopped him, just before he reached into her knickers, he’d only laughed.

“Rather a bit of privacy?” He cooed into her ear, his voice practically dripping with sex. “Or do you just need a little something to help you out?”

“I don’t know why it can’t be both,” Hermione purred, though it probably sounded like more of a slur out loud.

Her male companion gave her a lascivious smirk, then pulled her face down to his and kissed her, hard and fast, practically devouring her. Hermione smirked against his lips and tangled her fingers in his hair. While she was distracted, he must have gotten the attention of one of his associates, because the next thing she knew they were being rudely interrupted.

“I thought you wanted privacy?”

He chuckled, obviously noting how put out she was at the interruption. “Come, pet. I know just the place.” Without waiting for an answer, he stood, pulling Hermione with him and clamping an arm around her waist like a steel trap, spiriting her towards an out of the way corridor.

As soon as they were away from the crowd he was on her, pressing her against the wall and attacking her lips once again, then her neck, her shoulder, her chest. Hermione hiked her leg up around his waist, trying to force herself to a height where she would be able to reach him and satisfy the aching need in her core. Without missing a beat, the man wrapped his hands tightly around her thighs and lifted her, using his hips to pin her to the wall, hitting just the right spot. Hermione gasped in pleasure and threw her head back, giving him better access as his lips and teeth and tongue attacked her neck.
“You’re a little minx, aren’t you?” he growled in her ear, grinding against her once again. “Bet you like it rough. Don’t you worry, I’ll throw you around like a fucking ragdoll.”

He bit down on her shoulder and Hermione cried out again, this time in pain. She could tell that he’d drawn blood, and what little was left of her senses told her something was wrong. Unfortunately, her inebriated body couldn’t do anything to aid the alarm bells in her mind, and what little effort she made to push the man away was only met with a deep laugh.

“Need a little something, do you?” he mused, his eyes raking over her with a sort of dangerous amusement. “Don’t you worry, pet. I’ll take good care of you.”

He set her down on her feet, pushing one of his legs between her thighs and smiling when she unconsciously ground against him, eager to get back to more pleasant activities.

“Come on outside, I’ll show you a good time pet.” He pulled away and Hermione followed immediately, wishing that he would push her up against another wall.

He laughed and held out his hand to her, beckoning her forward. “You like to have a good time, don’t you?”

She nodded, stumbling over her feet and falling into his welcoming arms.

“Yeah, I bet you do.” He leered down at her and slipped a hand under her skirt and into her knickers, making Hermione moan. “You dirty, dirty girl,” he growled, leaning down so his lips were right next to her ear. “All that for me. What shall I give you in return?”

Hermione pressed herself against his hand, searching for whatever friction she could get, but he pulled away teasingly.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he reprimanded her. “I’m not going to make it easy for you, pet. No, you’re going to beg.”

Hermione whimpered and stepped into him again, wrenching his head down to hers so she could kiss him. Apparently drunken kisses weren’t what he was looking for, though, because he pulled away sharply.

“No, no, pet,” he shook his head. “I like my toys to be a little more bright-eyed when I play with them. I think you’re in need of a pick me up.”

Hermione smiled knowingly and pressed her body into his once again. “Well, if you’re offering,” she said huskily.

She followed him into an alley, where he pressed her up against the wall again, the bricks digging into her back, scratching at her skin with every movement, but she didn’t care. It was about time for another hit, and she was certainly willing to give a little something for it. When he’d pulled the needle from his pocket, she’d barely flinched, but then he’d pulled out a vial that Hermione didn’t recognize.

“My own creation,” he’d smirked. “Now, let’s see that pretty little arm…”

The group had gathered at the bar once again after the band had finished their set, all sweaty and giddy from dancing, and most certainly in need of a drink. As their round was put up though, Draco realized they were missing one.

“Where’s Granger?” he asked, looking around the room for her unmistakable curls.

“She wasn’t with you?” Blaise asked, having returned after striking out not once, but twice, with the suspected Veela.

“No, I thought she was with Stori,” Draco turned to the younger Greengrass.

“She was having a drink with someone,” the blonde shrugged. “Who am I to get in the way of her sex life? Besides, if she hadn’t taken him, I would have. Fuck, that bloke was fit!”


Astoria stood up on the crossbar of her stool and looked around, shaking her head. “Nah, they must have gone out for a quickie. Like I said, he was fit as.”

“Perhaps we should check the toilets,” Daphne mused, sharing a look with Blaise.

He shrugged in agreement and followed her through the crowd. Astoria rolled her eyes at their protective urges, but she didn’t stop them.

When they returned a few minutes later to report that Hermione had not locked herself and her new friend in the bathroom for a shag, Draco found himself growing nervous.

“Oh, don’t get your knickers in a twist,” Astoria shrugged. “She’ll turn up eventually.”

Granted, Draco didn’t have as much experience with Granger disappearing as the others did, but there was something about the situation that nagged at him.

“I’m gonna have a wander, see if I can track her down,” he decided, draining his glass.

Blaise shrugged once more. “On your head be it, should she rain fire down upon you.”

Draco rolled his eyes at his drunkenly poetic friend and began a circuit of the room. After checking each corridor and unlocked door he could find, he thought she might have stepped out for a smoke and made his way to the nearest exit.

He almost tripped over her as he turned into the alley. She was laying down, propped up ever so slightly against the wall, her skirt pushed up over her waist, her shirt even more ripped than it had been at the start of the night and her legs sporting all too telling bruises. Draco was at her side in an instant, crouching over her unconscious form and searching for further damage. The mark on her arm and the discarded needle a few feet away was enough to tell him what had happened.

“What the fuck have you done Granger?” He muttered, checking her pulse.

He hadn’t even bothered to tell the others that he’d found her before apparating to his room at Blaise’s, where he set Hermione down on the bed, making sure to prop her head up, and got to work.
He started with the most basic hangover potion, pouring it down her throat and forcing her to swallow, then started casting diagnostic spells, all while trying to rouse her.

“Granger, wake up,” he ordered. “Come on, eyes open.”

He slapped her cheek softly and gave her a shake.

“Granger, wake up! What did you take?” He needed her to tell him, because the diagnostics he was running were getting him nowhere. Whatever she had used, it was something he’d never seen before.

Without any other options, Draco put his wand to her chest and muttered, ‘renervate.’

Hermione’s eyes flew open and her body jolted upright, her lungs gasping for air.

“Granger, look at me.” Draco caught her by the arms, pushing her back against the mattress.

“Hermione, what did you take?”

She didn’t answer, too busy trying to breathe and fight him off at the same time.

“Hermione, stop it!” Draco ordered, trying to hold her still. “You’re alright, just calm down.”

His reassurances did nothing for her. In fact, she almost seemed to fight him more. Whatever she had taken, it seemed to be giving her a monumental adrenalin rush, and Draco was having a hard time keeping hold of her.

After five minutes of struggling, he gave up trying to calm her down himself and magically bound her to the bed for her own safety. The fact that the restraints had no give whatsoever didn’t stop Hermione from trying to get out of them, and she thrashed and screamed violently until her voice was hoarse. All the while, Draco knelt beside her on the bed trying to calm her and figure out a way to control her without knocking her out magically.

He had just resigned himself to performing the spell, consequences be damned, when she stilled. As though she had been petrified, she lay stiff as a board, no longer tugging at the bindings, her eyes staring at the ceiling unfocussed- and then they had rolled back and she’d begun to shake.

“Dammit!” Draco cursed and quickly released the ropes, rolling her onto her side as her body convulsed.

Keeping one arm around her, he summoned a potions vial and removed the stopper with his teeth. The moment the seizure was finished, he forced its contents down Hermione’s throat.

“That should help.” He promised, settling her against the pillows once more, and casting another diagnostic. Finally, this one showed that she was running a dangerously high fever and Draco almost let out a sigh of relief. He could treat a fever, at least that was something. He cast a cooling charm over her, then went into the bathroom and half filled the tub with ice cold water.

“Right, here we go, Granger.” He lifted her into his arms and carried her into the bathroom, setting her down gently in the freezing water, clothes and all.

The effect was almost immediate, her eyes flew open and she shrieked in protest as the water cooled her skin.

“You’re alright.” Draco promised, placing his hands on her shoulders to keep her from jumping out of the tub. “You have to stay in the water, Granger. Whatever you took is burning you up.”
She looked around the room wildly, her eyes passing over him at least a half dozen times before they finally focussed.

“M-m-mal-f-f-oy?” she shivered.

“Yeah,” Draco confirmed. “Hermione, do you remember what you took tonight?”

“Wh-where…?”

“We’re at Blaise’s. Hermione, what did you take?” Draco repeated.

“I- I- don’t…” She shook her head frantically, eyes full of confusion, and Draco let out a heavy sigh. He wasn’t going to be getting anything out of her.

“Okay, Granger, that’s fine,” he said defeatedly. “Just relax, okay? You’re going to be fine.”

The delusions had started a few minutes later. Draco didn’t know if it was the fever or the drugs that did it, but he did know that there was no pulling her out of it. He’d poured as much Calming draft down her throat as he dared, but it had no effect.

“Please, please I’m sorry.” Hermione sobbed, curled up in a ball in the bathtub. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what I did. I’m sorry!”

Draco remained silent, only speaking to cast more cooling charms on the water, switching between pouring it over her hair and holding a cool cloth to her forehead.

“Ron, please!” Hermione choked out another sob and Draco stilled. So far she had only been offering apologies to the universe, this was the first name. “Please don’t leave me!”

She let out a terrified shriek and grabbed hold of Draco’s arm, pulling it tight to her.

“Please don’t leave!” she begged. “Please, I don’t want to be alone. I can’t do this on my own.”

“I’m not going anywhere,” Draco offered consolingly. “I’m right here, I’m not going anywhere.”

He put his hand over hers, squeezing tightly in the hopes that she would think he was Ron and maybe be able to pull herself from the delusion. For a moment he thought it had worked, but a second later she let go, an all consuming panic taking over her.

“Please don’t leave me!” She sobbed desperately, repeating the plea over and over, curling in on herself even tighter. Unsure what else to do, Draco stripped down to his boxers and t-shirt and climbed into the tub, gathering Hermione into his arms.

“It’s okay, you’re not alone,” he promised. “You’re not alone. I’m here, I’ve got you. You’re not alone.”

She responded immediately, her hands reaching up to hold tightly to his arm, pulling it even tighter around her and allowing him to quiet her.

“I’m sorry,” she began to whisper between her tears. “I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry.”

She repeated the words over and over again. Even when she had no more tears left to cry, she stayed curled in a ball murmuring apologies, clinging to Draco.
When her fever broke, he carried her back into his bedroom and changed her into a set of warm, dry pyjamas, before tucking her into his bed. He had planned to sleep on the floor beside her, anticipating that she might go through a bout of withdrawal in the night, but she refused to release her hold on him.

“Draco.” She spoke his name pleadingly, her voice still thick with tears and the occasional apology still tumbling from her lips. “Don’t go.”

Her eyes opened then, just for a moment, and he could tell that she wasn’t hallucinating. She knew that he was there, and she wanted him to stay.

“Okay.” He sat down on the bed beside her and carefully brushed some stray curls from her face. “I’m not leaving.”

This statement drew what Draco could only describe as the saddest laugh he had ever heard. She opened her eyes again, this time meeting his own, and shook her head sadly. “Everybody leaves.”

“I’m not everybody,” he pointed out with a smirk. “I’m Draco Malfoy.”

Hermione let out a snort of derisive laughter, then looked him over with hooded eyes. She pulled her lip between her teeth thoughtfully and raised a flimsy hand to his chest, dragging a finger down his torso.

“You’re different,” she mused.

“You’re not exactly the Hermione Granger I remember, either.” Draco told her, taking her hand and setting it back down on the covers.

“No, I’m not.” She gave him a seductive smile and sat up carefully, leaning into him.

“Granger, what are you doing?” Draco frowned, trying to maneuver himself out of her reach.

“What’s wrong Malfoy, don’t like what you see?” Hermione whispered, licking the shell of his ear.

“That’s not the problem at all,” Draco assured her, carefully holding her at bay.

“What then?” Hermione snapped, her mood changing drastically. “Won’t stoop to dirty your sheets with my mudblood quim?”

“Oi, I didn’t say that,” Draco said sharply. “You’re high, Granger. You need to sleep.”

“If you don’t want me, you just have to say so,” Hermione snarled. “I won’t break.”

“Won’t you?”

Draco wasn’t exactly sure why he did it- something about the way that she cowered away from him then, collapsing in on herself as she succumbed to another round of tears, perhaps- but without thinking about it, he pulled Hermione into his arms, cradling her like a child.

Holding her in his lap without the pressing concern of bringing down a fever or calming her from a hallucination, Draco realized just how small she had become. He could feel the way her bones stuck out sharply, the way she shivered despite being perfectly warm. The desperate grip she had on the front of his shirt made him think that she hadn’t been held in a long time- not like this at least. She might have shagged her way through every bloke in London, but not one of them had given her the
comfort and warmth that she so desperately needed— and any one that had tried, she’d pushed away.

In that moment, he promised himself that he would turn this shell of a girl in his arms back into the Hermione Granger that he had despised most of his life for beating him at everything. He wasn’t going to let her fall through the cracks.

She fell asleep in his arms, still clinging to him, her tears soaking through his t-shirt. Careful not to wake her, Draco turned the covers down once more and tucked her in, then summoned a blanket for himself and laid down on top of the covers beside her. Even in sleep, she looked empty and tortured, and Draco felt his heart clench.

He’d had a part in turning her into this. He’d stood by and watched as she’d been tortured, and while she might have forgiven him for it, he still had a hard time forgiving himself some days. Now, though, he had the chance to make it up to her. He may not have had the power or strength to save her that night in the manor, but he did now. He was stronger now. He was kinder and more understanding, and above all, he wasn’t afraid of doing what was right.

Watching Hermione toss and turn ever so slightly in her sleep, her eyes moving quickly behind closed lids, Draco had never felt so close to her. He knew what it was not to be able to escape your nightmares, he’d battled them for years and it had been her refusal to stop fighting that had eventually saved him.

She had fought enough, though, now someone needed to fight for her and Draco was going to do it whether she wanted him to or not.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Blaise’s private healer, Simon, had come round early the next morning to make sure that Hermione was alright, running dozens of tests while she grumbled angrily that she was fine.

“You’re a fucking car wreck,” Blaise snorted, leaning against the wall across the room in case Simon needed help immobilizing her.

“Hermione, we’ve talked about this,” Simon spoke seriously. “You can’t keep doing this to yourself. Your body can’t take it.”

“What kind of wizard are you?” Hermione sneered at him. “Even muggles can counteract the effects of drugs. Just give me a potassium drip and I’ll be golden.”

“You know that’s not how it works.” Simon shook his head. “Blaise, I need you to give us a minute.”

“He can stay,” Hermione rolled her eyes. “It’s not like he hasn’t heard you say it before. He can probably recite the lecture almost as well as I can by now.”

“Blaise, get out,” Simon ordered, his eyes never leaving Hermione.

“Geez, Min, you can turn even the shiniest of people into bastards,” Blaise observed, pushing off the wall. “How do you do it?”

“Force of will and a magic cunt,” she deadpanned.

“Ha!” Blaise started to say something in response to this, but Simon waved his wand and slammed the door, warding it shut.

“What the fuck are you doing?” Hermione demanded, confused by the healer’s sudden change in attitude and not at all comfortable being warded in.

“You don’t have a single memory of last night, do you?” He crossed his arms, glaring at her expectantly.

“Fuck off,” Hermione rolled her eyes. “I can remember last night fine.”

“You can’t,” Simon said, his tone brooking no argument. “You know how I know you can’t? Because you haven’t given me a list of potions that you’re convinced will make you perfectly fine in a matter of seconds. You haven’t got a fucking clue what you took last night, or who you were with when you did it.”

“Fuck you, Simon,” Hermione hissed. “You don’t get paid to judge me, just give me the potions and get out.”

“No, I get paid to make sure you live,” he held his ground. “The cocktail that Malfoy found in your system was beyond lethal, Hermione. By all accounts it should have killed you- it would have if you’d taken the whole dose.”

“And yet here I am,” she shrugged. “It’s a real shame, I know, but unless you’re willing to help a
“Do you even remember who it was, shagged you in that alley first?” Simon demanded, completely ignoring her. “Do you remember who gave you the drugs? Have you seen the bruises they left you with?”

Hermione stilled slightly, a hint of fear or possibly confusion, crossing her face.

“I’ve seen you in bad shape Hermione,” Simon continued. “I’ve never seen you look this bad- and I wasn’t here last night when you were coming down.”

The mention of her come down brought a flash to the forefront of Hermione’s mind, a hazy series of snapshots in which she remembered being in pain.

Simon could obviously tell by the look on her face, and he gave her a stern look. “Not what you had it cracked up to be, was it?” he challenged.

Hermione only winced, the pain and despair she had felt the night before slamming into her with a vengeance. All the emotions that she tried so hard to push down, the ones that she smoked and doped away, suddenly reared up and pounded their way to the front of her mind, taking the air from her lungs and seeming to pull the world out from under her. She felt the man’s hands on her last night, felt him shove her into the wall...

“Hermione,” Simon stepped towards her slowly, his hands held out to show he meant her no harm. “Hermione, breathe.”

He was too late, though. Fear and anguish pulsed to the forefront of her mind, and suddenly she was in the middle of a battle. It wasn’t the alley she was being cornered in, it was Hogwarts, and the man in front of her meant danger. She let out a guttural scream and launched herself off the bed she’d been laying in, pulling out the multiple IV lines he had put in her and taking cover on the floor. Adrenalin pumped through her veins, heightening her senses and sending blood rushing to her extremities, telling her that she needed to run. He was after her- they were all after her. Nowhere was safe, no one could be trusted.

Simon took a cautious step towards her, calling her name, but Hermione didn’t see him. All she saw was the wand in his hand- the wand that was about to turn on her.

“Expelliarmus!”

It flew out of his hand and across the room, where Hermione scampered to collect it before he could. With both wands securely in her hands, she turned back to her assumed attacker and raised her own.

“Petrificus Totalus.”

Simon froze mid-step, one arm still reaching out to her. Hermione ducked beneath him without pause and ran for the door- which was still warded shut.

“No,” she gasped, trying the handle over and over again. “No, no, no, no. Please!”

Panicked tears filled her eyes, blurring her vision as she tried to get the door to open. It wasn’t working, the handle wouldn’t budge. She was trapped.

“HELP!” she screamed, her voice thick with tears. “PLEASE, SOMEBODY HELP ME!”

She clawed desperately at the door, screaming until her throat was raw, desperate to escape her
prison. In a moment of semi-clarity, she suddenly remembered that she was holding two wands. Her hands shaking to the point of being almost useless, she pointed them at the door and spoke the first spell that came to mind, “Bombarda.”

The door flew off its hinges, blasted to smithereens against the wall. The force of the spell had knocked Hermione back as well, but she quickly scrambled to her feet and out into the corridor.

She had to get out. She had to get away. She wasn’t safe. She couldn’t remember where she was, or why she was here, but she knew that something was wrong. If she could just find a way outside, she could apparate somewhere and take stock. She just needed to find a door-

“Granger!” A voice cut through her panicked thoughts and Hermione whirled around in search of the source.

A few feet away, Draco Malfoy stood with his hands up by his head, a concerned look on his face. “Granger, what are you doing?” he asked, taking a careful step forward.


“Where am I?” Hermione demanded. “How did I get here?”

“You’re at Blaise Zabini’s,” he answered calmly. “You were at a club with him and your other friends last night and you slept here.”

A spark of a memory flashed in her mind- a club, a band playing, people dancing. “You had a bad high,” Draco continued. “I brought you back here to sleep it off.”

A man- he had been big, built like a Beater. He’d flirted with her… promised to make her feel good. She certainly didn’t feel good now.

“Hermione,” Draco’s voice cut through her thoughts again. He had taken a few steps towards her and Hermione tried to point her wand at him again, but she was shaking too much. She couldn’t hold it steady, couldn’t think of the spells.

There were hands all over her, so many, she couldn’t understand how there were so many.

A wall against her back, bricks cutting into her skin.

The sound of fabric ripping and someone whispering in her ear, a deep voice that had seemed sexy at first, but now only made her afraid.

“I’ll make you feel, Pet,” he growled. “Don’t you worry. You’ll feel it all.”

Hands clamped around her arms and Hermione tried to fight them off, but the person who held her was too strong.

“No, please,” she begged. “Please, stop! No!”

“Granger, listen to me. You’re okay,” Draco’s voice rose over her shouted pleas. “You’re okay. You’re safe. It’s just a panic attack. You’re safe.”

The hold on her arms spread, encircling her entire body. Hermione continued trying to fight the
person off, but they held on.

“Hermione, you need to calm down. You’re safe. No one is going to hurt you. You’re safe.”

Hermione only screamed and begged for help, for mercy- anything to make the pain go away. It was consuming her, building up in her chest until she felt like she would burst, but bursting would mean relief and that was something she didn’t deserve.

No, she deserved the pain and the desperation and the all-encompassing guilt that filled her with every breath. It was her fault, all her fault.

“What’s your fault?” Draco asked, still trying to calm her. “Hermione look at me, what’s your fault?”

They were dead, and it was all her fault.

The thought hit her with the force of an eighteen wheeler, and then it was dark, and she couldn’t feel anything at all.

“What the fuck just happened?!” Draco wheeled on Blaise the moment they were out of Hermione’s room.

At some point during his attempts to calm her, Blaise had undone the spell Hermione cast on the healer and they had subsequently teamed up to sedate her while Draco tried to talk her down. The swift, almost effortless, teamwork that was involved made Draco sure that it wasn’t the first time something like that had happened.

“She was suffering from a panic attack,” the healer answered. “She has them occasionally.”

“That wasn’t a panic attack, that was a full-blown hallucination!” Draco snapped at the man. “What the hell did you do to her?”

“What needed to be done,” he shrugged. “Sometimes Hermione needs to be told the harsh realities of her life in no uncertain terms.”

“What the fuck does that even mean?!” Draco demanded. “What kind of Healer are you?!?”

“Draco, it’s not Simon’s fault.” Blaise stepped in between the two men, pushing Draco back a step. “This happens sometimes.”

“And do you normally just jab her with a vial of Living Death?!”

“When she has panic attacks that severe, she can’t be reasoned with,” Simon answered once again. “We’ve tried, but it only makes things worse. Sedating her is the only thing we can do to keep her from hurting herself, and others.”

“That’s fucking bullshit!” Draco argued. “You realize that you’re only damaging her psyche even more by doing that, right?”

“We’ve tried everything else, it doesn’t work,” Simon insisted. “Look, I wish there was another way, but she refuses treatment and she’s pumped herself so full of drugs and quick fixes, there isn’t
“What put her into such a state in the first place?” Draco demanded, glaring at the healer in a way that would have made most men cower in fear. “She was fine earlier.”

“I assume she remembered a few glimpses of whatever it was she did last night,” the healer offered in way of explanation. “I can’t be sure, she’s not exactly a forthcoming patient.” He turned away from Draco then, tired of the accusations this newcomer was hurling at him, and faced Blaise. “I need to get her hooked back up to her IVs. Excuse me.” He pushed past the two men and went back into Hermione’s room, shutting the door behind him.

As soon as he was gone, Draco turned on Blaise. “What was she talking about? When I was trying to calm her down, she kept saying it was all her fault, that was what was carrying the attack.”

“How could you possibly know that?” Blaise scoffed.

“I just do,” Draco snarled. If anyone knew how to identify the causes of a panic attack, it was him. “She said they were dead and it was all her fault. Who?”

“I can’t say for sure,” Blaise shrugged. “But if I had to guess, probably her parents.”

Draco frowned, only getting more confused. “What are you talking about?!”

“I don’t know!” Blaise cried. “Which is what I’ve been trying to tell you. I don’t know the ins and outs of her life, Draco, she doesn’t confide her deepest secrets in me. Her parents died, I know that, but I don’t know anything about it. It doesn’t matter anyways. When she wakes up, she’ll be fine. She always is.”

“Why do people keep saying that?!” Draco snapped. “This is not fine! Nothing about that woman is fine!”

“Maybe not,” Blaise shrugged, speaking in a normal voice once again. “But none of us are. We’re all fucked up in our own ways, who are we to tell her that her way is the wrong one?” He gave a melancholy sigh and looked over at the closed door of her room. “When she wakes up, she’ll be back to normal,” he insisted. “That’s all you can ask for.”

_Fuck that, _Draco thought, _I want some fucking answers._

When the door opened, Ginny Weasley stood in the frame, a small child with blue hair balanced on her hip, her head turned to finish speaking to someone behind her. “I’m serious, Harry!” she was shouting.

When she turned around, her face went slack for less than a second and then her wand was leveled at his throat.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” She demanded, angling her body to act as a shield between him and the child.

Draco held his hands up to show that he was unarmed, and forcing the usual cocky undertone from his voice said, “I’m here to speak with Potter.”
“Why?”

“It’s about Granger.”

The redhead hesitated for a moment, sizing him up, then slowly lowered her wand and told him to wait. Closing the door behind her, she walked back into the house and Draco could hear a muffled conversation. A minute or two later, the door opened again to reveal Harry Potter.

“Malfoy,” he frowned curiously. “What can I do for you?”

“What happened to Granger?” Draco skipped right to the point. “Because she’s all kinds of messed up, and you’re nowhere to be found, so something pretty drastic must have happened.”

“I’m sorry, why would that be any of your business?” Harry scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest.

“I found her passed out, practically naked in an alley last night and spent the night nursing her through the worst high I’ve ever seen, then spent my morning disarming her when she tried to bring Blaise’s house down around her in the midst of a panic attack so severe it should have been a drug induced hallucination,” Draco answered sternly. “That little showdown ended with Blaise and his private healer sedating her in a perfectly practiced tag team that they’ve definitely performed before. What the fuck is going on with her?”

Potter stared at him in surprise and consideration as he related the events of the previous twenty four hours- though he didn’t seem surprised by the events themselves, so much as Draco’s involvement. When he asked his question again, the other man sighed heavily and gestured for Draco to follow him, leading the Slytherin through his house and into a study.

“What else have you seen?” Harry asked, nodding for Draco to take a seat in one of the armchairs while he stepped over to a cart and poured them each a glass of firewhiskey.

“It’s barely noon,” Draco frowned at the proffered drink.

“You’re going to need it,” Potter insisted. “Now, what do you know?”

What did he know? Nothing, Draco thought to himself. What he suspected, however, that was a different story.

“I’ve been travelling the past couple years,” he decided to start at the beginning. “Studying healing around the world. Finding myself and all that rot, but before I left, Granger and I were on relatively good terms.”

“I’m aware,” Potter admitted warily. “She told me you were getting on well at Hogwarts.”

“Okay, so you know that we forged a sort of… partnership, shall we say?” Draco suggested. “We were on the same intellectual plane and so decided that we would both be best served by working together to complete our educations.”

“You were friends,” Harry rolled his eyes at the overly political definition. “When Hermione talked about it, she said you were friends.”

This came as a legitimate surprise to Draco. He had never dreamed that Granger would have considered him a friend. The thought that she had told Potter as much brought a warm feeling into his chest, and he couldn’t help but smile slightly.
“Right,” he tried to control himself. “We were friends. I’ve been back for just over two months now, and not once have I seen the woman I was friends with at school.”

“Join the club,” Harry sighed wistfully. “What exactly have you experienced, though?”

“The experiments— the potions she’s trying to create so she can take all the drugs she wants. The drugs themselves,” Draco listed. “I don’t think she’s been sober a single day since I returned.”

“She hasn’t been sober for a lot longer than that,” Harry shook his head. “But let me guess, you’ve seen her take ecstasy?”

“The first night I was back,” Draco nodded. “She was trying one of her potions. It didn’t work, and she was absolutely catatonic the next day.”

Harry nodded knowingly and motioned for the blond to continue.

“She’s obviously depressed, anyone could see that, but…” Draco paused, casting about in his mind for the right word to describe the witch. “She’s drowning,” he decided. “She’s drowning. I’ve observed her for the last month, watching the way she gets high over and over, the way she goes home with the first bloke that asks her. I’ve watched her sit catatonic for hours as well, though. And I’ve seen her stand perfectly still in the middle of a dance floor and simply stare, completely empty. I was gone for a week over Christmas, I went to France to spend time with my mother. Nobody saw her the entire time I was gone.”

“Christmas is bad,” Harry nodded sadly. “They have been ever since the war.”

“I went to retrieve her to celebrate New Years when she failed to show up for the dinner invitation Blaise sent her,” Draco carried on. “I’d bet all the money in my vault that she didn’t know what day it was.”

“I’d take that bet,” Harry sighed. “Like I said, Christmas time is bad for her. Last year… well, she was missing for two weeks. I finally got a message from MCUSA that she had been admitted to an American hospital after an overdose.”

“Geez,” Draco winced.

“She had so much crap in her system, the muggles had been ready to write her off as a lost cause,” Harry admitted, a pained look in his eyes. “It was pretty much a miracle when she did magic during a hallucination and alerted the authorities. They transferred her to a magical hospital and pumped her full of potions to clear out her system, when they finally got her name they reached out to me.”

“Blaise said that you two don’t really talk anymore,” Draco hedged. “Was that…”

“Things were already pretty strained by then,” Harry shook his head. “She’d moved out in the middle of the night a couple months earlier and it had taken me a while to find her again. When she threatened to disappear completely, I had to back off. I knew that if I kept pushing she would do it, and she’d go somewhere unplottable and end up killing herself. So, I let her go, figuring at least I would be able to keep an eye on her from afar.” He laughed mirthfully, knocking back his drink in one gulp and putting his head in his hands.

It occurred to Draco, watching him, that Granger might not be the only one falling apart. It took an incredible toll on a person watching someone they love destroy themselves.

“She spiralled,” Harry continued once he’d gathered himself. “There was no one to take care of her, no one to fight off the dealers and drunks that tried to take advantage of her, no one to make sure she
got home at the end of the night. I can’t tell you how many stories I paid to keep from appearing in the papers. I was sure that I was going to get a call saying that she’d died of an overdose or been murdered in an alley somewhere, at any moment. Then there was an incident in a club, and she got caught up with Greengrass and Zabini.”

“I heard about that,” Draco nodded, not wanting the other man to have to talk about it if he didn’t want to. “That was when they all started going out together?”

“They saved her,” Harry said seriously. “Not just that night, but in general. If she’d kept going out by herself, letting anyone and everyone take advantage of her, she would have been dead a year ago. Blaise bringing her into his circle, it saved her life…”

Harry paused again, clearing his throat as his emotions threatened to bubble over. He would never forget the fear that had followed him during that time Hermione was alone, it had been worse than the fear of facing Voldemort on his walk through the Forbidden Forest. That night, he had known good would come from his loss, but the days he spent worrying about Hermione only promised future darkness and despair. The thought of living without his best friend had teared at him every minute of every day, and while it had calmed since she had found some new friends, it certainly hadn’t gone completely.

“What happened to her?” Draco asked again, still not understanding what could have pushed the witch so far over the edge. She was so brilliant and so strong, she had survived a war and come back stronger, what was more traumatizing than being tortured?

Instead of answering this question, Harry posed one of his own, getting up and pouring himself another drink. “You said you’ve been watching her for a couple months, what else have you seen?”

“She doesn’t seem to sleep well,” Draco offered, thinking of the nights in the library. “I’ve come across her in the library at Blaise’s quite a few times. She never even seemed to notice me for the first month. She always wears the same plaid shirt when she’s there.”

A worried frown passed over Harry’s face, but he said nothing, nodding for Draco to continue.

“When she finally spoke to me I asked her what she was doing there. That was when she explained her experiments,” he shared. “I offered to help her with them- well, with one at least. I thought maybe it would make her more inclined to speak to me.”

“I doubt it,” Harry shrugged. “She doesn’t really speak with anyone anymore, and she doesn’t let anyone touch her experiments.”

This made Draco start, a confused sense of pride settling over him. “She let me,” he told Potter. “Before I left for France, she brought me to her lab and let me go through her research, I’ve been there twice.”

Harry stared at him in shock, his mouth slightly agape and his eyes unblinking. Then, as though he’d received some sort of electric shock, he jumped to his feet and began to pace.

“She let you into her lab?” he repeated, almost to himself. “Let you look in one of her journals?”

Draco nodded assuredly, not sure if Potter was actually talking to him.

“What happened?” Harry demanded, wheeling on Draco. “Exactly what happened to make her let you into her lab- Fuck, what made her tell you about it?!”

“Blaise had already let it slip that she experiments,” Draco admitted. “She didn’t exactly tell me
herself.”

“But she let you in,” Harry insisted, dropping back into his seat. “Malfoy, she hasn’t let anybody in there… ever. The only reason I know about it is because she was still living here when she opened the shop. She won’t even let the ministry people in there. So, what happened?”

As Harry listened intently, Draco relayed the story of how he’d stumbled on her store and taken to trying to get her to chat with him, then the encounter in Blaise’s library in which he’d offered her his help and the actual time he’d spent in the lab with her. When he mentioned the pills she’d taken the first time and then the line of cocaine she’d done to simply do some paperwork, Potter had winced but remained quiet. When Draco finished, he began to pace again.

“This is… this… she let you into her lab!” he muttered, utterly astonished. “She let you in!”

“I don’t know about that,” Draco frowned. “I think she was inclined to let me in because she’s desperate not to feel the effects of the ecstasy anymore.”

“Probably,” Harry allowed. “But that doesn’t change the fact that she let you. She hasn’t done something like this since…”

He trailed off, shaking his head, and Draco knew that there was something important he wasn’t saying. A key event in Granger’s life that had pushed her over the precipice. Potter didn’t seem like he was about to share this, however, so Draco continued to speak, recalling the events on New Years.

“When we got to the club, she was off. She was drinking like there was no tomorrow, but it didn’t seem to be doing anything for her. She seemed… empty,” he frowned. “I mean, she was still flirting and pretending to have a good time, but I could tell that it was all an act. I kept getting rid of the blokes that were coming onto her and she barely even yelled at me. At midnight she perked up a bit, I thought she was going to take Stori home the way the two of them were going at it, snogging.”

Harry raised a single eyebrow at this declaration but said nothing. Nothing Hermione did these days could truly surprise him- aside from her seeming trust in Draco.

“But then she just walked out,” the blond continued. “Turned heel and left without a word to anyone. I followed her, figuring she would go home and knowing she wasn’t in any state to be going alone, especially not with everyone out partying. I ended up following her through half of London. I don’t know how she did it, walking that much in the shoes she had on.”

“She casts cushioning charms on them,” Harry said quietly, a fond smile warming his face momentarily. “Every time she gets a new pair of shoes, she casts a permanent cushioning charm. She says they make her feel like she’s got clouds strapped to her feet.”

Draco nodded, allowing the man a moment to reminisce over his friend’s quirks and habits before carrying on. “She walked from the club in the centre of town all the way through the city, it was almost four hours until she stopped.”

“Where?” Harry asked, a note of fear in the back of his throat, his eyes desperate as they met Draco’s.

“Heathgate.”

Harry’s shoulders slumped, and he dropped back into an armchair dramatically, putting his head in his hands.
“You know, then?” Draco assumed. “Where we were?”

“It was her house,” he sighed. “The house she grew up in.”

Draco had assumed as much, but hearing it out loud made the memory of watching Hermione sob in the middle of the street that much worse.

“I could see past the glamours,” Draco admitted. “At least at first. It looked abandoned.”

“Been empty five years now,” Harry said. “Wait, what do you mean, at first?”

“She just stood in the street staring up at the place for a while,” Draco explained. “I was about to try and talk to her, get her to come back to Blaise’s with me, when she finally walked up to the place and sat down on the front step. She curled up and started to cry, and then a ward went up and I couldn’t see her anymore or see through the glamour charm. I waited for another hour or so, figuring she would eventually come back out to the street, but she didn’t.”

Harry nodded slowly, a conflicted look on his face as he took this all in. Draco let him have whatever internal argument he was having in silence, sipping at his drink and waiting. Outside the study, he could hear Weaselette and the kid running around, laughing happily. It occurred to Draco that the child looked vaguely familiar- not many children sported blue hair- and he recalled that Potter had brought him to Hogwarts once or twice to visit Hermione. She had said the boy was Potter’s godson… Timothy? Trevor?... Teddy! Draco recalled. That was it, he was Professor Lupin’s son.

He was trying to recall what other information Hermione had provided on the boy when Potter spoke up, pulling his attention back to the conversation at hand.

“Right, okay, I’m going to tell you what happened- at least the parts I know,” he said decidedly. “I think there’s a lot that she wasn’t telling me, but I’ll tell you what I know, because you’re the first person she’s put any sort of trust in and that has to mean something. So, you should know… yeah, you need to know.”

He nodded again, bringing his slightly rambling explanation to a halt, then faced Draco seriously. “First, though, I need to know why you’re so interested. I need to know that I’m not making a mistake.”

Draco stilled- why was he so interested? He’d been asking himself that question for the last two months, trying to come up with an answer that went deeper than ‘somebody should care’. It was true, somebody should care about Granger, but why did it have to him?

“I don’t know how I can convince you that you’re not making a mistake, but I know that I do care. Granger was one of the only people to give me the benefit of the doubt when I was in trouble, even when everything you suspected was true, she was still willing to let me explain myself,” Draco said, meeting Harry’s eyes and noting the way his face fell in a vaguely guilty way for just a moment. “She forgave me when she had no reason to, and she didn’t shun me like the rest of the student body when we went back to Hogwarts. I honestly didn’t know that she considered me a friend until you told me just now, but I’ve always considered her one. She’s… she’s special. Granger is exceptionally special, and coming home to find her like this…”

He trailed off, shaking his head desperately and trying to come up with the right words. He needed Potter to understand that he meant this, that he was truly there out of concern for Hermione’s well being, and that he was committed to helping her. He wasn’t just looking for gossip or satiating his own curiosity, he was there to try and understand the broken woman he had found in the hopes that he might be able to help put her back together again.
“I’ve been where she is,” he finally continued. “Maybe not in the way that she is, but I’ve been there, in that absolute rock bottom chasm of pain that she’s in, and in her own way she helped to pull me out. I was well on my way out when she offered a hand, but she still helped, and seeing her there… I need to help her. I don’t know how to explain myself any better than that, I just... I need to help her, because the thought of not having Hermione Granger in the world is unfathomable to me. I may have wished that you would kill the Dark Lord, but I spent my childhood wishing that Granger would vanquish him, that one day she would step up and show the entire world what absolute gobshite he’d been spewing by taking it in her hands and making it into the utopia that she dreamed it to be. If she can’t do that, if she can’t climb up out of this and take the world by storm, it’s not a world I want to live in.”

The words fell from his mouth without any regard for whether or not he wanted them to be heard. They seemed to pour from the very depths of his soul. He hadn’t even realized how desperate he’d really been for Granger to win the war until now, but as the words left him, he knew that they were true. When it came down to it, he didn’t want to live in a world without Hermione Granger, and that was what he was facing.

Throughout this entire speech, Potter sat perfectly still, his eyes fixed on Draco, studying every twitch, every quirk of his lips and eyes, even the most minor inflections of his voice. When the Slytherin finished, he found that he was smiling, utterly confident in his decision to tell him the truth. They may have had their differences in school, but Malfoy had changed. He’d grown up, just as Harry had, and it seemed that it had all been for the better. Listening to him expound on his fears of living without Hermione Granger in the world, Harry felt an almost kindred spirit in the blond. Yes, he was definitely making the right choice. So with a sharp nod, and a deep breath, he sat back and relayed the story of Hermione Granger.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, that happened. Shit’s getting real folks.
Also, ten points to the house that catches the multi-fandom Easter Egg in the chapter.
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Thank you guys so much for all your kind comments! I'm so glad that you're liking this story.
I'm in a generous mood today, so here's a bonus chapter.
Also, no house points awarded yet. There'll be another clue in the next chapter, maybe we'll have a winner then...

“It started sixth year,” Harry explained. “Before Dumbledore’s funeral she went home for a weekend- a lot of people did, of course, but she was the one that had requested permission first. She told McGonagall that she just needed to be in her own home for a night, or some bullshit. Usually McGonagall wouldn’t have believed her, but everything was so chaotic right then, she didn’t give it a second thought. When she came back, something was different. Ron and I could both tell, but Hermione insisted that she was just upset about Dumbledore and worried about what we had to do next. We’d just figured out that Dumbledore wanted us to go after the Horcruxes- well, he wanted me to and Ron and Mione refused to let me go anywhere without them- but either way, it was a stressful time and she had every reason to be out of sorts. It wasn’t until a few months later that she admitted what had really happened- she’d obliviated her parents.”

“She did what?!” Draco coughed, choking on the sip of firewhiskey he’d just taken.

“Yeah,” Harry sighed. “She knew that as soon as we went on the run, Voldemort would put a target on her back, and theirs by extension, so she wiped herself from their memories, gave them new identities and sent them off to live their dream life in Australia. She figured they would be safe there, far out of reach from the Death Eaters, and if she lived through the war she would give them their memories back and explain what had happened, but if she didn’t, they wouldn’t have to go through the pain of losing their child. They wouldn’t know she’d ever existed.”

“That’s insane!” Draco argued. “There are about a million ways that could have gone wrong!”

“Maybe so,” Harry allowed, “but it was the only way she knew to keep them safe. You and I both know that their house was ransacked soon after the warrants for our arrest went out. If she hadn’t made the Grangers disappear, they would have been tortured and killed, and she never would have forgiven herself.”

Draco had to agree with this, unfortunately. His father had been one of the Death Eaters sent out to find Granger, he’d been the one who suggested using her parents as bait and he’d been duly punished when he came back empty-handed. “So, what happened?” he asked. “Was she not able to reverse the spell?”

“No, she reversed it,” Harry sighed. “But not until after her final year.”

“When she went back to Hogwarts, you mean?” Draco confirmed. “Why wait so long?”

“Ron.” Harry cringed slightly as he spoke his friend’s name, almost looking ashamed. “I don’t know how much you know about our time in hiding-“
“I read the papers,” Draco shrugged. “But I was a little preoccupied with the fear of going to Azkaban for life, so…”

“Right,” Harry nodded. “Well for a good five months or so, we carted around one of Snake Eyes’ horcruxes- a necklace that had belonged to Salazar Slytherin. We hadn’t figured out how to destroy them yet, and because we were afraid we’d lose it, we took turns wearing the thing around our necks.”

Draco’s horrified gasp was enough to tell Harry that he understood what that meant- how dangerous it had been.

“It affected Ron worst, though I think it's had quite an effect on Hermione as well,” Harry shared. “When she was still living with me, when she was still herself, we thought that the horcrux might have had some lasting effects on her, that it was fueling her PTSD and depression.”

Draco made a mental note to look into that, Potter might well be on to something with his theory.

“It was worse for Ron, though,” Harry continued his story. “He’d always had a short fuse and a temper to rival Snake Eyes himself, wearing the horcrux only made it worse. He was explosive and verbally abusive, suspicious of everyone and everything, and he took it out on Hermione, presumably because all his emotions were heaped together in a mass of hatred, and his feelings for her were somehow twisted within it all. She took it, though. Whatever he said or did, she took it and apologized and tried to patch whatever problem he’d created. She gave him everything she had. And then he left.”

“Excuse me?” Draco frowned, not quite understanding.

“I think it was sometime around November,” Harry explained. “We’d just figured out a way to actually destroy the horcruxes, we were finally making progress after months of nothing, but Ron wasn’t seeing things clearly anymore. He lashed out, one thing led to another and we got into an argument. I told him that if he didn’t want to be there he was more than welcome to leave, and Ron turned to Hermione and gave her an ultimatum- me or him. She wouldn’t leave me, so he left her.”

Draco remembered the way Hermione had screamed the previous night, begging him not to go- she’d thought he was Ron.

“She went after him,” Harry carried on, not noticing the way Draco’s hand tightened angrily around the glass he held. “I could hear her screaming for him in the rain, begging him to come back, but he’d already stepped out of the wards and disapparated. He couldn’t have come back, even if he wanted to. That was the first time she crashed. It wasn’t from drugs or alcohol, just the sheer exhaustion and emotional stress of having Ron leave her, but the effects were the same. We were moving camp every couple days at the time, and as soon as Ron left I knew we needed to pack up and move on, but she couldn’t. She sat outside the tent for three days, watching for him. She didn’t sleep or eat, and I had to practically force water down her throat. When she finally stood up again, she packed everything and disapparated us before I even knew what was happening. It was another week before she spoke, but she would call out for him in her sleep. She came back to herself slowly, but we were still carrying the horcrux, and it just chipped away at her. For every step forward, it was three back, you know?”

Draco nodded, he knew all too well.

“Ron came back a few months later, but the damage had already been done. She never properly forgave him for walking away- not that I blame her, I still have a hard time with it occasionally, and it wasn’t me that he walked out on. I told him to go, she was the one begging him to stay.”
“Hang on, though,” Draco frowned. “Didn’t they date afterwards?”

“Yeah,” Harry sighed heavily. “It should have been my first clue that Hermione wasn’t okay. Even once we’d destroyed the necklace, Ron was different. He never went back to being the boy we grew up with, all those traits that he’d tried to control before took over. He was angry and jealous and vindictive, but Hermione stayed with him any ways. She had wanted to go find her parents and restore their memories right away, but she stayed because she thought that she could help him, help the whole family. We were all a mess, Hermione included, and she didn’t want to make things worse by going away. Besides that, she couldn’t go by herself and Ron refused to go with her. I didn’t know that at the time, whenever I asked her about it or told her that I would go with her, she just told me that it wasn’t the right time, that we needed to stay put and heal. I needed Ginny and Ron needed her, and that was the end of it.”

“What do you mean, Weasley refused to go?” Draco asked, not quite understanding.

“Whenever Hermione brought it up, he would tell her he wasn’t going anywhere, and I thought it was because he didn’t want to leave his family when they were still mourning Fred, which I suppose made sense. The whole family was in a bad way for a while, especially George and Molly, and we all wanted to be there to help them.”

“But it wasn’t just that?” Draco guessed.

“No,” Harry shook his head, a wave of anger passing over his face, startling Draco. “It wasn’t until Christmas that I heard what he really had told her. He said he wasn’t going to go traipsing off to Godric knew where to find her useless Muggle parents, when she had a perfectly good family right there.”

Draco’s eyebrows shot up into his hairline, and Potter nodded seriously.

“Yes. Suffice it to say, she didn’t take that very well,” he said obviously. "It made her feel even more guilty than she already was, and she stayed because she thought he was right- the Weasleys had welcomed her into their family without a second glance, just like they did for me, and she believed that they would resent her if she left in their time of need. Ron preyed on that fear, he reminded her of it over and over again, and she believed him, which was why she kept refusing my offers to go with her. Like I said, though, I didn’t know all that until Christmas. At the time, I just saw how much pain she was in over everything, which was why I talked her into going back to Hogwarts. Ron and I had already been accepted into Auror training, so I thought she could have a year to herself, to just enjoy school and take time to recover without worrying about anyone else. I figured time and space away from Ron would do her good too, give her a chance to analyze their relationship away from his manipulating and realize how bad things really were. I had hoped she’d come to her senses and tell him that they were done.

“When she told him she was going back I thought he was going to kill her. We could hear him screaming at her all through the house, telling her he wouldn’t hear of it, she was coming to train with us and that was that. When I walked in to tell him off she was just standing there, staring at a spot behind him, letting him go on and on, it was like she didn’t even realize she was in the room. When he grabbed her, I just about killed him. I was about to hex him into the next month when she snapped back in. She hauled back and punched him square in the jaw and told him to go fuck himself.”

“Ouch,” Draco winced instinctively, recalling perfectly well how good her left hook was.

“He deserved it.” Harry almost smiled at the memory, it had been the last time he’d really seen his best friend be herself. “We moved out of the Burrow and into Grimmauld Place after that, and she
was better for awhile. She was excited to go back to school and was pestering me about being nicer to Kreacher, I thought we were on the right track…”

“But?”

“But when you take Dreamless sleep on a daily basis, you can build up a tolerance,” Harry explained sadly. “When she came home for Christmas she was taking ten times the usual dose and it was still doing nothing. It just made her groggy and exhausted. She would lay on the sofa and sob because she was so desperate to sleep and just couldn’t, or only got a measly hour before her nightmares became too much. She still hadn’t properly broken things off with Ron, either, so he was hanging around and making things exponentially worse. We went to the Burrow for Christmas and she was a mess, it was hard for her as is, not having her parents around, but with the sleep deprivation on top of that it was unbearable. She fought with Ron all night, that was when I heard him telling her off about wanting to find her parents. I could have killed him then and there, Molly had to come up and separate us all. She even took our wands. It was just all around awful and it brought all kinds of pain for the family- it was going to be a hard enough Christmas as it was, you know, and then Ron and Hermione going at it on top of that just sent the entire thing to the dogs. The next night Hermione drank an entire bottle of firewhiskey and almost drowned in the bath.”

“Fuck,” Draco muttered, rubbing his face with his hands as he realized what Potter was telling him. “She came back early that Christmas. I ran into her in an abandoned corridor where she was smoking, she seemed… off.”

“Yeah, I freaked out,” Harry admitted. “I mean, if I hadn’t noticed that she’d been in the bath so long, she would have died. I barely found her in time as it was. I didn’t know what else to do… I dragged her to a muggle hospital against her will and made them admit her on a 24-hour psychiatric hold.”

“You had her sectioned?” Draco gaped at him.

“Yes, Harry sighed heavily and ran his hands through his hair, pulling at it anxiously. “I didn’t know what else to do! I know that it didn’t really help things, I’m pretty sure she confounded the damn doctors, but I was desperate. She’d almost died, Malfoy, and I didn’t know if she’d done it intentionally or not. I was terrified. She went back to Hogwarts as soon as she was released, she didn’t even come back to the house and get her things, just apparated straight to Hogsmeade and walked back to the castle. She didn’t talk to me again until Easter.”

“I can’t say that I’d have been too fond of you either, if you’d had me sectioned,” Draco reasoned. “Not that I don’t agree with you, she obviously needed it- Merlin, she needs it now- but still, I can see her side.”

“That’s what Ginny said,” Harry agreed. “So, I gave her space and when she came home again, I apologized profusely and begged her to see things from my point of view. It took all week, but by the time she left we were at least speaking again. Then she graduated and opened the apothecary. She had it practically running itself within three months- that was when she decided to finally go track down her parents.”

He stopped there and began tugging at his hair again, obviously anxious about sharing this next part. Stalling, he got up and poured himself another drink, then seemed to think better of it and set it down, pouring a glass of water instead.

Draco watched closely as he paced for a minute, working himself up to continuing.

“Look, Potter, you don’t have to tell me if you don’t want to,” he offered after a minute. “I mean,
they’re her secrets. I shouldn’t be prying—"

“No, you should be,” Harry shook his head adamantly. “Someone needs to.”

He finished his glass of water and sat back down, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees.

“It took us about a month to find her parents,” he started up again. “She’d given them completely new identities, but she’d left a lot of things to chance, she didn’t want anyone to be able to follow their movements based on something she did, so we had to go through muggle authorities. I went with her the first time she travelled to Australia, helped her through all the bureaucratic shit she had to go through with the Australian ministry and the muggle police, but when they actually found them she insisted on going alone. I fought her tooth and nail, but she just wouldn’t let me… She’s never told me what happened, just came back and said it didn’t work. That was around the time that the partying and drinking truly started.”

“Hang on, so you have no idea what went wrong?” Draco interrupted. “She just left it at that?”

“She won’t talk about,” Harry shook his head. “So, no, I don’t know the details. What I do know is that the night after she got back, I got a message from Aberforth telling me that I needed come down to the Hog’s Head. When I got there, Hermione was passed out drunk behind the bar, and that’s pretty much how every night for the next two months or so went.”

“Why do I feel like you’re leaving out something important?” Draco frowned.

“Not leaving it out, just telling you the way things played out,” Harry corrected. “It was three months or so after she came back when the Ministry got a letter from Australia requesting that Hermione take the next available port key out. I went to the lab, picked her up and offered to go with her, but she brushed me off and insisted it was fine. About three hours later, I was summoned to International Cooperation and given an emergency port key. When I landed in the Australian Auror’s office, they took me straight to the muggle liaison officer. His office was trashed, and Hermione was huddled in a corner of the room sobbing. I couldn’t even get her to look at me, let alone tell me what had happened, so I had them make up another portkey and took her home. She was catatonic at that point, not even crying, just staring listlessly, occasionally muttering things I couldn’t understand. I called Molly to look after her and went back to the Australian ministry demanding that they tell me what the hell had happened. I still don’t know all the details, only Hermione does, but I guess when she had gone to Australia before, she was able to restore her parents' memories.”

“But she told you that it didn’t work,” Draco frowned, interrupting once again. “Why would she lie about that?”

“Because when she did it, they didn’t respond as she’d thought they would. Like I said, she won’t talk about it, but suffice it to say they were angry. They called the police and attempted to have her arrested.”

“What?!” Draco shot to his feet, unable to control the anger coursing through him. “They called the police?!”

Harry nodded, his own attitude shifting from concern and regret to seething anger, as he remembered reading the file that had been given to him on the Grangers. “Apparently they weren’t as amicable as they always seemed. Obliviators had to be called in to re-establish the identities Hermione had given them, for fear that they would expose or become a serious threat to Wizard-kind.”

“That… that’s insane!” Draco shook his head in disbelief, pacing back and forth in front of Potter. “I
“Normal,” Harry supplied easily. “Yeah, I know. I knew them, I never once would have thought they were like my family, but…” he trailed off with a shrug, his expression becoming morose once again. They had all been duped by the Grangers, especially Hermione, but there was nothing to be done for it anymore. “From what the reports said, I can only guess what kinds of things they said to Hermione,” he shook his head.

“Hang on, you said that this happened on her first trip,” Draco realized.

Harry’s shoulders sagged as though they were holding the weight of the world. “When they summoned Hermione the next time, this time, it was to inform her that the Grangers had been killed in a car crash.”

Draco fell back into his seat like a bag of bricks, his jaw slack, and put his head in his hands. “Fuck.”

Harry simply nodded in agreement, there wasn’t much else to say.

“That was what pushed her over the edge,” he said after a moment. “She started going out every night and coming home wasted, then high. I tried to be there for her. I followed her wherever she wanted to go, and I didn’t stop her from doing what she wanted unless it was really going to hurt her, but she just kept pushing me out. Every time I tried to take care of her, she pushed harder, until she finally left.”

“When she went AWOL,” Draco assumed.

“She took her things and moved out in the middle of the night. She was missing for three months,” Harry recalled, his chest tight with anxiety just thinking about it. “Eventually I got a call from MCUSA telling me that she was in hospital in New York. I brought her back to England and tried to get her to move back in, but she wasn’t having any of it. That was when she started getting into her drug experiments- she’d already opened the shop, she’d wanted to get started right away so she could pass it over to a good manager and just do her own thing after Hogwarts. She figured she would work on experiments and go back and forth between Australia…”

“How long ago was this?” Draco asked, trying to figure out a timeline.

“It’s been a year since America,” Harry told him. “That was last Christmas. She’s always worst at Christmas.”

A heavy silence hung in the air between the two men. Now that everything was out in the open, Draco had hoped that he would be able to understand better what Granger was going through, that he would see a way to pull her back from the edge. Instead, he only found himself feeling more lost than when he’d walked up to Potter’s front door.

“They sedated her this morning?” Harry broke the silence, remembering what Draco had told him when he first got there.

“She was having a panic attack, hallucinating… she was coming down from something that must have been tainted.”

Harry nodded slowly, processing this information, then got up resignedly. “I think I should go back with you,” he decided. “I need to try and talk to her.”

Draco wasn’t sure what good that would do, but he understood Potter’s wanting to see that she was
alright, so he shrugged in agreement. “I would assume she’ll be out for a few more hours, so you don’t have to rush.”

“I need to talk to Blaise,” Harry shook his head. “We’ll need a plan.”

He seemed exhausted as he got to his feet and went to tell Ginny what was going on, offering Draco use of the floo in the meantime. Watching the Boy-Who-Lived walk away, Draco was struck by a pang of pity for the man. He had lost everything a person could lose and clawed his way back, only to have to watch his best friend fall into a self-destructive, black hole of misery. The fact that he could even get up in the morning was enough to make Draco admire him ever so slightly- even if he was Harry Potter.
Chapter Notes

One more 'easter egg' boys and girls. I'm looking at you my fellow SciFi nerds, make your houses proud!

They had sedated her again.

Hermione could tell the moment she regained consciousness, a heavy fog settled over her that only came from medical sedation- Draught of Living Death, to be exact. What had she done to deserve the needle this time?

Her limbs were heavy as she tried to stretch them out, her arms falling limply above her head and her legs so sluggish she worried she might have been given a muggle epidural.

“Good, you’re awake.” Astoria’s perky voice came from somewhere above her, making Hermione wince. “We were starting to worry. You’ve been out since yesterday.”


“I’m not, you’re just trashed,” her friend informed her.

Hermione groaned again and attempted to open her eyes, pushing back against the haze that the drugs had left her in. The windows were covered by drapes and only a couple of candles lit the room, but it was still too bright. She attempted to move one of her arms to shield her arms, but only succeeded in hitting herself in the face, making Astoria laugh.

“Wow, you really are in bad shape,” she observed. “I’ll grab ol’ Tammie and see if he can give you something.”


“Blaise said not to,” Astoria pouted. “You overdid it, Mi.”

“Bag,” Hermione snarled, finally forcing her eyes open.

Astoria had a conflicted look on her face, torn between following Blaise’s instructions and angering the she-beast in front of her. Before she could make a decision, her sister strolled into the room with a tea tray to save her.

“Drink this.” Daphne ordered, putting a mug down on the table beside Hermione’s head. “It’ll clear your head.”

“Give me my bag.” Hermione countered in the same authoritative tone.

“Simon confiscated it,” Daphne said flippantly. “Drink the tea.”

“He did what?!” Hermione snapped, sitting up with all the grace of a strung-out ragdoll. “Where the fuck is he?!”
“Drink the tea and I’ll tell you.” Daphne crossed her arms, a sure-fire sign that she was ready to go to battle with the other witch. The two women glared at each other, Hermione’s eyes still fuzzy and having a hard time staying focussed on one spot, while Daphne’s seemed to be pure steel.

“Drink it,” she ordered once more.

Hermione muttered under her breath angrily, but carefully lifted the mug from the table and began to drink.

Admittedly, the effects were rather quick. By the time she’d finished, her vision had returned to it’s usual level and her limbs no longer felt like they belonged to someone else. With full control of her body returned, Hermione got to her feet and stretched languidly, putting herself through a few yoga poses before turning to back to Daphne angrily.

“Where is that fucking quack of a healer, and where has he put my bag?” she demanded.

“He’s in Blaise’s study,” Astoria said quickly. “You might want to wai-“

She couldn’t even get half of her warning out before Hermione sped off.

“Where the fuck do you get off stealing my shit?!” She demanded, throwing the door of Blaise’s study open, ready to unleash holy hell on the healer. “You arrogant, pigheaded, little prick. You think you can just sedate someone and do whatever the fuck you want?! And you!”

She turned to wheel on Blaise but stopped short when she came face to face with Harry Potter.

“What are you doing here?” she seethed, glaring at her former best friend.

“Blaise called me,” Harry stepped towards her calmly.

“Where the fuck is he, then?!”

“Hiding,” Simon offered. “As is everyone else.”

“Give me my shit!” Hermione wheeled on the healer once again, deciding to ignore Harry. “You have no right to touch my stuff. You’re not even my healer.”

“I’m not?” Simon asked sarcastically. “Well then what the hell have I been getting paid for this last year?”

“I don’t know,” Hermione snarled. “All you do is shove needles in my arm to render me unconscious, I can do that myself. And when I do it, I don’t wake up feeling half as shitty as when you do, so I don’t have a fucking clue what you’re supposedly paid for!”

“Hermione,” Harry vied for her attention. “He was just trying to protect you.”

“The only thing I need protection from is him!” Hermione spat, pointing a finger at Simon. “He’s a fucking predator.”

“The thing you need protection from is yourself,” Simon countered easily. “Do you even remember why I had to sedate you?”

They could immediately tell by her face that she didn’t, but Hermione wasn’t going to let a minute detail like that bother her. There were plenty of days that she couldn’t remember- the problem was the days that she could.
“You just about blew up the house earlier today, do you remember that?” Simon continued accusingly. “You came this close to bringing the whole building down on yourself.” He held his index finger and thumb less that a hair’s width apart.

“You had a panic attack,” Harry spoke up in a far more understanding tone. “You were hallucinating.”

“So you just figured you’d jab a needle in my arm and knock me out for an undetermined amount of time?” Hermione accused Simon. “What kind of healer are you?!”

“How is that any different from what you do to yourself every night?” he challenged. “You were going to hurt yourself, I didn’t have a choice.”

“There is always a choice.” Hermione said dangerously, her eyes suddenly filled with flames. “There is always a fucking choice!”

“Hermione,” Harry spoke cautiously, slowly stepping towards her. “Hermione, calm down. He didn’t mean anything by it.”

“Shut the fuck up, Harry!” She snapped and turned on the healer once more. “Don’t you fucking dare talk to me about not having a choice. You don’t even know what that means, you have no possible idea what that fucking means! You privileged, coddled, overeducated, useless sack of shit! You want to know what not having a choice is? Try being tortured within an inch of your life for information, knowing that if you say a single word your best friend will be killed. That is not having a choice, you conceited, fuck faced, cunt!”

She could feel herself shaking, could feel the magic rushing through her bloodstream and the sparks flying from the tips of her fingers and the ends of her hair. White hot rage pulsed through her, everything seemed brighter, every single sound was amplified by a thousand. She could hear the blood rushing in her ears and felt a scream building in her chest. Harry reached out to her, but she let out a burst of magic thrusting him back.

“You want to talk about choices?” Hermione advanced on the healer, her voice becoming dangerously low. “Let’s talk about the choice between killing your family yourself or waiting for someone else to come do it. You thought I was going to hurt myself? I’ve fucking destroyed myself, there’s nothing left to damage. So you can take your needles and your opinions and your disgustingly subpar medical skills and shove them up your ass. I don’t need your help, and I don’t want your help. That is my choice.”

Without another moment’s hesitation, she turned on the spot and disapparated, leaving a splinched chunk of hair to float slowly to the floor.

“DAMMIT!” Harry shouted, punching his fist against the wall in anger and frustration. “DAMMIT! DAMMIT! DAMMIT!”


“She must have broken through them.” Simon reasoned, staring at the spot where Hermione had just disappeared in confusion. “I know she’s powerful, but that… that was terrifying.”
“YOU THINK?!” Harry reeled on the man, redirecting his anger. “I FUCKING TOLD YOU THAT YOU HAD TO TREAD CAREFULLY!!”

“Potter, calm down,” Blaise tried to soothe.

“I WILL NOT FUCKING CALM DOWN!” Harry bellowed, his anger still focused on the healer. “I FUCKING TOLD YOU! I’VE DONE THIS BEFORE, I KNOW HOW, BUT YOU HAD TO STICK YOUR FUCKING NOSE IN IT AND NOW LOOK WHAT’S HAPPENED! SHE’S GONE- AGAIN!”

“We’ll find her,” Blaise reasoned calmly. “You know we will. She’ll turn up on the cover of Witch Weekly within the next day or two and Astoria will go find her.”

“You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.” Harry shook his head, the anger ebbing from his body ever so slightly. “You weren’t there before, you didn’t see-“

He shook his head, unable to continue. The last time he had seen Hermione so angry he had almost lost her.

“I have to get to the ministry and file a missing person’s report,” he said, heading for the floo.

“They won’t let you,” Simon frowned. “She’s been gone three minutes, that’s not missing.”

“She is missing,” Harry snarled. “Do you know where she is? No! And neither do I, I’d call that missing! And I’m Harry-fucking-Potter, they’ll do what I fucking tell them to!”

Without waiting to hear the healer’s response to this, Harry shoved past him and began to storm to the floo, Blaise trailing along behind him.

“We’ll go check her usual places and I’ll get in touch with her dealers,” he promised Harry. “We’ll find her.”

“We won’t,” Harry shook his head in defeat.

“Come on, Potter,” Blaise tried to encourage him. “She’s gone rogue before.”

“Yeah, she has,” Harry nodded. “And she didn’t come back. You don’t get it, Zabini. The last time things were like this… the last time it was like this, I got back a shell. She doesn’t have anything left to lose.”

They came to a stop in the entry room, where Ginny Weasley stood waiting for her boyfriend with a worried look on her face.

“Harry?” she asked tentatively, taking a step towards him.

He shook his head mournfully and stepped back, not wanting to be comforted. “I need to go to work,” he said. “I’ll see you at home.”

Ginny looked like she wanted to argue with this, offer to go with him or do anything other than sit at home, but the look in his eyes told her that it wasn’t a discussion. He needed to be an Auror now, and he couldn’t have his girlfriend tagging along.

“I’ll let you know if I find anything,” Blaise promised.

Harry nodded succinctly, but it was apparent that he didn’t think there would be anything to find.
“Hey man,” Blaise stopped him before he could take a handful of floo powder. “I’m sorry. I didn’t think—”

“Don’t,” Harry cut him off, his anger ebbing down into defeat. “It’s not your fault. It’s not anyone’s fault. It’s just… the way it is now.” He sighed heavily and clapped Blaise on the back, probably trying to be reassuring, then tossed the powder into the fire and spun off to the Auror’s office.

Once he was gone, Blaise and Ginny shared an awkward, worried glance.

“She’ll turn up,” Blaise tried to sound convincing. “She always does.”

Ginny nodded, but the look on her face told him that she didn’t have a lot of hope.
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

A/N: Ten points to Cinnamon Silver Tiger for guessing correctly- Blaise's private healer is in fact Simon Tamm from the show Firefly (which, if you haven't watched, you 100% should because it's amazing!) And just because I can, I'm giving her a bonus chapter as well. So here we are, in Hermione's descent into madness...

She'd been at a rave, the lights flashing brighter than the sun thanks to the acid trip she was on, dancing her heart out as the music pounded through her body. All around, the world was smiling and bright, none of them had a care in the world. They were a pulsing, throbbing mass of love and laughter- and then everything stopped.

The lights still sparkled, moving like a kaleidoscope as Hermione spun in a circle, her arms thrown out wide, but the music had suddenly become quiet and a hush fell over the room.

The DJ's voice boomed over the speakers and the entire room erupted as some sort of Christmas medley remix started blasting through the speakers. Red and green confetti fell from the ceiling, candy canes were passed around and more then a few people dressed like Santa Claus or his elves were suddenly in the room. Hermione didn't remember them being there before- what the hell were they doing there? Christmas was over, she'd done this already, it was supposed to be done!

The music grew louder, jingle bells morphing into something more akin to nails on a chalkboard, or the sharp violinist shrieks of a Hitchcock film. The lights changed colours, and suddenly the world was lit up blood red, the occasional burst of green bringing forth images of large snakes and billowing shadows conjured with those dreaded words, Morsmordre. Everything began to twist.

The bright, happy people that she'd been with a moment before had suddenly become ominous, glaring at her with wicked looks in their eyes and evil smirks on their lips. The stamps on their bodies that had once showed their proof of admission, now twisted and darkened, moving against their skin as they burned, calling them to their master.

What had been an absolute dream trip only moments ago was suddenly becoming a thing of nightmares. Spotlight warped into the scorching lights of an interrogation room. The many elves in the room became sinister, advancing on her in unimaginable numbers, their eyes unblinking and their smiles cruel as they demonically chanted "Happy Christmas".

Hermione retreated until she hit a wall, her legs giving out beneath her and forcing her to the floor, where she curled into a protective ball begging for mercy.

A high-pitched cackle echoed around her, not unlike that of Bellatrix LeStrange, multiplying until she couldn't even hear the music anymore.

"Stop it!" Hermione begged, clamping her hands over her ears in an attempt to escape the voices. "Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!"

"And what have we got here?" A deep, booming voice spoke above her.
Hermione opened her eyes and shrieked in terror- Voldemort crouched beside her, his face just as cold and snakelike as ever, but with a large white beard and red hat accentuating it, as though he had possessed Albus Dumbledore's vacated body.

"Have you been a naughty girl?" He leered, reaching out a bony hand to toy with her barely there dress. "You certainly look naughty."

Hermione whimpered in terror and curled in on herself even further, shutting her eyes to the man in the hopes that he would leave her alone.

Behind her eyelids, however, the images only grew worse. Her parents floated in front of her, their eyes full of disgust and hatred, their hands reaching out to grasp her throat, cutting off her windpipe and leaving her clawing for air. Bellatrix pulled at her hair, dragging her across the floor to use as a canvas for whatever hellish art she chose. And in the corner, eyes watched her, reflecting her pain and misery back on her, amplifying the emotions tenfold.

And then there had been nothing but black…

She was in bed with someone. His hands seemed to be everywhere as he thrust into her, grunting with the effort. Hermione could hear herself responding in kind, could hear the breathy moans that escaped her lips and the occasional high-pitched gasp, but she couldn't feel them. Even though she knew the sounds were coming from her, they seemed to belong to someone else, someone who could actually feel this man's hands on her, feel him thrusting against her passionately. That person was not Hermione. Hermione couldn't feel a thing, nor could she move. It was as though she were trapped inside a body that had been taken over by someone else. It occurred to her that this was what Ginny must have felt like when Tom Riddle had possessed her- she could see what she was doing, but had no way to stop it.

Panic rose in her chest as she attempted to regain control, desperate to push away the man that was clamouring all over her, pressing her into a bed she didn't know, claiming her body as his own. No matter how hard she tried to push against him, however, her hands only clawed at his back in what could obviously be seen as an act of desire. The panic continued to rise, sending her heart rate through the roof and making her extremities tingle from the increased blood flow the adrenalin caused. She needed to run, to hide, to fight, something! But she couldn't do any of those things. All she could do was watch as a stranger pounded her into his mattress, his face buried in her neck, unaware of the fear in her eyes as he bit down.

And then everything was fading again, and she was falling…

She could hear the girls giggling obnoxiously behind her and immediately knew she'd become the butt of yet another joke. She wasn't so self-involved as to think that whole world revolved around her, but she'd been in school long enough to know when she was about to be attacked. It always started with the giggles, the loudest ones coming from Patricia Hurley, de facto leader of the Fifth-year girls. It seemed to be one of Patricia's greatest joys in life, raising the entire year against her,
topped only by the joy of getting her in trouble.

It appeared that today would be no different, as she felt the pack of gigglers approaching.

"Oh, look everyone!" Patricia's high, cackling voice rose over the giggles ominously. "The little swot's got a new book. What are you learning today?"

The girl ignored her, burying her nose a little further into the large tome in her lap and focussing especially hard on the words.

"How can you possibly learn anything with all that hair taking up space?" Another girl scoffed harshly. "I mean, honestly, what self respecting person would walk around with all that on their head?"

"It really is dreadful," Patricia agreed, offering what one might have interpreted to be a sympathetic sigh. The girl knew better than that, though. Patricia Hurley was not sympathetic, she was mean and horrid, and nothing good ever came of her fake sincerity.

"I know!" her tone brightened significantly, and the girl flinched, knowing that something awful was to come. "We'll give her a makeover!" Patricia announced. "It's really the right thing to do, don't you think girls? After all, we're always told to help those less fortunate."

There was a murmur of heinous agreement from her gang, and the other girl was quick to close her book and stuff it into her school bag.

Slinging her bag over her shoulder, the girl mustered up the courage to speak and turned to face Patricia and her gang. "I'm fine, thank you," she said firmly. "Now I think the bell is about to ring, we should probably head inside."

"Oh no," Patricia sneered at her viciously. "We've got plenty of time still before the end of break. First thing's first now, I think the swot could use a haircut."

"Here, this'll help." A deep voice reached out to Hermione, pulling her out of the dream just enough that she forgot. "C'mon, open up."

A hand cupped her cheek, fingers softly prying open her lips and placing something on her tongue. He leaned over her and pressed his lips softly over hers, ensuring that her mouth remained closed for a moment, forcing her to swallow the pill.

"You'll feel better soon," the voice assured her. "Don't worry. I'll take care of you."

Hermione keened as his hands stroked her neck and softly fondled her breasts. He felt nice, whoever the voice belonged to. Calm and soothing, though decidedly not British. The way he touched her made her feel like she might melt.

"That's it," he encouraged. "That's a good girl…"

Hermione felt herself smile and nod. Yes, she was a very good girl. She could be a good girl for this
man, whoever he was.

As his hands traveled across her body, she turned into him, her lips seeking purchase on the first patch of skin she came to. He chuckled, a deep, velvety sound that vibrated all through Hermione, making her back arch and her spine tingle.

"See, I told you you'd feel better," he crooned. "I take good care of you."

Hermione nodded and tried to open her eyes, wanting to see who exactly it was that seemed to be playing her like a well-tuned piano. Her eyelids were heavy, though, and what did it really matter what he looked like? No, it was best just to keep her eyes closed and let this man take care of her.

The man shifted behind her and Hermione felt herself being lowered onto her back, a feather soft mattress catching her as the man’s skilled tongue marked a path down her body.

Yes, she would just keep her eyes closed and feel. Feeling was good, feeling was very good.

She gave her body over to the feeling of his tongue on her skin, of his teeth nipping at her occasionally, marking each and every patch of skin that made her react, as though making a map for himself.

Whoever this man was, he was definitely taking care of her, Hermione decided. And as his tongue reached out and curled around her clit, she gave herself over completely to the feelings, allowing her consciousness to leave her.

Hermione drifted in and out of a drug-induced haze. She was aware of people coming and going, of talking to some of them, of pleasuring others and being pleasured by them. Whenever she felt a sense of panic grip her, the man with the deep voice would calm her and coax something into her mouth, something to make her feel better. It was nice, not knowing or having to care about anything. All there was was pleasure, and softness, and happiness. She liked it here. But something in the back of her mind kept nagging, telling her that she couldn't stay, that she needed to go.

Whenever she tried to voice this, though, someone coaxed her into staying.

And then the happiness had gone, the soft haze she'd been in dropped away and a heavy darkness latched onto her, dragging her up by the throat, into one of her dreams. The ones that clawed at her mind and ripped at her chest, forcing themselves upon her and leaving before she had a chance to remember what they had been. She thought that she might have had this one before, though, that she remembered the feeling of their hands on her, the way they had fled from her in fear. Something about it was familiar…

She could feel hands holding her arms and legs, despite her furious struggles to break free. Heard the cackles of children all around her, gathered together to watch the little bookworm get her due.

"Hold her still," one voice spoke over the others, a joyful lilt in her voice that made the girl shiver in fear. "God, Charlie, if she doesn't stop moving I'll end up nicking you!"

The hands gripped her even tighter, yanking her arms behind her back painfully as fingers dug into her skin. She could already feel the bruises forming and found her herself fighting back tears. Why was it always her?
Patricia smiled cruelly as the girl stopped fighting so much, unable to move without coming close to pulling her arms from their sockets. With a gleeful look in her eyes, she looked around to ensure there weren't any teachers lurking, then reached into the pocket of her jumper and pulled out a pair of shining silver scissors.

"Now, let's see what we can do with this absolute atrocity," she mused, snipping the air threateningly.

"Let me go!" The girl cried, tears spilling over despite her desperate attempts to control them, making her voice pathetic and wobbly, and getting her nothing but uproarious laughter from the rest of her tormentors.

Patricia took a step closer, scissors poised in her hand, and grabbed a large chunk of curls, yanking the girl's head sharply towards her and making her cry out in pain.

"This seems like a good place to start," she crooned.

The girl felt the cold metal of the scissors against her scalp and yelped as she heard them open and close, the cold autumn air brushing over the bald patch and making her sob even harder.

"Stop!" She pleaded desperately with the children, once again trying to free herself, but there were three boys holding onto her now, instead of just Charlie, and she couldn't move an inch.

"A bit more, I think," Patricia observed seriously. "Wouldn't want you to look uneven."

She yanked another section of curls and placed the scissors once again, but before she could make the cut, the boys began to cry out in pain.

The girl in their clutches felt warmth travelling through her, settling gently on the parts of her body where they restrained her and bringing a sense of peace. She didn't notice the way the boys tried to pull away, or the screams that the children around her let out at the scene. When the boys released her, she simply fell to the blacktop, pulling her knees up to her chest and whimpering softly. She didn't see the burns that covered their hands, or the fear in the other children's eyes. She just knew that she wanted them to go away and leave her alone. Why would they never just leave her alone?!

ENOUGH! The voice in her mind seemed to scream at her.

Hermione sat up sharply, her head clear for the first time in Merlin only knew how long, her body shaking with the effects of the dreams that she could not remember, hands rising to her throat and tightening momentarily as if to be sure that she was in fact breathing. She didn't think she had been for a moment.

The room was dark, and she had to squint, but she could make out the shapes of bodies. Two lay in the bed with her, a woman draped lazily over Hermione's legs and a man with his arm draped softly across her waist. She could tell by the way he felt against her skin that this was the man who kept talking to her, giving her pills. In the dark, she studied his face, her eyes tracing the outline of his cheeks and the shape of his lips. He looked just as nice as he sounded.

Careful not to disturb him, Hermione carefully slipped out from beneath his arm and swung her feet over the side of the mattress, to the floor. Taking a moment to steady herself, she took stock of where she was. It looked like a studio flat, a large open concept area with a bed in one corner and a sitting area in the one diagonally opposite. There were plastic cups and empty bottles scattered everywhere, Christmas lights were strung around the ceiling and party decorations covered the room. It seemed that they'd all been having an excellent time, as there were about fifteen people scattered throughout
the flat, all sleeping peacefully on various pieces of furniture, occasionally on each other. By the state of undress, Hermione gathered that there hadn't been many boundaries set forth. Excellent, she'd spent the last however long at an orgy...

Trying not to think too much about what she might have done, Hermione set about locating her bag and whatever articles of clothing she could find, be they her own or not. She was unsteady on her feet at first, and it occurred to her that she didn't think she'd been out of bed in a while. It was at that point that it also occurred to her that her bladder was exceedingly full, and so she set about finding the toilet.

As fate would have it that was also where she found her bag, discarded inside an elegant looking bathtub. Reaching into the bottom, she found her wand and quietly summoned her clothes. What appeared in her hand was a slinky black dress she had no memory of purchasing, or ever wearing for that matter. It was a nice dress, though, so she decided to simply let it be and slipped it over her head. Collecting her bag from the tub, Hermione turned to exit the bathroom and came face to face with her reflection.

She was a mess. Her hair, wild and untamed to begin with, had reached an entirely new level of messy that might have elicited scientific studies should someone see it. The dark circles under her eyes confirmed her suspicions that she had been here for longer than just a night, more than likely it had been days, though she had no way of knowing at the moment. Whatever makeup she might have been wearing when she arrived was long gone now, but she could see the faint remainder of mascara on her cheek. Her neck and what she could see of her chest and shoulders were covered in bruises, some obviously love bites, while others were in the distinct shape of fingers.

"What did I tell you?" Mirror Hermione seemed to sneer. "Just another hole for them to fuck. And fuck you, they most certainly did."

Wincing, Hermione quickly averted her eyes and ducked out of sight of the mirror, stumbling back into the open flat. For a second, Hermione considered staying. She'd liked it here, it was nice and happy, and she didn't have to care.

"That was the drugs, you stupid bint, mocked the voice in her head. And we've obviously run out."

She could feel a hangover setting in and knew that if she didn't take something else soon, she would start to suffer through some sort of withdrawal. God, she didn't even know what she'd been taking!

No, that voice in her head had been right. It was time to go.

Grabbing the first pair of shoes she set eyes on and shrinking them to size, Hermione stepped out the door of the flat into a hallway and followed the signs for the emergency exit.

On the street, she quickly realized that she had no idea where she was. Nothing about the area looked familiar, and the warm night air told her that she was most definitely not in England. A momentary pulse of fear went through her, but Hermione swallowed it down. It was fine. This wasn't the first time she'd come out of a binge in a place she didn't know. She'd just have to find a hotel and go from there.

Picking a direction at random, she set off along the street keeping an eye out for anything that might give her an idea of where the hell she was. Soon enough, she reached a main street that carried plenty of early morning traffic. Putting out her hand, she brought a passing cab to a halt and climbed into the back seat.

"I need a hotel," she told the driver. "Wherever's closest, it doesn't really matter."
The man nodded and pulled away from the curb without a word.
Chapter 16

The music pounded through the club, shaking the glasses on the tables and making it impossible to have a conversation- not that anyone was trying to, they were all too busy dancing their cares away. Up on stage, the band were giving it their all, and the crowd was more than happy to give it back. All except two.

In the middle of the dancefloor, trapped in the mass of crashing and swaying bodies, Hermione Granger stood perfectly still. Her eyes closed, face lifted towards the sky, she allowed herself to be pushed to and fro without concern.

Over by the bar, Draco Malfoy watched. He’d been watching her for weeks now, trying to figure out what was happening in her head. He’d watched her sit catatonic on the floor for hours at a time, and he’d watched her get high a few hours later, only to become even more despondent. He’d watched her get high to numb her pain, and he’d watched her drink to forget.

He’d followed her as she wandered aimlessly through cities and he’d watched her stand in one spot for hours at a time, seemingly staring at nothing.

Now, in the middle of a packed nightclub, she looked as though she was standing beside an open grave and as the bright lights passed over her, he could see the glimmer of tears on her face.

And then, just as quickly as she’d stopped, she started dancing again, plastering a smile on her face and screaming along with the rest of the crowd. It took less than a blink, a flick of a switch, and she was a completely different person. After a month of watching this act, though, Draco wasn’t fooled. He knew exactly what was going to happen next. When the band finished playing, she would go to the bar and get a drink- or three- then she’d find some drugs, and by the end of the night she would be incoherently grinding against some guy. When the lights went up and the music turned off, the guy would take her home and Draco would follow them, stepping in and taking her back to his hotel if she was too out of it.

It was what they had done just about every night since he found her.

It had taken him two weeks to track her down after the apparition incident. As soon as he’d felt the wards break around Blaise’s, Draco had jumped into the nearest fireplace and flooed to Hermione’s flat, but she hadn’t been there. He’d waited the rest of the day for her to return, all the while keeping in touch with Potter and Blaise as they ran down a precompiled list of people and places she might go to. When that yielded nothing, Draco had bribed every gossip columnist and photographer in Wizarding Europe to contact him the moment Granger was spotted. He’d instructed them to pass the offer on to their affiliates around the world as well, both magical and muggle, promising that he would make it worth their while if he was the first to hear about it. When an owl had arrived telling him that Hermione had been photographed at a club in Brazil, Draco had taken the first portkey he could get.

It had taken him another two days after his arrival in the country to find her and when he did, he’d almost caused a national incident.
They were in a muggle club and as soon as he saw her, he knew she was wasted.

Not wanting her to notice him right away, he’d found a seat at the bar and spent the next three hours watching her charm everyone she met, flirting impartially and dancing up a storm. The glass in her hand was never empty and there was no shortage of drugs offered to her as she cozied up to a bloke in the VIP area, who he later learned was the son of a foreign ambassador to somewhere. When she snuck off to the bathroom with said bloke, Draco was right behind her, not trusting the look in the other man’s eye. A pair of bodyguards built like Quidditch Beaters blocked his path, growling at him in a language he couldn’t identify, and Draco’s concerns only grew. He’d barely given it a second thought before pulling out his wand and stunning both men, not giving a damn about the consequences it might have. Stepping over their prostrate bodies as though it were nothing, Draco broke down the door to the bathroom and forced his way inside to find Hermione pressed up against a wall, mumbling incoherently as the man she was with held his hand to her throat to keep her still.

Draco had seen red.

With a roar of anger, he lunged forward and ripped the man off of Hermione, throwing him against the opposite wall and punching him in the jaw.

“Stay away from her!” Draco growled, pushing him to the ground and giving the man a swift kick to the ribs when he tried to get to his feet.

Satisfied that the assailant was disabled for the moment, Draco turned around to find Hermione passed out on the floor, her clothes in a state almost identical to the night he’d found her in that Parisian alley.

“Fuck, Granger.” He sighed and crouched beside her, checking her pulse. Once he was sure that she was still breathing, he’d hoisted the unconscious witch into his arms and apparated them back to his hotel.

When she’d come to the next morning, Draco had been sitting next to the bed.

“Fancy meeting you here,” he joked as she took in her surroundings.

“Malfy?” Hermione frowned, turning to look at him. “What are you doing here? Where are we?”

“My hotel room in Rio,” Draco informed her.

This didn’t seem to make her any less confused.

“I found you passed out in a bathroom last night.” He continued, skipping over the part where he’d knocked out three men and technically kidnapped her.

“How?” She frowned, wincing at the sound of her own voice, despite the fact that she was whispering.

“Here,” Draco offered her a basic hangover potion to take the immediate edge off. “I don’t know what you took last night, so I don’t have one of your special cocktails, but this should help.”
She nodded her thanks and gulped the potion down, a sigh of relief escaping her lips. “How did you find me?” Hermione repeated her question, sitting up slowly.

“I followed the trail of tabloid stories,” Draco shrugged. “You’ve been having quite a trip—pun intended.”

Hermione gave a quick snort of laughter at the joke, then turned serious again. “What are you doing here, Malfoy?”

“Just taking a vacation. I heard Rio was nice.”

“You just took a two year vacation,” Hermione scoffed. “Why are you here?”

“Why are you?” he countered.

She pursed her lips. “I was invited to a party.”

“That’s nice. When was it?” Draco asked coolly.

Her eyes flashed with anger and she quickly got out of bed and started towards the door.

Draco followed, overtaking her before she could reach for the handle. “Where are you going?”

“Get out of my way, Malfoy,” she snarled.

“Just hang on,” Draco shook his head, remaining rooted to his spot. “I didn’t mean anything by it, okay? I’m sorry.”

Hermione didn’t look like she believed him for a minute, but she momentarily stopped trying to force her way around him.

“I’m sorry,” Draco repeated. “It’s just, you were in bad shape when you left Blaise’s and I was worried about you.”

“Why?” she demanded. “What does it matter to you?”

“We’re friends,” he reasoned simply. “Don’t you remember?”

“It’s been two months, you can’t be that attached,” she rolled her eyes.

“What are you talking about? We’ve been friends since school,” Draco reminded her. “That’s almost three years now. Besides, you’re the only person I know who’s as smart as I am. I get bored with only Blaise to talk to.”

“So you came to Brazil for a chat?” Hermione scoffed.

“See, that’s where you’re wrong,” he shook his head. “I came to Brazil for some sun and just happened to stumble upon you.”

“You’ve never gone anywhere for sun, you’re a fucking vampire,” she laughed sharply. “You came back from a year in Africa translucent.”

“That’s because I spent my time there in Witch doctor huts, they’re not fond of sun for some reason,” Draco explained.

“You’re full of shit, Malfoy.” Hermione sneered, moving towards the door once again.
“No more than you are,” he called after her in challenge.

Another flash of anger made her stop, giving Draco a chance to catch up and face her again.

“What happened while I was in France?” He asked casually, throwing her off. “I left to visit my Mum for a couple days and come back to find you’ve gone AWOL. What’s up with that?”

“None of your business.”

“Alright,” Draco shrugged easily. “What happened to those potions you were working on, then? You can’t be experimenting all the way out here.”

“I’m taking a break,” she frowned. “And why do you fucking care, anyways? God, Malfoy, just get out of my way, alright?”

“How about breakfast?” he offered a compromise. “My treat.”

“How about no,” Hermione snapped. “Move!”

When he didn’t, she stomped her foot angrily and shoved his chest as hard as she could before apparating away.

He’d found her in Paris a few nights later- a club was opening in the Wizard’s quarter and she had yet to miss such an event. She’d blacked out before the end of the night, crashing after what Draco thought was an extended Adderall binge, but not before wandering the streets for a few hours. Draco had followed her, of course, just as he had on New Years. This time, she spoke to him as she walked, recalling random facts about the city. He assumed that it was the drugs making her chatty, but he wasn’t complaining. It was almost like catching a glimpse of the old Granger.

“You know, when he was executed, Louis XVI was too fat to fit into the guillotine,” she told him as they crossed a street, noting the commemorative plaque nearby. “Well, specifically, he was too fat to fit into the lunette, which is what the space for the head was called.”

“I definitely did not know that,” Draco shook his head.

“But for all the hype about beheadings during the French revolutions, the Nazis beheaded twice the number of people,” Hermione carried on as though she hadn’t heard him.

“Nazis?” Draco frowned, strolling along beside her. To his surprise, she answered.

“They were a German political party in the 1930s and 40s that eventually waged war against the rest of the world. They were responsible for one of the most horrific genocides in human history,” she explained shortly. “Voldemort times a thousand.”

“And they had a thing for beheadings,” he nodded. “Got it.”

“They took Paris during the war,” Hermione continued. “Marched into the city and called it their own without a second glance. All the men had gone off to war and the government had fled to Vichy and basically thrown Paris to the wolves. They never stood a chance.”

“But?” Draco sensed that there was more.
“But they fought tooth and nail, they organized a resistance and they held their own until the Allies could get to them,” she smiled wistfully.

“Reminds me of some people I know,” he mused.

Unfortunately that was the wrong thing to say, because Hermione’s face immediately fell, her mouth snapping shut. They walked another ten blocks or so before she stopped and sat down on a bench, suddenly looking like she was about to fall over. When she laid down and rested her head in his lap, Draco waited a few minutes and she was out cold. He took her to an empty Malfoy property and let her sleep it off, and the next night they started the cycle again- Draco standing at the bar and Hermione finding someone to take home.

That had been four weeks ago. In the interceding time, he had followed her to Mexico, and then through the States, trailing a safe distance behind her as she lured men back to her hotel room and was lured back to theirs.

When she’d tired of America, he’d followed her out to Greece, where she’d been welcomed aboard more party boats than he could count, and almost drowned twice. Each time she fallen overboard, Draco had been in the water in an instant, pulling her to shore and handing her a sobering potion before she was coherent enough to argue. When she’d sobered, of course, she threatened to hex him within an inch of his life. She’d actually acted on the threats a few times now and let off a barrage of stinging jinxes or unleashed her signature flock of canaries, but Draco wasn’t deterred. He simply knocked the spells away, said ‘You’re welcome, Granger,’ and offered to take her back to a hotel to rest, before she stormed back onto the boat. She would be good and wasted again soon enough, and forget that he was even there until he showed up at her hotel room the next morning, coffee and donuts in hand.

“I didn’t know you had a tattoo.” Draco mused, noticing the black ink on her ribs just under her bikini tie as he strolled up behind her on the dock.

She was on her way to whatever party was happening down off the pier, some group of rich kids had rented out the whole thing and Draco had magicked his way into the private affair by passing himself off as her bodyguard- which he technically was.

“Fuck off, Malfoy,” Hermione groaned and picked up her pace, but he only fell back in step a moment later.

“Didn’t take you for a tattoo person,” he continued without missing a beat. “Is that Latin?”

He tried to get a better look at the design, but Hermione clamped her arm to her side, hiding it. “Testy,” Draco frowned. “Sentimentality or gross embarrassment?”

“Fuck off.”
“Personally, I had a rather embarrassing incident in China. I thought I was getting something really interesting and meaningful, some ancient Chinese proverb, you know?” he looked over at her for a reaction, but wasn’t put off by her stoic indifference. “Turns out it says ‘chicken noodle soup’.”

Despite herself, Hermione let out a short sniff of laughter at this, quickly schooling her face back to its former dispassionate expression, but Draco wasn’t fooled.

“See, I knew you’d like that,” he smiled. “So, you gonna throw me a bone? Is yours embarrassing too?”

Hermione paused a moment, then stopped and turned to face him completely. Only a few metres away, the party she was heading to was in full swing, music pounding and guests shouting and laughing in enjoyment. In a few minutes she would be rolling, and it wouldn’t matter if she told him or not, because she wouldn’t remember it. With an almost sick sense of enjoyment, she raised her arm to allow him to read the elegant script: “CLII” and below it “sic itur ad astra”

“Thus you shall go to the stars,” Draco translated easily, though he frowned at the roman numerals above it. “152?”

Hermione nodded, watching him for a moment to see if he knew. When his eyes widened slightly and his expression turned dour, she smiled.

“The number of people we were responsible for and failed,” she sneered. “It’s important to keep track of your personal body count, I think.”

Without another word, she turned and walked the few remaining feet to the boat, where she was greeted by an almighty cheer and a full glass of champagne. Glancing back, she saw Draco watching her sadly and felt a pang of guilt, but quickly brushed it off. She hadn’t told him anything he didn’t already know. They had held the lives of the entire Wizarding World in their hands, and they had let 152 slip through their fingers like grains of sand. Those losses were on them, and she carried them with her every day.
“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Hermione snarled angrily as she opened her hotel room door to find Draco stood there with a takeaway cup, instead of the room service she’d been expecting.

“Good morning to you too.” He greeted her cheerily and pushed his way inside, ignoring her protests that he fuck off, and turning his attention to the man passed out in her bed. “Oi! Up and at ‘em, mate!”

The nameless man groaned, squinting up at Draco in confusion. “Whoeryou?”

“I’m the wake-up fairy,” he answered sarcastically. “You’ve got ten seconds to get out before I start chopping off appendages.”

Hermione stood at the door still in only her bra and panties, glaring at him. “Malfoy, get the fuck out before I call security.”

“Don’t worry, I already did,” Draco smirked. “Told them that there was a bloke cooking meth in the room. They were very keen to come see, mentioned something about bringing the police along for some sort of show and tell…”

He’d barely gotten out the word ‘police’ before Hermione’s bed mate had become wide-eyed and bushy-tailed, stammering his way through a quick farewell as he pulled on his jeans and stumbled out the door with his shoes clutched to his chest.

“Your morning Red Eye.” Draco held out the takeaway cup to Hermione as soon as he was gone.

“Get the fuck out!” she roared.

He ignored her and set the cup on a nearby table, then made himself comfortable on the sofa. “I’ve had an idea,” he offered lazily, flicking through the television channels.

“Does it have to do with not stalking me?” Hermione snarked. “Because if not, I don’t care.”

“I think I’ve worked out the problem with your Ecstasy potion.”

Despite herself, she stopped mid-step on her way to the bathroom, and Draco smirked, knowing he had her attention.

“I was thinking, you might need to take a more Felix Felicis type approach, increase your magical ingredients as opposed to muggle. Have you thought about Unicorn hair?”

He turned his head and watched as she mulled this over, taking note of the way she quirked her head to one side, thoughtfully.

“I bet if we worked on it a bit, you’d be able to test it out soon,” he added.

That was too far, though.

Quick as a whip, her head straightened and her spine became stiff, her hands balled into fists. “Get out, Malfoy.” She tried to put a quiet anger in her tone, but all he heard was empty words as she stormed into the bathroom and locked the door behind her.
In Amsterdam, he sat in the corner of a smoke filled coffeeshop while Hermione lounged with a group of Muggle men. He’d already heard one of the employees warn her against mixing the different varieties of cannabis at the table, but she had simply waved the girl off inconsequentially and turned her attention back to her new ‘friends’. They were tourists, backpacking across Europe after finishing college back home in America. Draco suspected that ‘finishing’ had more to do with expulsion than graduation, but Hermione didn’t care about that at all. They were buying, and she was good and baked, what else mattered?

Draco’s fists clenched as he watched the man sitting closest to her put his hand on her leg, slowly inching it higher as he spoke. Hermione smiled listlessly and leaned into him, her eyes barely open.

“Excuse me,” Draco hailed over an employee and pulled €50 from his pocket. “What is she mixing over there?” He nodded to Hermione’s table.

“I’m sorry-“ The girl started to shake her head, but he interrupted.

“Please, she’s my cousin. I’m just trying to look out for her, she’s going through a rough patch,” he explained meaningfully. He’d found it helped to claim they were related in situations like this. Calling himself her boyfriend made people think he was just jealous, but a cousin looking out for another was endearing and trustworthy usually.

The girl studied him for a moment, obviously trying to gauge whether or not he was lying. Then she frowned at Hermione’s table and turned back to him, snatching the bill. “She shouldn’t be mixing. It’s very strong,” she told him, then hurried off behind the counter.

“Gee, thanks.” Draco rolled his eyes and turned his attention back to the table in time to hear the men offering Hermione a lift.

“-can take you back to our hostel,” one of them was saying. “Sleep it off.”

Hermione’s head nodded up and down like a ragdoll, seemingly too heavy for her shoulders, and two of the men helped her to her feet. She giggled and leaned into one of them, allowing him to take full advantage of the deep neckline of her t-shirt.

The group of men exchanged lecherous grins and began making their way out to the street, taking Hermione with them.

Without missing a beat, Draco got up and followed, pushing his way through the crowded sidewalk to catch up, shouting for her when he was a few steps away.

Hermione frowned and tried to turn, but the man helping her wasn’t too keen on the idea.

“I- I- that’s my name,” she slurred, looking around.

Everything was hazy and blurred at the edges, she could barely keep her eyes open. It felt like her legs were made of lead and she could barely stand, let alone walk, but somehow, she was still moving.

“GRANGER!”
There it was again, her name. That was her name, after all, wasn’t it? It certainly sounded like it. And that voice… there was something familiar about it… something calming.

She tried to stop again, but the arm around her waist spirited her forward.

“Wait,” Hermione pushed her hand against his chest, trying to pull away. “Wait.”

“It’s okay, you just need to sleep it off,” the man insisted. “Come on.”

Yes, sleep sounded like an excellent idea, Hermione nodded. “OI!”

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Draco clapped his hand down roughly on the backpacker’s shoulder, shoving him to turn around.

“What’s your problem?!” the man demanded, trying to hold onto Hermione.

“That’s my girlfriend,” Draco lied easily. He’d found it was the easiest way to get other blokes to relinquish her, as opposed to his lie of being related to get information.

“Draco,” Hermione moaned his name, helping his lie along perfectly, a smile playing on her lips. “Hi!”

“Hi, love,” Draco responded patronizingly. “Come on, it's time to go.”

She muttered something about sleep and patted the chest of the man holding her, obviously not completely in control of her limbs.

“Yeah, you need to sleep it off,” he agreed with her. “And you won’t be doing it with these dolts. Come on.”

The men started to argue, insisting that Hermione didn’t want to go with him, but they were all baked and it took Draco all of three seconds to shove them off and toss Hermione over his shoulder.

“Oh, Draco, everything’s turvy,” she giggled.

“Is it now?” He indulged her, turning and heading in the opposite direction to the backpackers, ignoring their cries of protest at his stealing away their new toy.

As he walked, she babbled incoherently, occasionally holding onto him but mostly just hanging limply down his back.

“You have a nice bum,” she informed him at one point. “It’s very firm.”

She gave it a squeeze, just to prove her point.

“Oi, hands to yourself,” Draco protested.

“Better than Blaisey’s bum,” Hermione continued happily. “He’s all bony. Like your bum.”

Draco rolled his eyes and carried on down the street, ignoring the strange looks people were giving him and tugging Hermione’s skirt down so that it covered her better.

“Hands to yourself,” she copied him, then began giggling uncontrollably again.
Well, at least she was happy today, Draco mused to himself. Better that than have her screaming at him while he carried her through the streets- he’d been forced to Confound quite a few police officers in Los Angeles the week before, when she’d begun shouting that she was being kidnapped after he punched out a drug dealer that had been far too shady, as well as overly handsy. No, giggly and happy was definitely preferable, even if it was slightly disturbing.

As Draco thought about this, there was suddenly a sharp pain in his arse, and he let out a pained yelp.

“Did you just bite me?!” he demanded, turning his head to try and look at her.

“Mmhm,” she giggled again.

“Why?!”

“Just wanted to,” she hummed dreamily. “It’s a nice bum.”

“No more biting,” Draco ordered exasperatedly. “Merlin, woman.”

“You’re boring,” Hermione scoffed at this order.

“I’m perfectly alright with that,” he assured her. “Has anyone ever told you what a piece of work you are, Granger?”

“They tell me what a piece of ass I am,” she giggled again. “Just like you.”

Draco rolled his eyes and kept walking, ducking into an alley as soon as possible and setting her on her feet, propping her against a wall so she could get her balance.

“Hello!” She smiled brightly at him once her eyes focussed, then looked him up and down appraisingly. “You are fit, aren’t you? I bet you’d be an excellent shag.”

“Back at you,” he rolled his eyes again.

“Oh, I am!” Hermione assured him. “Care to find out how excellent?” She reached out and slipped her arms around his neck, pressing herself flush against him.

Draco sighed and looped his own arm around her waist. “Come on, Granger, let’s get you to bed.”

“Exactly what I was thinking,” she purred.

“Hold on,” he warned, then apparated them to his hotel.

The moment they landed, Hermione keeled over and hurled.

“That was horrible!” she whined, as he helped her up. “Why did you do that?!”

“Had to get you home somehow,” he shrugged. “Still want to shag?”

“No!” She attempted to shove him, but only succeeded in tossing her body into his, losing her balance. Thankfully, Draco was rather used to this by now and deftly caught her, helping her the rest of the way to the bathroom. With practiced ease and precision, he cleaned her up and convinced her to drink a large glass of water, then helped her change into one of his shirts and tucked her into bed.
He had thought that she was already asleep when he heard her speak quietly. She talked in her sleep quite a lot, but when he looked over she was watching him expectantly.

“Sorry?” he frowned, sitting down on the edge of the bed.

“Why are you here?” she asked.

“This is my hotel room.” Draco quipped, figuring she was just babbling again, but she shook her head, a serious frown wrinkling her forehead.

“No, why are you here?” she asked again. “Why haven’t you gone home?”

“I like to travel,” he shrugged. “Besides, someone’s got to take care of you.”

“I can take care of myself,” she grumbled, but nowhere near as loudly or adamantly as she would have sober.

“Yeah, but sometimes you need someone else to help,” Draco offered carefully. “We all need someone we can rely on, Granger.”

“People leave,” she replied heavily, her eyes focussed on something far away. “And then you’re alone again. Better off to just stay that way.”

“Not everyone is going to leave,” he argued. “I’m not going to leave.”

She shook her head sadly, and without another word, pulled the comforter up and rolled away from him.

When Draco woke up the next morning she was gone.

She’d found a Muggle dignitary’s son or something to pal around with after Amsterdam and gone off the map for a few days. A little digging had informed Draco that while the man was well known for his partying, he probably didn’t pose any sort of threat, so he’d let her be and watched from afar while she partied lavishly with her latest suitor.

When he’d followed them to the airport, Draco had been only vaguely concerned. Even if the bloke had a private plane, he could easily find out the destination and follow her there. When he’d tricked the woman at the terminal into believing he was an employee of the boy’s father, however, his concern turned to serious worry.

“That’s correct,” the woman had smiled warmly at him. “They should be landing in Melbourne in about two hours.”

In that moment, Draco knew two things for certain. Hermione had either not been in her right mind when she’d agreed to get on that plane, or hadn’t been told the destination, and this was not going to be good.

It had taken him twenty minutes at the Greek Ministry to get a portkey, another twenty to get from his arrival point to the airport. The first time he saw her, she was blitzed. Giggling and flirting, hanging off of a muggle bloke who was practically carrying her. She didn’t know where they were yet. When they’d checked into a fancy hotel, having reserved the entire penthouse floor, Draco got a
room a few levels below, then parked himself in the lobby and waited.

She was still wasted when they left the hotel later that night, but instead of being giggly, she was full of energy, unable to keep still. She noticed him out of the corner of her eye and glared, picking at the skin on her arms and muttering to her beau when he questioned her sudden change in mood. They looked over at him and Draco waved amicably. A moment later, there were two security guards on him, demanding that he leave.

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen,” he drawled lazily. “See, that girl there, she’s my cousin. She’s going through a bit of a rough patch, as you can probably tell by the excessive amounts of drugs she’s consumed since you met her a few days ago. So, I won’t be going anywhere without her.”

The lie came easily, and they didn’t question it very much. Once Hermione and her friend had exited the lobby, they let him go, suggesting he might not want to let her see him again, but agreeing to leave him be. Draco shrugged in thanks and followed them outside, where he ordered a cab to follow their limousine.

In the club, he stood at the bar and sipped at an exceptionally good glass of whiskey, waiting for the inevitable shoe to drop. They’d been there for about four hours and her high was slowly waning to a buzz, laced with shots. She was laying down in a booth, her head in some other girl’s lap, laughing about something. The guy she’d been with had found himself a model of some sort to play with and was nowhere to be found, but his tab at the bar had been left open and his entourage was putting it to good use. As another bottle of champagne was delivered to the table, he saw Hermione let out a whoop of excitement and swing herself into an upright position, reaching out for a glass.

“Australia’s finest,” the waitress assured them. “Another round of shots?”

There was a resounding ‘yes’ from the rest of the group, but Hermione had stilled. *There it is,* Draco frowned in concern. He watched as realization dawned on her, as her hand passed over the glass and went straight for the bottle, which she lifted to her lips.

Her companions seemed to complain at first, then began to cheer her on as she drank more and more. She had to have finished at least half of it before she put the bottle down too hard, accidentally smashing it to pieces on the corner of the table and cutting her hand open in the process. The others fusséd and complained that there was glass everywhere, that the champagne had been wasted, and even that she was bleeding, but Hermione didn’t even flinch. She stared at the oozing cut on her hand as though it were impossible to fathom, her brain unable to wrap around the idea of whatever was happening to her.

Without a word to any of them, she got to her feet and left.

Draco had been after her in a second, pushing his way through the crowd and slipping out the back door only moments behind her. Out on the street, he breathed a little easier, the night comfortably warm compared to the stifling heat of the club. It was past midnight, and the streets were relatively empty save for a few stragglers, so he didn’t have any problem keeping up as she walked. He wasn’t sure how she was managing it so well when she’d drank her weight in shots and at least a bottle’s worth of champagne.

The cut on her hand left a trail of blood behind her, and Draco worried that it might be more than just
a flesh wound. He was catching up, set on healing it, when she stopped, looked around for a second and pulled her wand out from the holster she kept on her thigh. A quick charm and the bleeding stopped, the skin stitched back together all on its own. He hadn’t made any attempt to hide, but she didn’t acknowledge his presence. Instead, she slipped off her shoes and started to walk again, the strappy heels dangling from her fingers all night as she traipsed across the city. Occasionally, she would wipe away tears that had fallen silently or pause and stare up at the sky in search of something that was never there.

When the sun began to rise, she sat down on a stray piece of grass and watched it. Taking the opportunity to try and talk to her, Draco approached and lowered himself to the ground next to her. He didn’t say a word, waiting to see if Hermione would speak, but she too remained silent, watching the sky fade from darkest blue to watercolour reds, pinks and oranges, all mixing together with serene beauty. As they watched, her head slowly came to rest on Draco’s shoulder, and it took every ounce of self-control he had not to jump or tense up in surprise.

When the sky settled back on its normal blue, she sat up and reached into her bag, pulling out an old hairbrush. A moment later she was gone, the portkey having activated.
“Let’s just give it a chance,” the woman suggested, her voice hushed and muffled through the wall.

“A chance?!” The man’s voice wasn’t muffled at all, it rang clear through the whole house.

The woman shushed him quickly. “You’ll wake her.”

“See, it’s already started,” he argued, lowering his voice. “I will not live in fear in my own home!”

“That’s not what I meant,” she tried to calm him. “You don’t know what this will do, perhaps she’ll come in handy.”

The man scoffed as though this were the most ridiculous thing he’d ever heard, but the woman continued.

“It will be years before it’s truly a problem, you heard what that woman said. She can’t do anything with it until she’s of age.”

“It certainly hasn’t stopped her yet,” the man hissed. “You saw what she did to those children at the school, she put them in hospital.”

“They were picking on her,” the woman reasoned, though she didn’t sound convinced. “It was self defense.”

“She mutilated them!” he roared.

“SHHH!” he was quieted again. “You saw how upset she was by it, though. She didn’t mean to.”

“That is my point entirely. What happens the next time she ‘doesn’t mean to’? What will she do to us?” he demanded. “It’s all well and good for her to feel badly about it, but that won’t do us much good when she’s blown up the house with us in it.”

Silence fell over the house. There was no muffled reply, no hint of a whisper or rustle of someone shaking their head in denial, only quiet stillness.

And down the hall from the arguing couple’s bedroom, a little girl pressed her face into her pillow and let go of a silent sob.

Hermione woke up to find her face wet with tears. She’d had a dream again. As always, she had no memory of what it had been about, the moment she opened her eyes it fled her mind, leaving a hollowness in her chest and a headache in its wake.

“Buenos dias, hermosa.” A deep, sultry voice drew her attention and she sat up, looking around for the source.

Standing in the doorway was a tall, Adonis-like figure. A loose pair of sweats hung from his hips, his lack of a shirt making it easy for Hermione to admire his perfectly carved abs and chest, and the deep V of his pelvis. As her eyes slowly scanned up his body, she took in his broad shoulders,
noting quite a few scratches she’d presumably caused. His neck seemed to have a bite mark in it and Hermione couldn’t keep her smirk to herself. Between the marks across this man’s body and the deep ache in her hips, she felt safe in assuming she’d been rather rough the night before. She licked her lips subconsciously, hoping that she might get a repeat now that she was sober, and the man chuckled, the sound sending vibrations all through Hermione’s body, making her shiver.

“Did you sleep well?” He asked, pushing away from the doorframe and sidling towards the bed.

He sat beside Hermione and slowly ran a hand up her leg, which stuck out beneath the sheets, handing her the mug in his hand. “I brought you some coffee.”

“Thank you,” Hermione hummed, lifting the mug to her lips and taking a sip. The beverage sent warmth all through her, decidedly sweet, but dark at the same time and she let out a satisfied moan at the taste.

“It’s good, then,” the man smirked. “If that noise is anything to go by. It certainly meant good things last night.”

Hermione smiled at him over the brim of the mug, taking another sip and repeating the sound. “Very good,” she assured him, her voice thick with desire.

“Muy bueno.” His hand slid from her leg up to her hip, tracing large circles around the joint, his touch barely more than a whisper.

Hermione hummed in satisfaction again, then placed the mug on the table beside her and shifted further down the bed so that her uncovered leg was behind him, her aching core pressed against his hip.

“You are a temptress,” the man chuckled, his accent thick on the English words. “La seductora.”

Hermione grinned, leaning into him wantonly, trailing her fingers over the ridges of his stomach. “What are you going to do about it?”

A deep growl rose from his throat and in an instant, he was on her, his lips and hands relentlessly dragging her to the edge, pulling her closer and closer to beautiful oblivion. Letting her eyes roll back in her head, Hermione gave herself over to the feelings and allowed herself to be set adrift, waves of passion rocking her away from shore.

He’d found her at the peep show her Adonis-like new friend had taken her to and pulled the damn fire alarm before things could even get interesting, and Hermione was ready to blow. Could she not just live her life without Draco Malfoy interfering, for Merlin's sake?!

No matter where she went, he always seemed to find her, and she was getting tired of it. He wasn’t her keeper! Spotting him in the crowded street, she decided that it was time to get rid of him. She needed to be as hard with him as she was with Harry, needed to make sure he couldn’t stand her. She’d let him get too close, and now she had to do something about it.

Taking his arm, she dragged him into a nearby alley and began to berate him, demanding that he leave her the fuck alone and go back to England.
“I’m not leaving you by yourself,” Draco shook his head adamantly. “And it’s not like I’m getting in
the way of your life.”

“The fuck you’re not!” she scoffed.

“Would you have honestly been willing to do that if you weren’t wasted?” he challenged, pointing
the building he’d just cleared out. “You want everyone in the world to watch you fuck some guy
who’s name you don’t even know?”

“What does it matter to you?” Hermione demanded. “You’re not my mother, I don’t owe you
anything.”

“From what I hear, you don’t owe her anything either.”

The words fell like tiny bombs- a moment of silence followed by an almighty BOOM! that tore
through her chest.

“Fuck you.” Hermione snarled at him, her entire body becoming tense and fraught with rage. “You
don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about.”

“You know I do,” Draco countered calmly, unable to keep silent anymore. She’d been teetering on
the edge for too long, and it was time that she came back in.

“Fuck you, Malfoy,” Hermione repeated, shaking her head at him. “You don’t know shit.”

“I know that you didn’t deserve whatever your parents said to you when you went to Australia,” he
assured her. “I know that you only did what you had to, to keep them safe.”

“And look how fucking well that worked out,” she scoffed angrily. “Jesus, why am I even talking to
you about this?!”

She turned and started to storm away, but Draco caught her arm, she needed to hear this.

“Because you need to talk to someone about it,” he told her. “Because not talking about it is killing
you.”

“I’m fine,” Hermione yanked her arm away.

“You’re a disaster. A strung out, catatonic disaster. You think that pumping yourself full of drugs
will make you forget? How’s that working for you?”

He forced her to remain where she was, holding her arms so tightly that he knew there would be
bruises, but scared to loosen his grip even a little, should she break free.

“You remember it all,” he carried on. “I know you do, because I’ve watched you relive it over and
over again. You know why you can’t get your Ecstasy cure right? It’s because every molecule in
your body is fighting against it, your magic won’t let it work because it knows that the only way
you’re going to get better is if you face reality.”

“Fuck reality!” Hermione spat, fighting against him again.

“You don’t even know what reality is anymore!” Draco cried. “Because if you did, you would
know that what happened to your parents had nothing to do with you. You would realize that they
were in complete control of their lives when they died, and none of it was your fault! You would
know that Weasley walking out on you was on him, not you! You would know that Potter would
sell his soul if it meant keeping you safe, and you would know that I’m following you around the world because I care about you, but you don’t see any of it! All you see is the black hole of self-loathing you’ve been sucked into and it’s tearing you apart! You keep everything bottled up and hope that the drugs will take it, but all they do is take more and more pieces of you and leave the pain and grief. You say you can’t feel anything, but you’re wrong. You feel everything and if you don’t stop denying that soon, it’s going to kill you.”

His words ripped through her, as though he pulled them from the innermost depths of her body and yanked them from her skin, leaving her bleeding and broken. It was too much. She couldn’t listen to him anymore, couldn’t stand how right she knew he was. She needed to go, needed to get away from him before he could convince her otherwise, before he could try to save her. She was a lost cause, he shouldn’t waste his time.

Pulling away from him with all the strength she had, she finally broke free, tripping backwards. Before he could grab her again, she had disapparated, landing in a random alley she remembered shagging in once. On the corner, she knew she would find a dealer, and when she did she would take what he had and pray that it was enough. Maybe tonight would be the night that it finally stopped.

Two days later, she stood in the middle of the largest club she’d ever seen, crushed between what had to be more than a thousand other bodies, all dancing to their own beat despite the heavy bass thumping through the stacked speakers surrounding them.

On a stage somewhere, an up and coming DJ with a funny name was spinning her latest mix, and on the floor, her subjects fell at her feet.

Above them, the occasional roar of jet engines broke through the music as planes took off and landed at the nearby airport- it had been a thoroughly horrifying attraction to Hermione’s drug-addled mind at first, but she’d made some friends that had calmed her down and now the noise brought with it an entirely new wave of exhilaration.

Tonight, she had decided to forgo the blotters that were being passed around and had instead tracked down a supplier for her drug of choice. It was the best high she’d had in a while, and as she spun around the dance floor, her arms spread wide and her face lifted to the sky, she felt inexplicably and delectably happy. This was the feeling that made rolling so desirable.

In the open-air Ibiza club, Hermione could feel the love and friendship that oozed from the crowd around her. No matter where she looked, everyone smiled and laughed and hugged. It didn’t matter if they knew each other, or even if they spoke the same language, they were all feeling the same things and dancing to the same DJ and that connection was enough.

How could you ever be sad when there were places in the world like this?

Because nowhere else is like this. The tiny voice in the back of Hermione’s mind piped up, seeping through the tiniest crack in her mind and sharpening the edges of her wonderfully hazy world ever so slightly. Hermione immediately turned to the person next to her and pulled them into a kiss, forcing the voice back into it’s tiny corner and sealing over the crack it had made. The lips Hermione found were all too happy to part, and their tongues tangled together fighting for dominance as hands gripped her waist and neck.
All too late Hermione noticed the slightly off feeling of the kiss, the vaguely rough texture of the other girl’s tongue against hers, and realized that she must have just dropped, the blot paper still intact.

Hermione tried to pull away, the rational part of her brain knowing that this was a bad idea, but the girl held her close, her fingers tangling in Hermione’s hair, and the thought floated away. Why worry about what you couldn’t change? Kissing this girl was nice, lovely in fact, and she let herself be pulled in once again, her own hands finding purchase on the girl’s hips.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Happy New Year guys!
Let's celebrate with the most emotionally distressing chapter yet. So distressing, that I'm putting a trigger warning right here at the beginning, because we are going to be dealing with some self-harm and suicidal tendencies in this chapter. I hope you enjoy, though.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everything was loud- too loud.
The music that had seemed to be powering her heartbeat only moments ago, now stabbed like a knife, cutting into her skin and bones with each note.
The bodies that had surrounded her like a warm hug, now felt suffocating.
The soft edges were becoming dark and pointed, as though thousands of tiny obsidian blades were encroaching on her.
Her breath was coming in pants and gasps, and she clawed at her throat as though there was a hand squeezing it.
Panicking, Hermione began to push her way through the crowd, desperate to find an exit. She didn’t make it very far before hitting a brick wall of a man. His mouth opened, but no words came out, only high-pitched shrieks that pierced Hermione’s mind and sent her staggering backwards.
She needed to go. She needed to run and hide.
The darkness was creeping closer, bringing all her worst fears with it.
Someone approached, their hands held out as if to offer help, but when she looked up she saw the face of Bellatrix LeStrange smiling back at her, gnarled yellow teeth in full display, her incisors sharpened like fangs.
Hermione stumbled back again and collided with the same man as before. This time, his hands closed around her arms and she felt herself being pulled away. No, she couldn’t let him get her. She had to get away, had to escape. She had to find Harry!
The thought came to her like an apparition, slowly becoming clearer.
She had to fight off her captors and find Harry, Harry was in trouble.
She had to find Harry!
In a flash, the vice-like grip on her arms released and she launched into a sprint, knocking aside any and all obstacles in her path. The only thing that mattered was Harry.
Fresh air engulfed her, the sweat and heat and smoke of the club pushing away as a cool breeze surrounded her. It was darker here, and emptier… she must have gone the wrong way. Dark was
bad, the dark was where danger lay, waiting to grab onto her. She had to turn back, had to find the others, had to find Harry… No, that was wrong. It wasn’t Harry she needed. Harry was gone…

“HARRY POTTER IS DEAD!” Voldemort’s high-pitched voice burst through the dark, sending Hermione staggering back. Something caught her heel and she fell backward, her head hitting something hard.

“HARRY POTTER IS DEAD!” “HARRY POTTER IS DEAD!” “HARRY POTTER IS DEAD!” “HARRY POTTER IS DEAD!”

The words played on a loop, the cruel voice becoming more and more shrill with each pronouncement.

And then there had been the cackling- that ethereal sound that floated from the very depths of Bellatrix’ soul, filling the world with unprecedented glee. Each note of sinister laughter felt like a fresh slice of the woman’s knife.

She could feel the blood trickling from the wounds, feel it pooling on the floor around her. She was absolutely saturated by it- she couldn’t have anything left in her veins to bleed, but it continued to flow, and the cuts kept coming.

She felt the blade rip through the flesh of her hip, deep into the bone, felt it slice her open from stem to stern, putting her ribs and organs on display. And then the woman had reached into her chest and dug her nails into her heart, tearing through it as though it were tissue paper, and ripping it from its mooring.

She tried to scream, tried to draw the attention of anyone that might be able to help her, that might save her, but nothing came out. There was only the cackling and the snakelike shrieks that announced her best friend’s death. Harry was gone. What was the point of going on now? Harry was gone…

She seemed to scream for hours. Draco didn’t understand how she could keep it up for so long. Surely, she must have strained her vocal chords beyond repair, yet the terrified shrieks kept coming. He’d silenced the room as soon as he’d landed, clinging to Hermione as she thrashed against him to escape. It was a miracle that he hadn’t splinched her. He’d thought about petrifying her for the jump, but it had seemed entirely too cruel. He’d already had to once, when she ran from the club.

The drugs had made her unreasonably strong, the adrenalin coursing through her veins would have given her the ability to snap an elephant’s neck should she have needed it, and as she’d fought past each and every bouncer that tried to stop her, Draco had been forced to climb a stack of speakers and stun her before she breached the property line. He’d watched in horror as the spell had sent her falling backwards, knocking her head into the building with a crack that he swore could be heard over the music. In an instant, he was at her side, not giving two shits about the Secrecy Act as he apparated in plain sight. Everyone there was too high to remember or believe what they were seeing, except for the security guards, and they were all injured and distracted thanks to Hermione’s ‘Kill Bill’ style escape.

The wound wasn’t as bad as Draco had imagined it would be and he’d quickly been able to heal it, but then the stunning spell had worn off and she’d begun to claw at herself, her nails ripping through
her skin as though it were tissue paper.

That was when the screaming had started, screams that he knew only too well- the same screams that haunted his own nightmares.

When they were safe in the hotel, Draco tried to talk her down. He tried to reason with her, to convince her that she was safe, that he was here for her, that he wasn’t going to let anyone hurt her. She continued to fight him, though. She threw herself around the room, crashing into furniture hard enough to break it, leaving holes in the wall each time she came near it. Draco knew that he needed to restrain her, but the only ways he could think to do that would make things a thousand times worse for her. He tried to hold onto her, trapping her arms at her sides and using as much force as he dared to keep her from breaking away from him, but it wasn’t enough, and she continued to slip free.

At one point, he got her onto the bed and laid on top of her, hoping that the weight would be calming to her nervous system, the way it was when he had panic attacks, but she continued to fight and eventually got a knee free to hit him with and wiggled away.

She was making a break for the door when he caught her again, worried that he was going to break her if he held her too tightly, but more scared that she would leave the room and hurt herself even more. Her elbow landed in his kidneys and Draco let go, the wind knocked out of him. He wheezed through the pain, doubled over and cursing the effects the drugs were having on her. She was skin and bones, she barely weighed 5 stone, she should not be able to overpower him!

In the time it took him to focus again, he’d lost her. Her screams echoed through the entire suite, seemingly at the same pitch in all directions, which didn’t help him figure out where she had gone, so he focused on whatever other noises he could make out.

In the kitchenette, she sat on the floor with a chef’s knife in hand, her eyes unseeing and her screams reaching a new level of pain as she dragged the blade over her skin.

It had taken him less than a second to disarm her, and she couldn’t have had the blade for more than a minute, but the damage she’d done made Draco’s heart stop. There was blood everywhere. There had to be at least a pint on the floor already, besides what had soaked into her clothes, and he couldn’t even tell where it was coming from. It shouldn’t have been possible for the human body to release that much blood- she shouldn’t have had that much blood to begin with, she was a pixie for merlin’s sake!

Some otherworldly power took over Draco as he rushed to her side, pushing away his panic and fear, and forcing his training as a healer to take over. She’d made deep cuts to her arm, ripping open the cursed scar his aunt had left her with and extending it even further. A large cut ran from her hip almost to her navel, but thankfully hadn’t been deep enough to reach further than the skin. She’d been holding the knife to her breastbone when he’d summoned it, and there were a few cuts around there, but none of them were as concerning as her arm. Summoning towels from the bathroom, Draco quickly packed the wound to her torso and chest, keeping them in place with magic, then turned his full attention to the magic-imbued disaster that was her arm.

At some point while he was treating her, she’d stopped screaming. Draco wasn’t sure when it had happened, he had subconsciously checked her pulse when he’d noticed to ensure that she was still alive, and when he’d found it he’d gone back to work. It was horrifically fast, but that was to be
expected when she was tripping this badly and actively bleeding. He only hoped that she would be able to ride it out without going into cardiac arrest or suffering some other dangerous reaction.

It took half a bottle of dittany to stop the bleeding in her arm, even the slightest movement had broken the tentative clotting and Hermione had not been able to lay still, whimpering and squirming as her dreams assaulted her.

When he’d finally gotten the old wounds sealed, Draco had used muggle stitches to close the rest of her arm, as well as the cut on her torso, certain that they would leave scars. Finally, he’d poured a blood replenishing potion down her throat and carried her back to bed where she tossed and turned for another half hour before regaining consciousness.

Sitting by her bedside, Draco tried to figure out a timeframe for her high. By his calculations, she’d been tripping for about two hours- at least that he’d noticed- that meant at least five more hours before the drugs left her system… and that was if she was lucky.

“No, please! Please, we found it!” Hermione mumbled, fighting against Draco as he held her down to the mattress to keep her from hurting herself anymore. “We found it! We found it!”

“Hermione it’s okay,” he tried to speak over her. “You’re safe. She’s dead, she can’t hurt you anymore. You’re safe.”

A blood curdling scream fell from her lips and her eyes flew open, her pupils blown to twice their usual size.

“Hermione, look at me,” Draco tried to get her attention. “Look at me, you’re safe.”

“Where’s Harry?!” she demanded, looking around the room. “Where’s Harry?!”

“He’s in London, he’s safe,” Draco told her. “Hermione, do you know where you are?!”

“He’s gone to the forest!” she panicked. “I have to stop him! He’s going to die! I have to save him!”

She continued to struggle against him and Draco decided to take a chance, releasing his hold on her in the hopes that she might calm down a bit. Even when he let go, however, she only continued to thrash.

“I need to help him! I need to find him!” she sobbed, her muscles spasming wildly, and Draco realised that she wasn’t in control of the movements at all. “Harry! Harry!”

She continued to call for him, sobbing and insisting that he was going to die. Draco almost sent a Patronus to summon the wizard, but he knew that Hermione wouldn’t be able to tell he was there. As far as she could tell, they were somewhere in Hogwarts during the final battle, so he simply continued to promise her that Potter was safe in the hopes that she would eventually hear him.
When her panicked screams turned to delirious muttering, Draco felt his own panic rise again. The bed was absolutely soaked in her sweat, but she shivered uncontrollably, burning up with a fever. She was dangerously dehydrated on top of everything and Draco cursed himself for not having a muggle IV kit. If he didn’t get fluids into her soon, he was going to have even bigger problems than he did now, but it had taken so much effort just to get a fever reducing potion down her throat.

“I’m sorry,” Hermione muttered, reaching out and grabbing at him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to.”

“It’s okay,” Draco dropped to his knees beside the bed so that he was eye level with her. “It’s okay. I know.”

“I tried to be good,” she continued. “I tried. I did everything right, I was a good girl, I tried so hard.”

“Of course you did,” he nodded, reaching out to stroke her hair, which hung in soaking wet clumps around her face. “You did so good.”

“I didn’t mean to hurt him. I didn’t mean it. I’m sorry. I couldn’t help it, I didn’t know!” She shook her head viciously, her eyes closed tight. “I didn’t know what it was, I didn’t know how to stop it! I promise I’ll never do it again. I’m sorry!”

“Shh, shh,” Draco felt his heart break at her words. She was so desperate and there was nothing he could do. “It’s okay. I know you didn’t mean it. It’s okay.”

“I won’t do it again,” she repeated. “I’ll be a good girl. I’ll be the very best. I’ll be good. I’ll be good.”

She fell back into incoherent muttering and whimpers, her eyes no longer forced shut, but simply closed, as she tossed and turned. She was still burning up, despite the potion, and Draco was worried that he’d have to take her to hospital. He needed to cool her down before there was irreparable damage.

Giving her a cold bath had helped the last time, so he carefully picked her up and carried her into the bathroom. He filled the tub halfway with ice cold water, vanished what remained of her sweat soaked clothes and set her down inside.

She didn’t even react to the cold, simply sank into the water like a lead weight, her head falling beneath it. Draco was quick to haul her back up, trying to rouse her enough that she could hold her own head up, but it was no use, so he quickly removed his jeans and shirt and climbed into the freezing water with her.

He emptied and refilled the tub three times before her temperature finally dropped, the fever breaking. Once that happened, he was able to coax a glass of water down her throat, sip by sip. It wasn’t much, but it was something.

When her fever had gone completely, Draco wrapped her in a warm towel and carried her back to bed, which he covered with fresh sheets before tucking her in and attempting to get another glass of water down her throat.

“Come on Hermione,” he coaxed softly, holding a straw to her lips. “Just a couple sips. You can do it.”

When she sucked a small amount in, he just about whooped with joy. “That’s it, you’re doing so good! A couple more sips!”
She continued to suckle at the water until it was about half gone, before pulling her head away and turning over, her breaths evening out as she fell asleep.

“They want to take her, let them!” A man hissed, sitting across from a woman at a kitchen table, their heads bowed close as they flicked their eyes at something in another room.

“But what if they teach her things?” The woman hissed back worriedly. “I don’t want her spending any more time with them than necessary.”

“They can’t teach her things, she can’t do it there, don’t you remember?” The man argued. “And it will keep her away. It’s dangerous to have her here!”

“But if she’s here, we can keep her under control,” the woman reasoned.

“And if she’s not in control?” the man demanded. “Do you want us to end up mangled and stuffed in that derelict shop they call a hospital? The longer we keep her, the more danger we’re in. These people want her, let them have her. If we’re lucky, they might take her off our hands for good.”

“Oh please,” the woman sneered. “Nobody is going to be willing to take that. She’s an insufferable little know-it-all. I don’t care if she insists she’s made friends, we both know that she’ll eventually end up back here. No one wants her.”

Hermione’s eyes fluttered open, blinking against the light that seemed to be flooding the room. It was too bright still, and fuzzy. Why was everything fuzzy?

Beside her, she could make out the vague shape of a body and immediately felt herself begin to panic. Where was she? What was she doing? Why couldn’t she see properly?

An overwhelming thought flew to the front of her mind, pushing all the others to the side- I want Draco.

“Draco.” His name fell from her lips in a whimper, barely even audible, but he was crouched beside her in a second.

“I’m here,” he promised, reaching out to stroke her hair. “I’m here, Hermione you’re safe.”

She flinched away from his touch, squirming as though she were trying to retreat, but couldn’t quite get her body to cooperate.

“Draco,” she whimpered again, a pleading tone in her voice. “Please, I don’t want- I don’t know- “
She shook her head, a frustrated sob rising in her throat. If only she hadn’t kept running away, if only she’d listened when he’d yelled at her in Barcelona, instead of running. He had given her so many chances and she’d thrown them back in his face without a second thought. She had convinced herself that she didn’t want them, that she was happy to drown herself in drugs and booze and simply wait for the end. That was what she deserved after all the things she’d done, after what she’d done to her parents, she deserved to die. She’d been sure of that. Everything else had been flipped upside down, her entire world had fallen apart, but that was the one thing she had known to be true—she deserved to die. But she’d tried—she remembered trying! She remembered the bathtub, she remembered the needle in Paris that the man had promised would make it better, but then dropped her right back on the edge, remembered the nights she’d prayed for the end to come. But she’d been wrong. She’d been so, so wrong. If only she had listened to Draco, if only she had let him in, instead of pushing and pushing and pushing.

But she had pushed, and now he was gone. Replaced by another faceless bloke who would use her for sex or drugs and toss her back into the street with the rest of the trash. And it was entirely her fault.

“Hermione!” Draco shouted her name, hoping that she might realize that he was there.

Her eyes closed again, like a small child who was trying to hide, hoping that if they couldn’t see anything then nothing would see them.

“Hermione!” Draco called out to her again, sitting on the edge of the bed and cradling her face in his hand, his thumb stroking her cheek softly.

When she opened her eyes again he was there, and she had to swallow the sob that threatened to break free.

“You’re okay,” Draco smiled warmly, his voice deep and melodic. “You’re okay, I’m here.”

His face hovered above her, an ethereal glow surrounding him.

“You look like an angel,” she whispered, and he chuckled. The sound went straight to Hermione’s chest, vibrating through it and leaving warmth in its wake. Gods she loved his laugh.

As quick as the warmth had appeared, though, it was gone, leaving her cold and empty as she realized that this was wrong. Draco wasn’t here, she was just high—hallucinating. He wasn’t real, he was just a trick that her twisted mind wanted to play on her—You’ve finally realized how badly you fucked up? Here, stare at your last hope and remember that he’s gone!

“I’m sorry,” she choked out the words. “Draco, I’m so sorry.”

“It’s okay,” he shook his head.
“No!” Hermione fought back, this was all she was going to get, but she’d be damned if she didn’t tell some form of Draco how she really felt. “No, I’m sorry. I’m so sorry! I fucked everything up. You were right, you were so right. Everything you said was true and I should have stayed. And now you’re gone and I’m never going to be able to tell you.”

“I’m right here,” Draco insisted, laying down beside Hermione and pressing his body against hers in the hopes that she would realize that he was real, that she wasn’t imagining him. “Hermione I’m here, it’s me. Can you feel my hand in yours?”

He threaded their fingers together and squeezed tightly.

“I should have stayed,” Hermione whimpered, her tears soaking into her pillow. “I don’t want to die.”

“You’re not going to die,” Draco promised, holding her as tightly as he dared. “You’re not alone and you’re not going to die. I’m here. I’m here. You’re going to be okay. I’m here.”

He was crying as hard as she was now, his tears soaking into her hair as he begged her to hear him, to know that she wasn’t alone, that he was here.

**Chapter End Notes**

I know, it looks bleak, but I swear I won’t leave you hanging for too long. Please don't hate me!
*hides behind closest rock and waves white flag*
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

A promise is a promise. Hope your new year has gotten off to a wonderful start!

Her head was pounding. Nothing had ever hurt as much as her head did in that moment, barring the Cruciatus- and even that might have been preferable to this. It felt like her entire brain was pulsing inside her skull, expanding and contracting in time with her heart- which she could hear so loudly she wondered if it hadn’t been replaced with a bass drum.

From her head, the pain radiated down through her muscles and flared into her wrist, where she knew she would find the scar that Bellatrix had left her with- why was it so painful, though? It had been healed for years. Her hip stung as well, though not as badly, and it was pressed against something hard.

She recognized that feeling well enough, she’d gone home with someone yet again. Casting her memory back, she tried to figure out where she had been the night before, who she might have followed home, but the last thing she remembered was… oh, gods, the alley.

She let out a cry of some sort and, in an instant, the body she lay on shifted, a hand rising to her cheek.

“Hermione, can you hear me?”

That voice… she knew that voice…

“Hermione,” the voice rose a few decibels and she felt herself wince.

“Okay, I’m sorry,” the voice quieted again.

“Draco.” His name fell from her lips in a moment of elation, and she forced her eyes open despite the pain, needing to see his face and know that she wasn’t imagining it.

“Hey,” he smiled, and she could tell that he was relieved- he had been worried about her. “How are you feeling?”

“Ow,” she squeaked, unable to find any other words.

Draco shifted once more, jostling her slightly and eliciting a pained hiss, then held a vial to her lips and instructed her to drink. She recognized the taste of one of her own potions, the one to take after an acid trip.

Why was he giving her that…?

All at once, the night avalanched through her mind, jarring her at every turn, flashing bright and painfully vivid. The club, the girl, the fear, the pain… Draco… she’d thought she lost him, that he was gone. She let out a pained wail and leaned into him, holding as tightly as she could.

Oh, gods! He was here. He was here. He was here.
“I’ve got you,” he whispered, holding her just as tightly, one hand cupping the back of her head while the other wrapped around her waist. “I’m right here.”

Slowly, she got herself under control and tried to pull away, but Draco’s hold on, keeping her safe against his chest. He wasn’t letting her go again.

When she didn’t fight him or get angry, he pulled back so that he could see her face.

She didn’t look angry or annoyed as she usually did when she sobered up. She looked utterly defeated.

“You need fluids,” he suddenly remembered, getting up. “You’re beyond dehydrated.”

“Don’t-“ Hermione reached out to stop him, but she could barely lift her arm.

“I’ll be right back,” he promised, taking her hand. “I’m just going to get you some water.”

When he came back a minute later, he helped Hermione sit up against the pillows, then held a straw to her lips as he had the night before, urging her to take slow sips. She needed water but drinking too fast would just make her sicker.

She was halfway through the bottle when her throat finally felt like it might be able to use her voice, so she pushed the bottle away and forced her eyes to focus on Draco.

“I didn’t mean it,” she told him, her voice raspy. “I- I didn’t mean to, I wasn’t- it was an accident.”

“It’s okay,” he tried to console her, pushing the water bottle on her again. “Come on, you need to drink.”

“I was rolling,” she pressed on. “I was just rolling, but there was a girl… I kissed her, and she’d just taken a blotter, I didn’t mean to take it.”

“I believe you,” Draco assured her, his voice smooth and kind, a balm for her desperation.

Hermione nodded her thanks and went back to sipping the water, allowing herself to lean against his shoulder as she did.

It took two more bottles before she was able to really move, and in that time, she silently sorted through the ups and downs of the night, trying to separate the hallucinations from the realities.

“You were at the club,” she realized, turning to Draco. “I didn’t see you, but, you must have been.”

“Yeah, I was there,” he nodded.

They were sitting side by side in the large king bed, propped up against the headboard. At some point he’d let her go and moved away, no longer pressing tight against her, and Hermione found herself missing the feeling. Waking up and realizing that he was there, that he’d held her through the night, had been calming and warm. Now, she felt like she did every other morning when she woke up next to a stranger- cold and alone.

“I’m not sure…” Hermione shook her head, frustration wrinkling her forehead as she tried to remember, unsure what was real and what was drug-induced.

Draco knew her well, though, and was quick to offer the facts.
“You started hallucinating a few hours in, something triggered you and your trip went bad. I think you were trying to leave when you ran into a bouncer,” he began filling in the blanks for her. “A woman from the bar came over to try and offer to take you to get some air, but you were already freaking out. The bouncer grabbed you to keep you from falling over and you took it as a threat and dropped him.”

Hermione winced, vaguely remembering feeling like she was fighting someone. In her mind, she’d been back at Hogwarts, trying to reach Harry before he could get to the forest.

“You took out about twelve security guards before you finally made it outside,” he continued. “I had to stun you before you got too far, you were heading for the airport and the manager was calling the cops.”

“My head,” Hermione frowned, lifting a hand to the spot where she’d landed the night before.

“Yeah, sorry about that,” Draco winced. “I didn’t mean for you to get hurt, I just needed to get to you before you hurt yourself even more…”

He trailed off looking miserable and Hermione looked down at the bandages covering her arm and stomach, pulling up the tank top she was wearing to examine the extent of the injury, she let out a gasp. “Oh gods, the knife!”

She’d thought it was a hallucination, that she’d just scratched at her skin until it began to bleed. It had happened before, she was a habitual skin picker when she was sober, let alone on a bad trip, but she remembered feeling like she was being cut open.

“Hey,” Draco was close again, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and carefully lowering her shirt back over the bandages. “You’re okay.”

“I- I did this.” Hermione gasped, the fiery pain returning all at once, ripping through her abdomen. A choked sob escaped her, and Draco pulled her closer, his hands roaming along her back and arms, trying to comfort her.

“You’re okay, it wasn’t as bad as you remember,” he promised. “You only had the knife for a minute.”

He was trying to reassure her, but she could hear the guilt in his voice. He was ashamed of himself for letting her get the knife in the first place.

“I’m sorry,” she said, lifting an arm to hug him. “I’m sorry. I didn’t- I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault-“ Draco started to argue, but she wouldn’t hear it,

“It was. You were trying to stop me. I… I hit you, didn’t I?” Hermione recalled, trying to see through the haze of hallucinations in her mind. “I… I thought it was the manor. That Bellatrix-“

“It doesn’t matter,” Draco insisted.

“It does!” she cried, facing him. “It does matter, because you think it was your fault, but it wasn’t. I did this. Me.”

“You were high, Hermione,” he shook his head. “You didn’t know what you were doing. I should have-“

“NO!” She roared at him, fury rising in her chest. “No, none of this was your fault! Gods, Draco,
all you have done is try and help me, and I’ve just kept pushing you away and running and making things worse and worse and worse. This is all my fault, not yours! I did this, and I need you to know that, because I can’t be to blame for another person’s pain, I just can’t!”

At some point during this speech she’d got up and started to pace, storming back and forth at the end of the bed and yelling as loudly as she could.

She needed him to understand. She needed him to not blame himself, because she remembered holding the knife in her hand. She remembered seeing it in the block and picking it up and thinking that it would make everything stop. She remembered…

“I did it,” she muttered, falling on her bum. “I did it.”

“Hermione,” Draco got up from the bed and sat down in front of her. “Hermione, you weren’t in your right mind.”

“I saw the knife,” she shook her head, tears falling freely down her cheeks. “I remember seeing the knife and I remember picking it up.”

“Hermione, you’re remembering it now,” Draco argued, taking her hands in his. “You didn’t know what you were doing then. You were hallucinating.”

“I don’t know if I was,” she whispered, guilt spreading through her body like wildfire.

“You were,” Draco insisted. “Hermione, look at me.”

He waited for her to respond, ducking his head to meet her eyes, demanding that she listen to what he had to say.

“You were hallucinating,” he repeated, his tone leaving no room for doubt. “I was here, I know. You were hallucinating.”

Hermione nodded slowly, wishing that she could believe him, but her eyes betrayed her doubts.

“Tell me what else you remember,” Draco instructed, deciding it would be best to move on.

She had never wanted to relive her experiences before, and now that she was trying, she needed to go through the whole thing. Maybe, just maybe, this would be the thing to bring a piece of her back.

“Tell me what else you remember,” he repeated the request, squeezing her hands encouragingly.

“The dreams…” she frowned and shook her head. “I don’t know… I had one. I know I had one.”

Why could she never remember them?!

In a moment of anger and frustration, she wrenched her hands away from Draco and lashed out, hitting the end of the bed. “Dammit!” She screeched, and lashed out at it again, pain radiating through her fingers and up past her wrist.

Draco was quick to stop her, grabbing her wrists and holding them tightly with one hand while the other pulled her towards him. “It’s okay.”

“It’s not!” Hermione snapped, struggling against him. “It’s not okay! It’s a fucking nightmare and I can never fucking remember!”

She thrashed against him again, throwing a tantrum, and Draco pulled her into his lap, letting her
wail on his shoulder for a minute to take out her aggression before disabling her arms.

He quieted her like he would a small child, knowing that she was at an emotional precipice. He waited until she had calmed down before asking the question at the forefront of his mind. “What can’t you remember? Last night?”

“No, I remember it all,” Hermione muttered. “I always remember afterwards. I remember everything, like some sick fucking joke from the universe. All I want is to forget and the only things I ever do are the fucking dreams!”

“What dreams?” he asked calmly.

“I don’t fucking know!” Hermione snapped. “That’s the entire fucking point!”

To an outsider, it might have looked like she was angry with him, but Draco knew that wasn’t the case. She was angry only with herself. Angry that her body continuously seemed to betray her by taking away the one thing she seemed to wish for and leaving behind those she prayed to forget.

“Oh, okay,” Draco nodded, his voice low and even. “Okay, just take a breath. Why don’t we go back to last night, okay? What do you remember next?”

Hermione took his advice, taking a few deep breaths and scrunching her face up in thought. As he waited for her, Draco couldn’t help but think how adorable a face it was.

Oi, not the time!

His conscience chided.

She’s finally talking about things, pay attention!

“You.” The lines in her forehead smoothed, and the same serene look she’d had on her face when she’d called him an angel appeared.

“There was just a lot of noise and the dreams and I remembered…” she shook her head, not wanting to admit it out loud. “I was scared. You were gone, and I was alone, and I was so, so scared. I thought… I thought I’d done it, that I’d…”

She trailed off again, and Draco frowned, not quite sure he understood.

“You thought you’d what?” he asked gently.

“I thought I was alone,” Hermione whispered. “In Barcelona, you-“ she frowned, not quite sure how to put it, and Draco winced.

“I screamed at you,” he said.

“Well, yes,” she agreed.

“And then you left,” Draco continued.

“Because it hurt,” she admitted. “Everything hurt, like it hurts after the dreams, and I just wanted it to stop. I needed it to stop.”

Draco frowned at the mention of these dreams she seemed to hate so much, hoping that she would be willing to talk about them later, but not wanting to interrupt her while she was so willingly sharing with him.

“It never stops,” she turned to look at him, a desperate, pleading look on her face that made his gut twist. “I just want it all to stop, and it never does.”

“You want what to stop?” he asked, desperately trying to understand.
“Everything! The feeling and the remembering and the dreaming and the hurting. I just want it all to stop!” she cried, holding her head in her hands and pulling angrily at her hair. “It never fucking stops!”

Draco waited for her to go on, beginning to understand what she was trying to say. When she didn’t, he decided to return to his original question.

“What do you remember, Hermione?”

“I wanted you,” she sobbed. “I wanted to have stayed instead of running away. I thought… I didn’t know where I was, or who I was with, I thought I was dying in a stranger’s bed and I all I wanted was to not have run away in Barcelona. I just wanted you.”

The confession hung in the air between them, like a galleon flipping over and over as it fell towards the ground, the future decided by it’s landing on heads or tails.

In that moment, neither one of them breathed or moved. Their entire future depended on what came next, and they were both terrified of making the wrong move.

It was Hermione that finally broke the silence, though she still spoke in barely more than a whisper, as she lifted her face to meet his eyes. “I thought I was dying, that I had dreamed you up in one last horrific regret. One last ‘fuck you’ from my mind, reminding me that on top of everything else in the world I’ve fucked up, I’d gone and lost you too.”

As soon as she’d finished speaking, her eyes fell to the floor again, staring at a spot a few feet away and waiting for him to disappear, either due to having been a hallucination this whole time, or having fled the hotel as quickly as possible now that he realized how badly he’d fucked up trying to help her.

For his part, Draco could only stare at the woman in his lap in shock. Yes, he’d been present for her entire apology the night before, when she’d thought that he was just a hallucination, but hearing her say it out loud, and sober… it was more than he could have ever hoped for.

*Say something to her you great prat!* his mind bellowed angrily at him, jarring him from his silence, and Draco swallowed the lump in his throat.

“Hermione,” he rasped, cursing himself internally and attempting to clear his throat once more. “Hermione, look at me.”

He cupped her cheek softly and guided her face back to his, waiting for her to meet his eyes once again.

“I’m not going anywhere. I meant what I said, I care about you,” he insisted. “And I’m not going anywhere. That dream you thought you had, thinking that I wasn’t here? I was. I held you all night and promised not to leave you, and I meant it. I’m not going to leave you. I’m not going to leave you.”

He repeated the words over and over again, holding her tightly as she cried, promising her again and again and again, willing her to believe him, to understand that he was here and wasn’t going anywhere.

When the crying stopped, he summoned a handkerchief and handed it to her, smiling at the disbelieving laugh that it pulled from her.
“Who the fuck uses handkerchiefs anymore,” she muttered, wiping her eyes and blowing her nose.

“Gentlemen,” Draco answered immediately, his tone comedically haughty. “Thought you’d have worked that out by now, Granger. I’m nothing if not a gentleman.”

She chuckled softly once more, and turned to look at him, her eyes hooded and curious. “What if I don’t want a gentleman?” she mused, her glance darting from his eyes down to his lips.

“Sorry, you’re stuck with one,” he shrugged.

“Let’s see if we can’t change that.”

A small grin pulled at her lips, and then they were on his, soft and full and everything he’d ever dreamed they would be, vanishing any sense he had and pulling him into the most beautiful dream… Merlin and Morgana, this was what she must feel like in that first hour of being high, because Draco never wanted it to end.

And then her hands began pulling at pants and trailing under his shirt, and he remembered what they had been doing, what was supposed to be happening right now. This wasn’t right.

His hands, which had been holding her face and neck, moved to still her hands. Slowly, he pulled away from the kiss, lifting her hands to his lips and kissing them softly before using one hand to cup her cheek again, hating the broken, dejected look she had on her face.

“Not like this,” he shook his head, his thumb stroking her cheek gently. “Not like this, Hermione.”

“Don’t try to lie to make me feel better,” she tried to snap at him, but he could hear the tears she was holding back. “I’m a big girl, I can hear the word ‘no’.”

“I’m not saying ‘no’,” Draco held her where she was, stroking her cheek. “I’m saying ‘not now’. Not like this. I care about you far too much for that. I’m not going anywhere, Hermione. I’m not leaving, but I’m not going to let you do something you might regret.”

“What if I won’t regret it?” she challenged.

“Then when the time is right, it’ll happen,” Draco smiled. “But not like this.”

He held his breath, waiting for her to react, praying for her to understand that he wasn’t rejecting her. When her eyes softened, and she offered the tiniest of nods, he felt himself smile even wider, leaning forward to press a kiss to her forehead.

There were a lot of things that needed to be said, a lot of things that needed to be discussed and things that needed to be done, but in that moment none of them mattered. Sitting on the floor in a hotel room in Ibiza, Hermione safely in his lap, resting her forehead against his, the promise of one day was enough. Just for a little while, it was enough.
spoke.

“I think that’s enough about school,” the father interrupted.

“Oh, yes, of course,” the girl blushed, eyes falling to her plate in embarrassment. “What’s happened while I’ve been gone?”

She listened raptly as the two adults related the success they had been having in their practice and the general status of various relatives’ health and happiness. A moment was taken to discuss where they would be enjoying Christmas dinner that year, and then the girl excused herself, claiming homework.

“I’ve put your school books away for the holidays,” the man said immediately. “You’re here to spend time with us. You can get them back out when it’s time for your return.”

The girl started to argue, appalled at the idea of not getting her holiday homework done, but the look he gave her was enough to bring the subject to a close for the time being. Instead, she announced that she was tired from the train journey and would simply go to bed.

Lying beneath the covers of her small bed, she listened through the walls as the man and woman argued, insisting that there was nothing else to be done, she would just have to be normal.

‘Of course they want you to be normal,’ the girl scolded herself. ‘They want a normal child to flaunt in front of their friends and family, they can’t go around telling people that you’re a witch, of course not. You’ll just have to be on your best behaviour, that’s all there is to it.’ Nodding assuredly to herself, she closed her eyes and settled down for the night, willing her mind to bring her normal dreams.

When Hermione woke, she was laying in bed again. Beside her, Draco sat reading a book that seemed to be held together with nothing but dust and spell-o-tape.

“You’re still here,” she mumbled, unable to hold back the relief in her voice.

Draco looked up from his book and smiled, marking the page and setting it aside before laying on his side to face her.

“I told you, you’re not getting rid of me. How did you sleep?”

Hermione wrinkled her nose in frustration. Once again, the dreams had come and gone with nothing but the ache in her chest to announce their departure.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Draco asked.

“There’s nothing to talk about,” Hermione shrugged. “I don’t remember anything.”

He frowned for a moment, studying her face carefully, and Hermione felt herself blush under his scrutiny.

“Stop that,” she muttered, rolling onto her back and staring up at the ceiling.

“Stop what?” Draco copied her movements.
“Stop staring at me. It’s weird.”

“I’m not staring, I’m admiring,” he corrected. “And it’s endearing.”

“It’s weird,” Hermione held firm. “And creepy.”

“I am not creepy! I’m handsome and gentlemanly.”

Hermione didn’t respond to this, but he saw the way her lips quirked up in the tiniest of smiles.

“You need to have some more water.” He ordered after a minute, summoning a bottle from the kitchenette. “You’re still pretty dehydrated.”

Hermione nodded vaguely and accepted it but didn’t sit up to drink. Instead, she continued to stare at the ceiling, studying the delicate patterns in the drywall.

“There’s only one Stop sign in all of Paris, did you know that?”

“I didn’t,” Draco shook his head.

“It’s at the end of a driveway, it’s not even in the street,” Hermione continued.

“Did you work that out wandering the streets?” He asked, laying back down beside her.

“Read it in a book,” she countered, and Draco laughed.

“Of course you did.”

“There was a man in the 1920s that impersonated a government official and sold the Eiffel Tower twice, his name was Victor Lustig. He was a rather infamous con-man until he was turned in by his mistress, who he’d cheated on.”

Not sure what he should say to that, Draco remained silent.

“And there are 1,710 steps to the top of the Eiffel tower, but muggles can only take the first 1,665.”

“The elevator?” he guessed, and Hermione nodded, still staring straight ahead.

“It took Michelangelo four years to paint the ceiling of the Sistine chapel,” she carried on. “He permanently damaged his eyes doing it. And when he was in his sixties, he was ordered to paint the wall behind the altar, that took him another five years.”

Draco frowned over at her in concern, but she continued to stare emptily at the ceiling.

“Van Gogh only sold one painting in his life, but he created over 2000 pieces before he died, most of them in the last two years before he committed suicide. I’ve always thought that was odd,” Hermione mused. “To be so depressed but have so much energy and need to produce that kind of beauty. It’s almost paradoxical.”

“Hermione,” Draco’s frown deepened, but she continued listing off facts about Van Gogh.

“He shot himself in the chest while he was painting,” she informed him. “But it didn’t kill him. He walked all the way home afterwards. He lived for an extra thirty hours.”

“Granger,” Draco tried again, but to no avail.
“Do you know what his last words were?” she asked, though she didn’t need an answer. “The sadness will last forever.”

The words fell from her lips accompanied by a single tear, and followed with silence.

“Hermione,” he spoke her name once more, rolling over on his side and wiping the tear away.

“I think he was right,” she said, her voice shaking.

“He wasn’t,” Draco was quick to argue. “He wasn’t right.”

Finally, Hermione turned her head to look at him, and he could see how terrified she truly was at the thought.

“You need to drink,” he encouraged softly. “Last night really did a number on you, you need to keep up your fluids.”

She nodded listlessly and lifted the bottle to her lips, sipping it slowly as Draco watched her, trying to decide what to do next.

“You were talking in your sleep,” he finally told her when the bottle was half empty. “Something about Flitwick?”

Hermione looked over at him and frowned, confusion etched into her skin. “What do you mean?”

“I mean you were talking in your sleep,” Draco repeated. “I figured you knew, you do it a lot.”

“I- I didn’t,” she shook her head in surprise, sitting up a little. “What did I say?”

“Nothing too coherent,” he shrugged. “But I definitely heard you say ‘Flitwick’. You must have been dreaming about Hogwarts.”

Hermione’s frown deepened, her eyebrows knitting together. Why wouldn’t she remember a dream about Hogwarts?

“D-did I say anything else?”

Draco shook his head, his own face looking rather confused. “You don’t remember?”

Hermione shook her head, sitting up all the way and crossing her legs beneath her, fiddling with the label on the water bottle.

“I don’t remember a lot of dreams,” she admitted. “I remember the nightmares, the really bad ones that is, but there are others…”

She shook her head, her mouth twisted in anger despite the sadness in her eyes. “I told you, I don’t remember them. As soon as I wake up they’re gone, just vague shadows in my mind and these awful feelings in the pit of my stomach and in my chest, like I’ve got a Dementor hovering over me.”

“How often do you have them?” Draco asked, leaning back against the headboard beside her.

“Most nights, I think,” Hermione shrugged. “Except for the ones I don’t remember.”

“I think you have them on those nights too,” he frowned. “You talk in your sleep a lot.”

“Great.” She deadpanned, her head falling back against the wall with a thud.
“You know, you can burn over a thousand calories if you do that for an hour,” Draco offered a fun fact of his own, hoping to lighten the mood.

Hermione only quirked an eyebrow and repeated the action, banging her head even harder.

“It wasn’t a suggestion, Granger.” He put his hand up to cushion her head before she could do it again, giving her a disapproving glare. “You’re skin and bones as it is, you don’t need to burn calories.”

“Or brain cells, I suppose;” she smiled self-deprecatingly.

“I think you’ve retained enough,” Draco assured her. “I mean, you can remember all those interesting facts, can’t you?”

Her smile warmed ever so slightly, and he smiled back, his hand traveling a little higher on her head so that he could scratch her scalp softly. Quite enjoying the calming action, Hermione scooted over and allowed her head to rest against his shoulder, closing her eyes.

“I’m a mess,” she muttered quietly after a few minutes.

“A little bit,” Draco agreed. “But you know what?”

She shook her head against his shoulder, eyes still closed.

“Messes can be tidied,” he assured her.

The tiniest sniff of laughter escaped Hermione at this, and Draco used his arm to pull her closer, his nails scratching softly up and down her arm instead of her scalp as she leaned into him further.

“It’ll get better,” he promised, his lips pressed against her temple. “If you want it to, it will get better.”

She nodded ever so slightly, and Draco kissed her temple once again.

As she drifted back to sleep, it occurred to Hermione that she actually believed him.
Chapter 21

The cravings didn’t start until the next morning. Draco had kept a close eye on her the previous day, keeping her hydrated and coaxing her into eating some fruit and toast, but she’d mostly slept. The next morning, however, she was getting antsy and Draco could tell.

“Buy you breakfast,” he offered. “There’s an excellent restaurant downstairs.”

“I’m not hungry,” Hermione shook her head, looking around the room.

“You didn’t have your bag with you,” Draco recognized what she was doing.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, her hands balling into fists in an attempt to hide the fact that she was shaking.

“Eating something will help,” Draco assured her, walking over. “We’ll get you some waffles and strong coffee.”

“I’m not-“

“Hungry,” he interrupted. “You said. Not for food, at least.”

Hermione winced and dug her nails into her palms, willing the feelings to go away. Draco stepped in front of her and she leaned into him, resting her forehead against his chest.

“What’s going on?” he asked, one hand coming up to rest on her lower back. “Tell me what’s going on in your head.”


“Okay,” he nodded. “So, let’s make it quiet.”

“I can’t,” she frowned. “That’s the point.”

“What will?”

“Drugs,” she said obviously.

“Do you want to go find some?” he asked, his tone completely even, and she looked up at him with a frown.

“What?”

“I’m not here to tell you no, Granger,” he explained. “I’m not here to make you do something you don’t want to do, I would think you’d have realized that by now. I haven’t stopped you from doing anything since I found you in Brazil, and I’m not going to now. It has to be your choice.”

Hermione simply gaped at him, shocked that he was being so… chivalrous wasn’t the word, but that was what it felt like. He was right, he had never stopped her from doing what she wanted, only saved her ass when it went wrong.

“So just tell me,” Draco continued. “What do you want?”

And that was the question, wasn’t it? What did Hermione Granger want? Did she want to keep
throwing herself headfirst down the rabbit hole she’d been living in for the last two years, or did she want to grab onto the hand that she was being offered and pull herself up? Would she let the voice in the back of her head that insisted the drugs would help win, or would she fight back and remind it who’s boss?

Well? the voice in her head demanded. *What do you want?*

“I want to be quiet,” she breathed.

“Sorry?” Draco frowned, not hearing her.

“I want to be able to be quiet,” Hermione told him, only a touch louder.

“Okay,” he smiled and rubbed her back.

“I’m terrified of being quiet,” she admitted, voice shaking once again.

“That’s okay,” Draco reassured her. “You just have to want it. That’s the first step.”

“Are you going to start quoting AA at me?” Hermione frowned up at him. “Because I don’t think I’m ready for that.”

Draco chuckled. “Come on, let’s get some breakfast.”

“I’m really not hungry.” Hermione shook her head again, a pleading look in her eyes.

“You are,” he insisted. “You just don’t realize it, I promise. At least have a cup of tea, or coffee.” He took a small step back and held his hand out, waiting for her to take it.

Her hands still balled up, nails digging deep into her palms and close to drawing blood, Hermione took a moment to take stock, looking seriously at Draco’s outstretched hand.

If she took it, she might be able to move forward, she might be able to be quiet again- but what if she couldn’t? What if she let him in and nothing changed? What if she’d gone too far? Could she really climb back out of the chasm she’d thrown herself in?

“Stop overthinking it, Granger,” Draco spoke quietly. “It’s just breakfast.”

“Just breakfast.” Hermione nodded and took a deep breath, slowly lifting her hand to put it in his.

“Just breakfast,” Draco grinned, clasping their hands together. “I’m telling you, the waffles here are amazing.”

His eagerness was enough to make her laugh. It seemed ridiculous that Draco Malfoy would be so excited about something like waffles- though, no more ridiculous than him following her around the world to play guardian angel.

Before she could think about this too much, though, Draco tucked her arm through his and pulled her out of the suite.

“I told you you were hungry.” Draco smirked as Hermione inhaled a second plate of waffles and
cream.

She didn’t bother to answer him, simply flipped him the finger between bites.

“You should be nicer to me,” he frowned comically. “If I hadn’t dragged you down here, you never would have experienced the most amazing waffles in Spain.”

“I’d have tried them eventually,” she scoffed.

Draco gave her a disbelieving nod and she stuck her tongue out at him childishly.

“Mature, Granger.”

“The drugs have addled my mind,” she shrugged.

Draco let out a bark of laughter. “Sure they have,” he nodded sarcastically. “Because your extremely successful business and life-saving medical advancements just scream addle-minded.”

The compliment came from nowhere and Hermione immediately cast her eyes anywhere but his face, her cheeks pink and her mind speeding up. Sure, her business was successful, but what had it done for her?

It didn’t matter how many medical advancements she made, they didn’t change the fact that she’d killed people. That she’d cursed them and maimed them and permanently scarred them, both emotionally and physically. She’d ruined lives, and there weren’t enough potion inventions in the world that would assuage the guilt she carried for that. No, the only thing for that was pumping her body full of drugs and praying for the best.

Even as the thought passed her, Hermione felt the need return, and she knew that Draco saw it too. Setting her cutlery down carefully, she traded it for her coffee mug and hoped that the bitter drink would be enough, even just for a moment.

“What’s going on?” Draco asked calmly, his face the picture of care and concern.

Hermione only shook her head and took a deep drink, shuddering at the taste. Draco offered her the sugar dispenser, but she shook her head again and took another sip, keeping her hands wrapped tightly around the mug even after it was empty.

“If you’re full, we could go for a walk,” he suggested. “Get some fresh air, see what Ibiza looks like in daylight. What do you say?”

For the second time that morning, he held his hand out to her and waited patiently.

He wasn’t going to force her, he wasn’t going to make demands. For all that she assumed he wanted to, he was still giving her the choice, and Hermione wasn’t sure if she should thank him or hate him for it. She hadn’t been very good at making the right choices in her life.

Maybe this one, though. Maybe this time she would make the right choice. But what if she was wrong again? What if she couldn’t do it, and she ended up losing him too?

Even as the thoughts began to swirl in her mind, slowly forming a funnel cloud, Draco’s voice broke through, calm and kind and loud enough to speak over her screaming mind.

“Just a walk,” he said, his silver eyes meeting her petrified brown. “Don’t overthink it. We’re just going for a walk.”
Don’t overthink it. Hermione almost laughed at the thought. When had she ever not over-thought something? Even when she was high, her mind still spun until there was nothing to do for it but black out. How could she not overthink it?

Just a walk, Draco’s voice echoed in her mind, causing her to jump. When had he joined the chaos up there?

Don’t worry about it, he spoke again. Just go for a walk.

Before she even realized what she was doing, she’d set her cup down and put her hand in his, letting him thread their fingers together and following blindly as he led her through the restaurant and outside.

“How do you feel about a stroll along the beach?” Draco asked, slowly heading in that direction. “Sun on your face, ocean air in your lungs, waves lapping at your feet.”

“Are you quoting a travel brochure at me?” Hermione frowned.

“Possibly,” he shrugged. “But it sounds good, doesn’t it? Come on.”

Without waiting for her answer, Draco picked up their pace and lead her down to the water.

It was beautiful, she would admit that. The beach was littered with chairs and daybeds and umbrellas and tables, all available for guests to use, but Draco didn’t stop at any of them. He made his way straight to the water’s edge and kicked off his shoes, carrying them as they walked through the cool water.

The old Hermione would have liked this. The Hermione that had gone to France with her parents and spent the summer lounging on the Riviera, she would have thought this was wonderful. The beach and the sun and the beauty of it all would have left that Hermione breathless.

The Hermione that walked beside Draco Malfoy, however, could only think about how bright the sun was to her eyes that had not seen daylight in months, and how much she itched to go up to the nearest group of young men tossing a ball around and ask them if they had anything to share.

“Stop thinking,” Draco ordered, watching her face closely. “Just breathe in the ocean air and feel the water.”

“You make it sound so easy,” Hermione shook her head. “I can’t stop thinking, Draco. It doesn’t work like that.”

“Then think about the way the water feels and the way the air smells,” he shrugged. “Think about the simple things.”

“How can I think about simple things when everything around me is huge?” she scoffed. “Fuck, Draco, I’m walking on a beach with you on an island in Spain, that’s not simple!”

“No, it’s not,” he agreed. “But you don’t need to worry about it right now. Right now, you just need to let the sun soak into your skin and feel the ocean breeze, that’s it. Just that.”

He stopped walking as he spoke and turned to face her, putting his hands on her arms and giving
them an encouraging squeeze.

Hermione took a deep breath and met his eyes, they seemed to be reflecting the colour of the water. “The sun on my face,” she repeated skeptically.

“That’s it,” Draco smiled.

He took her hand and started walking once again, chatting aimlessly about the weather and the various tourist attractions offered on the island, his voice lulling her mind into quiet submission, forcing her to think only of ridiculous things like parasailing and beach volleyball.

By the time lunch came into question, the silence had gone, and Hermione’s brain was spinning once again, begging for something to set itself straight.

While Draco was on the phone with room service, she raided the minibar. Three mini bottles of tequila would be enough to bring some semblance of peace, but even as she cracked the seal on the first one, a measure of guilt crept in, somehow even louder than her raging thoughts.

Hermione closed her eyes and put her head in her hands, tugging angrily at her hair, hoping that if she pulled hard enough she might pull the parts of her brain that she didn’t want out too.

She just wanted quiet, she wanted her mind to shut up and stop reminding her of what a mess she was, what a fucking disappointment. But if she took that drink, she would disappoint Draco.

What about disappointing yourself? a voice that Hermione hadn’t heard in a while spoke up in her mind- the voice of the Hermione she once was. That Hermione obviously hadn’t gotten the message- there was no more disappointing herself, you couldn’t disappoint what didn’t care.

Draco, though, Draco could be disappointed. If she took that drink, he would look at her with those sad eyes and tell her that it was okay, that it was her choice, and he would stand and watch as she made a mess of herself and try to clean her up again- unless he didn’t.

Everyone had their breaking point. The point where they had to admit to chasing a lost cause- and Hermione was certainly that. What if this drink was the one that proved it and finally sent Draco packing?

You can’t lose him too. It came to her as little more than a whisper, a teeny tiny thought in the smallest recess of her brain, trying to crawl out from beneath the angry weights piled over it, pleading with her to listen. You can’t lose him too, it repeated desperately.

What if I’m going to anyways? Hermione countered, trying to push the thought away. It was a valid question, after all. She was an absolute shit show with nothing to offer, what in Merlin’s name was he even doing offering her help? What was going to happen when he saw what everyone else already knew- that she was just a slut with a drug problem, a has-been, an empty shell of a girl-

A murderer. The thought came unbidden, an automatic response to her inner questioning, because when it all came down to it, that’s what she was. Her parents’ murderer. She might not have been the one behind the wheel, but she had been the one to put them there.

If she’d just left things alone, if she’d told them about the war and told them to leave, to run and
forget about her, maybe they would have lived.

If she’d just given them the chance, instead of taking their memories and sending them off without a word, maybe they would still be alive, and maybe they would still love her. Maybe, just maybe, she wouldn’t be so very broken…

But she hadn’t, and she was broken, so beyond broken that she wasn’t even worth fixing. She was the toy that was thrown out and replaced with the newer model without so much as a second glance. After all, wasn’t that what Ron had done? When she hadn’t been what he’d wanted, he’d tossed her aside and picked up the next bint that caught his eye. And so had every boy that came after. She was fun for a night, maybe even a few, but sooner or later she got old. Nobody liked to play with broken toys.

Draco stood in the doorway and watched quietly as Hermione debated taking the drink. He watched as she put her head in her hands and tugged sharply at her hair. He wanted to help her, to sit down beside her and hold her hands and talk her down, but he knew that he couldn’t. It had to be her. She had to decide. No matter how painful it was to watch, he had to let her do this, because the only way she was going to get better was by deciding to.

That was where Potter had gone wrong. He’d tried to force her, even if he hadn’t realized it, and that wasn’t enough.

It had to be Hermione.
Hello my lovelies! Thank you so much for all your kind comments, they make my day. I don't think I've ever mentioned this, but I got the inspiration to start this story from the songs Mad Hatter by Melanie Martinez and Like Lovers Do by Hey Violet. However, this week I found the most perfect song there could ever be to describe Draco's character in this story. I cried listening to it for the first time because it was so beyond perfect, and beautiful to boot. The song is called Two by Sleeping at Last, and holy shit balls it's amazing!!! And perfect- did I mention that? Go give it a listen, I promise you won't be sorry!
xoxo
Emma

The Christmas tree was so large that even the Groundskeeper at Hogwarts would have been dwarfed by it. Standing regally in the large sitting room, the star atop it brushing against the ceiling and the lights shining brightly, it seemed to be alive. The baubles and ornaments seemed to be dancing, performing their own special version of the Nutcracker, twirling and bouncing each time the light struck them anew, and the little girl at the foot of the tree watched with rapt attention.

She’d thought that the decorations at school had been grand, but this was a different scale altogether. If only her friends could see it, she was sure that they would agree. It was marvelous and spectacular and positively magic- No, not magical, she scolded herself. Not magic. Magic wasn’t real, of course, not when they were here. Magic was silly and childish and absolutely nonsensical.

No, there was no magic.

Without a second glance, the girl stood and turned away from the tree, berating herself for thinking such a thing. She’d promised, after all, promised that she would be good- a normal girl. Normal girls of twelve did not think about magic.

‘Absolute poppycock,’ her Grandmother would have said, should she have heard such a thing.

“Ah, there you are!” an elderly woman waved her over as she appeared in the dining room doorway, gesturing for her to sit beside her. “We thought you’d gone and run off. How is school?”

“It’s wonderful!” The girl smiled brightly, eager to tell the woman how much she enjoyed it, but then caught sight of her father’s face.

The tips of his ears were red, and his lips were pulled into a tight line. A severe glare told her that school was not an appropriate subject, and she quickly took heed.

“Thank you for asking,” her tone quieted to one of polite boredom. “How are you, Auntie?”

She tried to pay attention as the older woman prattled on about fundraisers and charities and ailments that she had been suffering, but all the little girl could focus on was the looks her parents gave her- looks that threatened severe consequences should she stray from their strict behavioural
guidelines. When dinner was announced, she was happy to leave the adults to their discussions and retire to the children’s table next door where they were to adhere to that age-old rule: Children should be seen, not heard.

As the meal progressed, she smiled and nodded when necessary, but mostly kept to herself. While her cousins discussed their many adventures in school and extracurriculars, she kept quiet. When they asked what she did, she told them she mostly spent time in the library, and tried her best to ignore them as they mocked her. It was alright if they did, she told herself, because it wasn’t true anymore. She did have friends and they did have fun together, she was a witch for heaven’s sakes!

NO! her father’s voice spoke in her mind, reprimanding the thought as it came.

No, there was no such thing as witches or wizards. No such thing at all. Not as far as anyone here was concerned.

No magic, no witches, no wizards. Normal. Everything here was normal.

Soon the children found better things to talk about than her lack of friends and excessive work ethic, and their jeering turned back to normal conversation.

The boys discussed their football teams and the girls mooned over some actor, all but the girl at the end, who was thinking only about how very normal she needed to be.

When dinner had finished, they returned to the sitting room and sat around the tree with their coffees and After Eight chocolates, a rare treat for the children. While the others extolled and expounded on how lovely and wonderful the tree was, the little girl sat primly at her father’s feet and kept her eyes firmly on the floor.

She would not look at the tree and admire the dancing baubles, nor would she comment on the lovely lights and the way they twinkled like stars. She wouldn’t betray her imaginings of a ballet amongst the branches, or her wishes for the ornaments to emit a sparkling tune to match. No, she would be normal, and quiet, and on her best behaviour. She would not be a witch, she would simply be a shy, bookish child just as she’d been every year before. She would be a good girl.

When she heard the gasp, she almost didn’t look. She figured that someone had told a rather interesting secret and merely shocked one of the aunts, but then there had been another, and another and another, and then there had been the sound of grinding teeth. When she looked up at the tree, she couldn’t help but be horrified to find the baubles had sprouted legs and the ornaments had come alive, and they were all dancing together in the boughs of the great tree. The lights continued to sparkle, and, in her ears, she could hear the beautiful tune that they played, directing the awe-inspiring dance. It was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen, and she was absolutely terrified.

Hermione woke in a cold sweat, her heart racing as her eyes flew open and she sat bolt upright. The dreams had been getting steadily worse every day that passed without drugs or alcohol, punishing her far worse than the craving and detox could. She’d had plenty of potions to help the process along and keep the symptoms manageable, but the dreams could not be helped, making up for any reprieve she might have gained in her waking hours.

Looking around, she slowly remembered that she was in a hotel room in Ibiza, the same room she’d been in for the last four days. She was also alone in said room, which had not been the case in the
days before.

She called out for Draco, her voice laced with tears, and he was there in an instant. He was dressed, which Hermione thought odd, but said nothing about as his arms surrounded her, capturing her in a warm embrace.

“Another dream?” He asked, rubbing her back softly.

Hermione nodded against his shoulder, her hands gripping his shirt tightly, reminding herself that he was there, that he was solid and real.

“Anything left?” He asked, and this time she shook her head no.

Draco nodded and hugged her tighter, knowing how much it bothered her that she couldn’t remember the dreams that brought her so much distress.

“I’m sorry,” he tried to comfort her, his hands smoothing back her hair and rubbing slow circles on her back.

Hermione only nodded again, her eyes squeezed shut as she tried to hold back her tears, her mind focussed only on breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth, until her racing heart slowed.

“Better?” Draco asked when she’d finally leaned back, lifting her face from his shoulder and wiping the few tears that had escaped from her cheeks.

She only shrugged in answer, sitting back against the pillows and studying her hands. “You’re dressed,” she observed quietly, not looking up.

“I was going to go for a run on the beach,” he explained. “Would you like to come?”

Hermione shook her head and fiddled with the edge of the comforter, picking at a thread that had come loose. “I’m sorry I kept you,” she muttered, mentally chastising herself.

Draco’s hand came up to cup her cheek, guiding her face to his and giving her a warm smile. “You haven’t kept me from anything,” he assured her. “And you haven’t got anything to be sorry about.”

She nodded, but he could tell that it was just to appease him and sighed.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come?” he asked again, his thumb softly stroking her cheek. “You could watch the sunrise from the beach while I run circles around you.”

He’d hoped that he might be able to goad her into it, that he would spark her competitive side and she’d scoff at him for thinking he could do anything better than her, but she only thanked him quietly and shook her head again. Draco smiled at her once more, encouraged her to get up and make some tea and try not to stew about the dream, but ultimately left her be with a promise to get breakfast when he returned.

She’d given him a noncommittal grunt of agreement and laid back down in bed, rolling onto her side and staring at his empty pillow as she grasped for any tiny particles her mind would offer from her dream.
“Okay, I’m going to say something,” Draco spoke up over lunch. “And you don’t have to freak out about it or agree with it or anything, but I’m going to say it.”

“You’re making me nervous,” Hermione frowned at him.

“What do you think about going home?” he asked, watching closely for her reaction. “I’m not saying you have to, I’m not saying I’m going without you, I’m just putting it in the universe.”

“Just putting it in the universe?” Hermione raised an eyebrow at him.

“Yes.” He went back to his lunch without another word, and Hermione let the thought ruminate, picking at her salad listlessly.

“You know,” Draco spoke again after a few minutes had passed. “You can’t actually eat the salad without lifting the food to your mouth. It’s not something you can do by osmosis.”

Hermione rolled her eyes and tried to glare at him, but only managed a slight frown.

“What is it?” he asked knowingly.

“I-I don’t know…” she trailed off, closing her eyes and fighting back the overwhelming embarrassment and guilt in what she was about to admit. “I don’t know how long it’s been,” she muttered.

Draco didn’t have to ask what she meant. He doubted she even knew what month it was, let alone what day.

“It’s been a little over two months,” he told her, his tone completely free of judgement or whatever else she had thought it would hold.

“Two months,” she let out a breath somewhere between a laugh and a sob. “Fuck.”

“Today is March 16th,” Draco continued evenly.

She took another shuddering breath, pushing her plate away altogether and resting her elbows on the table before putting her head in her hands.

“Fuck,” she muttered, shaking her head. “Fuck, fuck, fuck!”

Around them, the other restaurant patrons looked over curiously, wondering what was going on. Draco shot them all his most Malfoy-ish glare, sneering until they turned back to their own tables, then turned his attention to Hermione who was still cursing herself.

“Come on.” He got to his feet and carefully guided her up.

He had planned on taking her for a walk on the beach- it seemed to help before- but Hermione headed straight for the elevators, obviously intent on going back to the room.

Draco followed without complaint, letting her go through whatever motions she needed to, waiting patiently.

While she paced the length of the suite, arms wrapped tightly around herself, muttering incoherently, he sat on the sofa and pretended to read a magazine until she dropped down against the opposite arm and pulled her knees up protectively.

She watched as he put the magazine back on the coffee table and turned to face her, folding one leg
under himself and waiting for her to speak in that calm and open way that he did. He never seemed to demand it of her, never expected it, he could sit there and wait for her for hours without making her feel bad for her silence. He was okay if she couldn’t talk, or didn’t want to, he didn’t push or give her annoyingly expectant looks, he simply waited, and something about it made her want to.

Ever since that first night she’d talked to him in the library at Blaise’s, before she had fallen completely off the rails, before he’d done anything for her, or even tried to be friends with her, something about that look had made her want to talk to him.

“When did you find me in Brazil?” She finally asked, her face partially hidden behind her knees in fear and embarrassment.

Once again, Draco didn’t need her to explain what she meant. “Two weeks later, give or take a day.”

Hermione nodded slowly, trying to gather herself. She knew that she’d been deep, but knowing exactly how deep was a different matter.

“So three months, really,” she corrected.

Draco nodded reluctantly.

“Har-“ she stopped herself before she could get his name out, that awful voice in her head sneering at the thought before she could voice it. Harry probably hated her by now.

“I write him.” Draco said, and Hermione looked up at him in shock.

“Y-you write to Harry?” she squeaked.

Draco nodded, a vaguely apologetic look on his face. “I don’t tell him secrets about you or share your every move with him or anything,” he explained quickly. “I just drop him a line to tell him I know where you are and that you’re…”

Hermione nodded, knowing that there wasn’t really a word to positively describe what she’d been lately- alive, perhaps? But even that seemed to be a stretch. She’d barely even been surviving.

She was quiet again for a while, torn between being angry with Draco for writing to Harry behind her back keeping him informed when she had tried so hard to cut him out of her life, and thankful that he’d kept the man from worrying excessively.

“You talked to him,” she finally said, her face still hidden. “Before… you talked to him about me.”

Draco nodded once again, trying to gauge how she felt about that, but she was as unreadable as she’d been his first week home.

“He told you about my parents,” she reasoned.

Another nod. “What he knew, at least.”

Hermione nodded again, trying to figure out how to feel about that. She thought she should be angry, annoyed, violated even, but all she seemed to feel was… relief, and she wasn’t quite sure why.

“What else?” she finally asked, sneaking a glance at his face.

“He told me what Weasley did to you.”
The mention of her former best friend and love, made Hermione’s heart jump- and not in the good way. Thinking about all that had gone on between them, she felt bile rising in her throat.

He was one of the things she’d tried so hard to forget.

“He was wrong, you know,” Draco spoke again, earning her attention for a moment. “Weasley, the things he said to you, he was wrong. Your family was just as important as his.”

Hermione released a bitter laugh at this, angry tears prickling the corners of her eyes. “No, he was exactly right,” she scoffed. “He was the only one who was.”

Draco started to argue with this, but Hermione’s eyes flew to meet his, burning.

“You don’t know,” she said dangerously. “You don’t know any of it.”

“You’re right,” he allowed, his tone soft. “I don’t know, but I want to. If you want to tell me, I want to know.”

Hermione shook her head sharply and closed her eyes, willing the emotions in her chest to recede, to grant her grace just this once.

She did want to tell Draco, somewhere deep inside she knew she did, but you can’t tell what you don’t know. “It doesn’t matter,” she finally told him.

“It does.”

“No, it doesn’t,” Hermione snapped. “It’s done. There’s nothing to do about it now.”

“That doesn’t mean that it doesn’t matter,” Draco reasoned. “It matters to you.”

“It doesn’t!” She insisted petulantly, but even as the words left her mouth she knew that he wouldn’t believe her. She couldn’t even make them sound true.

“It does,” Draco repeated, inching closer to her. “It does matter.”

Hermione only shook her head, trying to drown out his sincerity.

Why couldn’t he just leave well enough alone?! Why hadn’t she kept pushing him away? Why had she stayed here for so long?!

*Because you have nowhere else to go*, the voice in her head reminded her, but behind it she could hear another voice.

*Because you need to let someone in*, the old Hermione spoke up again, her voice so hopeful and caring. *It’s okay*, she promised naively. *You can tell him.*
Hermione closed her eyes and tried to breath, she’d never admitted this to anyone, not even to herself if she was being honest, and the enormity of it was unreal.

“Hermione?” Draco reached out and brushed his hand over her knee, wishing that she didn’t feel the need to protect herself so much.

She shook her head and pulled back, silently demanding space, and he abided, waiting for her to be ready. It could have been hours, or seconds before she opened her eyes, she truly wasn’t sure, but when she did his eyes were warm and reassuring on hers. She had to tell someone sometime, she supposed. Who better then, than this man who had followed her around the world just to keep her safe?

“I don’t remember.” She said quietly, her words muffled as she pressed her face into her knees, only her eyes peeking out above them, though they were closed. “All the things I tried to forget, I did sometimes, and there are so many things I don’t remember, but they’re the wrong things.”

She chanced a glance at Draco and he nodded, encouraging her to go on.

“There are holes,” she tried to explain. “Holes that I don’t understand. Things I’ve forgotten that I shouldn’t have- things from my childhood that are fuzzier than they should be or missing altogether.”

“That’s not unusual,” he tried to placate her. “I mean, there are plenty of things from my childhood that I don’t remember. We’re human, we forget things.”

“No,” Hermione shook her head. “Not these things. I’m not talking about random dates and such, little things that happened when I was three or four. They’re big things, important things, I know they are, but it’s like they’ve been taken out for a pensieve and locked away. I think… I think that’s what the dreams are.”

She hadn’t meant to tell him this, but once again she found herself pouring her thoughts out to Draco before she could stop herself. It was downright disconcerting how much her subconscious seemed to trust the man.

“The dreams you don’t remember,” he confirmed, inching towards her again.

Hermione nodded, hugging her knees even tighter, inching away from him. She needed to maintain some sort of boundary here. She couldn’t just let him in, no matter how much she seemed to want to. Letting people in meant getting hurt, and she was in no shape to be hurt again.

“When did it start?” Draco asked, once again allowing her her space. “When did you notice?”

“Australia.”

He waited for her to expand, to offer which trip to Australia she was referring to, but when she didn’t speak up, he had to ask.

“The first-“ she paused, voice catching in her throat and closed her eyes again. Even as she did, the memory came, forcing itself through the darkness behind her eyes and broadcasting itself in full HD colour. The looks on their faces, the venom in their voices, the sheer hatred that shone in their eyes, and all of it directed at her.
“Hermione,” Draco sounded far away as he called to her, his hands sliding slowly up and down her arms, pulling her back to the room. “Hey, look at me, Hermione.”

With more than a little effort, she wrenched herself from the memory and met his eyes, grasping for purchase in the deep grey.

“They hated me.” She whimpered, and the force of admitting it out loud was enough to break the dam she had built around the emotions, releasing a torrent of pain through the tiniest of cracks, and slowly allowing it to spread.

As she broke down in uncontrollable sobs, Draco closed the remaining distance between them and wrapped his arms around her, though she was still curled into a tight, defensive ball.

She wasn’t sure how long she cried, but it seemed like hours. Years of pain and emotion that she’d pushed aside with the help of drugs and drinking bubbled out of her, and she couldn’t seem to stop. Each time she thought she’d got it under control, another wave of emotion would hit, and she’d start up all over again.

At some point she’d moved from hugging herself to hugging tightly to Draco. He’d lifted her into his lap and held her tightly, speaking calmly and quietly into her hair, promising her that he was there and that she was alright. She didn’t care what he was saying or whether or not it was true, but he sounded so steady, and that was what she found comforting.

Throughout the entire ordeal, his hold never loosened, and his voice never wavered, he was the rock that sheltered her against the dangerous riptide of her mind.

When she finally did run out of tears, her head pounding, eyes red and swollen and entire body aching hollowly, he continued to hold her, whispering the occasional endearment or encouragement as she came back into herself, entirely spent.

Draco didn’t move until she fell asleep, exhaustion taking over her. Even then, he only maneuvered himself so that they were laying down on the couch, her body stretched out across his.

This was what he had been waiting for. The flood of emotion that she had been suppressing for so long had finally burst free of its confines. Now, all he had to do was make sure she didn’t drown.

He’d known that she carried a heavy load of guilt from the war, he knew exactly how much when she showed him her tattoo, but this wasn’t guilt that she’d admitted to. This was the realization that you were unloved, despised even, by the people that were supposed to love you the most in the world, and that realization held a thousand times more pain.

And then there was the lack of memories, the things she seemed convinced she’d forgotten. She hadn’t said what they were, obviously, but Draco got the feeling that it wasn’t the drugs that had taken them. He didn’t have any proof, of course, but something told him that the things she was forgetting, the things she dreamed of without retaining, had been taken away by her own subconscious, hidden for her protection.

Casting his mind back to his discussion with Potter nearly three months ago, Draco wondered if the
memory loss had something to do with her contact with the Horcruxes, as they thought her PTSD might. Perhaps in the midst of trying to protect her from all that darkness, her mind had taken away other things that it had deemed unsafe, things that she hadn’t told anyone else. After all, if Potter had known anything of such importance, Draco was almost positive he would have told him, or at least told him that he knew more than he was saying, but he’d been adamant that he’d shared everything. He hadn’t spared a single detail, which lead Draco to believe that there was quite a bit more than Potter thought he didn’t know. She’d mentioned her childhood, after all, and Potter hadn’t said a single thing about the time before Voldemort.

While he thought about this, Hermione dreamed on top of him, a twisted, shadowy nightmare of towering figures with eyes of flames and demonic voices.

“I’m sorry,” a small girl whimpered, cowering on her knees before the looming figure. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to. I don’t know what happened!”

The shadowy being responded angrily, but she wasn’t able to decipher the words, they seemed to be nothing more than claps of thunder, each boom coming as an almost physical blow to the girl.

“I didn’t mean to!” she pleaded with the figure once more, not daring to look up into his flaming eyes. “I was trying so hard, I meant to be normal and good. I was trying to be good!”

Another booming shout and she let out a sob, her whole body quivering in fear.

“I’m sorry,” she cried desperately. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry.”

The apologies poured from her in a torrent of tears and desperation, but the figure didn’t want her apologies. Reaching out with extraordinarily large hands, he grabbed her and began dragging her away, ignoring her fearful screams. She grasped desperately for purchase, but the floor seemed to be perfectly smooth, granting her no reprieve. She ripped her nails completely, leaving a trail of blood on the floor as she continued to try and escape.

When they finally came to a stop, it was before a door of sheer steel, similar to the ones you might find on the vault in a bank. An entirely new wave of terror echoed through the girl, gripping her heart tightly in its hand and constricting it until it was unable to move.

Once more, she pleaded with the figure, begged for mercy, promised that she would be good, that she would never let it happen again.

The laugh that she received turned her very blood to ice, freezing every nerve and cell in her body as the demonic sound stabbed her again and again and again, each syllable like a dagger to her heart. And as he laughed, the door opened to reveal a deep, vast darkness- the kind of darkness that swallowed any and all light, no matter how bright. With a swift, heavy kick, the girl’s body was sent hurtling into the void, the darkness wrapping around her and constricting her body until she could neither breathe nor move, allowing only the most pathetic of whimpers to escape her before swallowing her whole…
She woke with a scream, clambering for purchase as though she thought she were falling, her eyes wide with fear.

“You’re okay,” Draco was quick to comfort her, his arms wrapped securely around her. “You’re okay, it was just a dream. You’re okay.”

For a moment, she buried her face in his chest and let out a fearful sob, but in a flash, she scrambled up and off of him, retreating to the farthest corner of the sofa and curling into the same defensive position she’d been in earlier, knees tight to her chest, face hidden.

“You’re okay,” Draco continued to reassure her, getting up and kneeling on the floor in front of her, his hands gently resting against her legs. “Hermione, look at me, you’re okay. It was just a dream.”

Hermione took a shaky breath and nodded but didn’t unfurl from her protective stance. Her entire body was shaking, her nerves fizzling dangerously with adrenalin. She’d fallen into the void of ‘fight or flight’ and her answer was most definitely flight.

“You’re okay, just take deep breaths,” Draco coached her softly, his tone calm and commanding. “Breathe in through your nose… Out through your mouth… In… Out… That’s it, you’re doing great. In… Out…”

Gradually, her mind began to slow and the fear became less demanding, fizzling out until she was only slightly on edge, the adrenalin having run its course. Draco still crouched in front of her, his hands softly stroking her legs as he continued instructing her on her breathing.

When he felt her grip loosen, he gave her space to set her legs on the floor. Propping her elbows on her knees and dropping her head into her hands, she pulled anxiously at her hair, grabbing fistfuls of it and yanking sharply, but he was quick to cover her hands with his own to stop her.

“It’s okay,” he repeated. “You’re okay.”

“No.” Hermione shook her head, her tone full of broken desperation. “No, I’m not.”

Draco sighed and rested his head against hers, pressing a kiss to her hair as she leaned into him.

“I think it’s time to go home,” she said quietly.

“Okay,” he agreed, rubbing her back. “I’ll arrange a portkey for the morning.”

For the second time in six months, Draco Malfoy stood in the Portkey office of the British Ministry for Magic, unsure what to expect. This time, however, he wasn’t alone.

Beside him, Hermione signed the same pile of papers as he did, declaring where they had been and what they had brought back- which was nothing. Hermione seemed to have well and truly lost her wand this time, and no matter how many times he tried, Draco was unable to summon her beaded bag. Thankfully, it had something like a homing beacon built into it that would summon the bag to her lab when activated, but she still had to get to the lab to retrieve it and pray that her wand was inside. That was their first stop.
An unseemly layer of dust covered the equipment and countertops of Hermione’s lab, having been left to itself for the last three months, and Draco could see that it pained her to look at it. Without hesitating, he offered her the use of his wand to set the place to rights and summon her bag, and she took it with a smile of thanks.

Quick as a flash, sponges and mops and brushes began to fly around, scouring every available surface until they gleamed. The potions that had been left unattended were binned and the cauldrons disinfected, and the ingredients that had expired were weeded out.

As that went on, Hermione went to her safe and began reciting incantations. When she’d finished, she gave Draco a hopeful look and went about unlocking the door. The bag was inside, but alas, the wand was not, and Hermione’s shoulders drooped.

“Well go get you a new one,” Draco reassured her immediately. “Just a quick trip to Ollivander’s, yeah?”

She nodded glumly, then let out a quick snort of laughter. “I don’t even know why I’m upset about it,” she scoffed. “I hated that wand. Every time I used it, all I could think about was her.”

Even though she didn’t say the name, Draco knew exactly who she was speaking of.

The wand she had been using for the last three years had once belonged to his Aunt Bellatrix. The same wand that had been used to torture her for information, she had been forced to channel magic through every day. Yet, he still understood why she was upset. Despite the painful history she and the wand had shared, they still had a connection—she wouldn’t have been able to use it if they hadn’t—and the loss of a wand was a painful one no matter the circumstances. He could attest to that personally.

“Wand magic is strange,” he offered in explanation. “You know what Ollivander says.”

“The wand chooses the wizard,” she echoed glumly. “Yes, I know. It was what he told me when I tried to replace it after… after everything.”

Draco glowered unhappily at this. It was cruel to force her to continue using a wand that had brought her so much pain, surely the old man must have known that—he’d heard her screams just the same as Draco had—Ollivander was a strange man, though. Perhaps he had truly believed it to be for the best. It didn’t much matter now, she had to have a new wand.

“Is everything else there?” Draco asked as she sifted through the rest of the bag, occasionally pulling out empty potions vials and sending them off to be sterilized.

“I think so,” Hermione nodded. “I’m not sure—” She stopped, embarrassed to say the words out loud. She didn’t remember what had been there in the first place. “Nothing seems to be missing,” she finished, tightening the purse string and getting to her feet.

“Shall we make a trip to Ollivander’s, then?” he asked, offering a hand. “It should be just about opening time.”

Hermione chewed her lip nervously and shifted from foot to foot, observing his offered hand with an unhealthy amount of trepidation.

“What’s wrong?” Draco frowned, stepping towards her.

“I- I don’t know if I should…” she stammered. “What if someone sees?”
“Sees what? You?”

She nodded.

“How don’t you want people to see you?” he asked patiently.

“N-not people…” she trailed off again, looking at the ground.

“People you know?” he guessed, earning another nod. “Well, how about this?” He pulled off his cloak and draped it over her shoulders, then lifted the hood up. It was too big, seeing as he had a good foot and a bit on her, and the hood fell low enough to cover her eyes and easily hide her hair. “Better?” Draco asked, peeking under the hood to find her smiling.

“Thanks,” she nodded.

He held his hand out once more, and this time she took it without pause, allowing him to apparate them up to the street.

It was past lunch by the time they finished at Ollivander’s. The older man had had a busy day of wand repairs and such, and so had sent Hermione and Draco to a small room in the back of the shop and left them with a few hundred wands to try, assuring Hermione that when she found the correct one, she would know.

He had been right, of course, but the hours of testing and failing had got to her. When she’d finally found the eleven-inch walnut wand that was now hers, she’d almost used the magic to summon the closest dealer.

“Let’s get some lunch,” Draco suggested as soon as they were out of the shop, recognizing how twitchy and irritable she was getting. “We can go somewhere Muggle.”

“I don’t want lunch,” Hermione shook her head adamantly. “I just want to go home.”

“No, you just want a hit,” he argued easily, stopping and turning to face her. “Right?”

Even though she was completely covered by his cloak, Draco saw the way she wrapped her arms around herself tightly, her eyes trained on the ground.

“You know I won’t stop you,” he continued in a kinder tone. “But I don’t think it’s what you really want to do. I think if you go home and do a line, you’re going to regret it.”

He was right, of course, she knew he was, but that didn’t stop the voice in her head that was telling her she needed it, or the twitchy feeling she had in the pit of her stomach. “Fuuuuck!” she groaned, leaning against the closest building and lifting her head to the sky, glaring at the universe.

“Come on,” Draco rubbed her arm consolingly. “We’ll get some food and go from there.”

Reluctantly, she nodded and pushed away from the wall, allowing him to put his arm around her shoulders and lead her to the Leaky Cauldron.
When they finally made it to her flat, Hermione found herself fearing what she would find on the other side of the front door. She didn’t remember what state it had been in when she left, and for all she knew, she was about to walk into a crack den.

“You can do this,” Draco offered encouragement behind her. "It's going to be fine."

Hermione only nodded, taking her keys from her bag with shaking hands. It took her three tries to actually get the key in the lock, and another minute of psyching herself up before she finally turned it and pushed open the door.

The flat seemed just as sparse and unused as it had when she left it. A well-used sofa pushed against the far wall with a battered coffee table in front of it, a row of stools set under the breakfast bar in lieu of a kitchen table. The only real personality in the place came from the bookshelves lining the walls, jammed to capacity and then some, though she couldn’t remember the last time she’d actually read any of the tomes.

As in her lab, there was a thick layer of dust over just about everything, and she quickly cast a series of cleaning charms around the place as she made her way back to the bedroom.

Unlike the rest of the flat, Hermione had actually put effort into her bedroom. The walls had been painted dark purple and at one point there had even been photographs up, though they had eventually been removed in a fit of rage, left on the floor to be covered by clothes and bed linens. In one corner of the room her vanity sat untouched, pieces of the mirror she had broken before leaving mixing in with her abandoned makeup as it fell.

“Eyeliner not playing fair?” Draco joked, nodding to the shattered glass.

“Something like that.” She stepped a little further into the room and began picking up the clothes that covered the floor, making a pile next to the already full laundry basket.

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It was Draco that found the first baggy, picking it up off the vanity when he went to repair the mirror.

“What do you want to do with it?” he turned to Hermione, offering the package. “It’s your call.”

The little pills seemed to call to her, crying out her name like angels chorusing 'Hallelujah', and she almost reached for them. Wham, bam, thank you Ma’am! Her inner junkie crowed, desperate to feel good after days of being denied, but that other voice in her head, the voice of her old self that had crept forward in the past week, also spoke up. Where's that going to get you? she asked shrewdly.

*High!* The junkie beamed.

*Exactly,* her old self agreed, *and what goes up, must come down.*

Ahh, there was the rib. No matter how much she enjoyed the high, there was nothing more painful than the down.

“Flush it,” Hermione said, looking at Draco.

“You’re sure?” he checked, studying her carefully.
“I’m sure,” she ordered, pushing the timidity from her voice. “Flush all of it.”

Draco beamed proudly at her, taking his wand and casting a summoning spell. He watched from the corner of his eye as she oversaw his disposal of the drugs she’d accumulated in the flat, noting the way her hands occasionally darted out to grab something before she pulled them back, crossing her arms tightly.

The determined look on her face made his heart swell, it was the same look she’d given him every single day they’d been at Hogwarts, the one she’d had when they dragged her into Malfoy Manor and thrown her to Bella.

It was the look that meant she was about to win.
Hello my darlings!
Once again, thank you all so much for your reviews and kudos, it's such an amazing feeling knowing that you guys are enjoying my writing.
While I am quite a few chapters ahead in this story, as far as writing goes, I am starting a new job as of Monday and therefore will not have as much writing time. Because of this, I'm going to be cutting posts down to once a week instead of twice. Sorry guys, but I just don't want to hit a wall and leave you with nothing, better to drag out what's already there and give myself time.
Hope you enjoy today's chapter!
-Emma

“You should probably see a Healer,” Draco suggested as they ate breakfast the next morning.

They’d stayed in her flat the night before, sharing the bed just like they had in Ibiza, as Hermione was scared to sleep alone. Draco had been more than happy when she’d asked. He hadn’t exactly fancied going back to Blaise’s and worrying about her all night.

“Now that you’ve cleaned out your system, you should have a check, just make sure everything’s good,” he reasoned.

“We’re both just as qualified as a Healer,” Hermione frowned, poking at her cereal. “I’m fine.”

“Granger, you know we’re not,” he argued. “We’re not properly trained, we can miss things.”

“We haven’t,” she insisted stubbornly. “I take my potions every day, no matter what. I’m fine.”

Draco gave her a disbelieving glare, but she ignored him, her eyes focussed solely on her remaining Cheerios. “What about that Healer Blaise keeps on call?” he suggested. “What’s his name? Steven?”


“He’s been treating you for a while,” Draco nodded. “Why not just let him swing by?”

“Draco, just drop it!” she snapped, slamming her spoon down angrily and getting to her feet. “Okay? Just leave it alone!”

She stomped over to her bedroom and slammed the door shut, leaving Draco to wonder what the hell had just happened.

He gave her twenty minutes to cool off before following, needing nothing more than a quick
‘Alohomora’ to open the door. The lights were all off and the curtains drawn, and Hermione lay curled up in the middle of the bed, wrapped in her comforter.

“Go away.” She muttered through the fabric, and he could hear that she’d been crying.

Draco refused, lighting the tip of his wand and setting it on the bedside table to give the room just a little light, before locating her head in the cocoon of blankets and laying down beside her.

He didn’t say anything, didn’t ask questions or lecture her about needing to see a Healer, he simply laid with his head next hers and waited for her to be ready. She would speak when she was- she always did.

Pulling back the comforter just a little, Draco exposed her eyes and tip of her nose, and raised an eyebrow as if to ask ‘Really?’

“Fuck off,” she muttered, though there was no venom in her tone. “Just let me cocoon.”

“I’m not stopping you,” he pointed out. “I’m just laying here. You did invite me to stay, you’ll recall.”

“What if I want to uninvite you?”

“Too late,” he offered a wry smile. “Besides, you don’t want to. You like me too much.”

“I bet no one’s ever said that before,” Hermione snarked, the tiniest of twinkles in her eyes.

“Blaise will occasionally admit to it,” Draco chuckled. “Usually when he’s particularly wasted. You’re the first one to admit it sober, though.”

“I haven’t admitted to anything,” she scoffed. “If you’ll recall, I told you to ‘fuck off’.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t mean it,” he shrugged.

Hermione rolled her eyes at him, but said nothing, and once again Draco waited.

When she began reciting random facts, he wasn’t surprised. It seemed to be a sort of coping mechanism for her. She did it when she was upset, or had too much going on in her head, and it seemed to calm her. Draco didn’t ask why, he simply let her fill his head with random information until she was ready to say whatever it was she wanted to say. Eventually, he knew she would get there.

“Did you know that in 1927, the U.S. government issued Santa Claus a pilot’s license?”

“Well, they’re American,” he shrugged easily. “They nickname their cities after fruits.”

Hermione smiled a little at this, nodding in agreement.

“There’s a town in Nebraska that has a population of 1,” she added. “It’s just one woman, and she’s the Mayor, bartender and Librarian.”


“I’d like to be a bartending librarian,” Hermione shared. “I think I’d be rather good at it.”

“You certainly couldn’t be any worse than Goyle,” he offered.
Again, she smiled in response, the comforter inching a little further from her face. “The fear of fear is called Phobiaphobia.”

“You know, I could have figured that one out for myself,” Draco frowned.

“Atychiphobia, fear of failure,” Hermione recited, not seeming to have heard him this time. “The fear of doctors is called Iatrophobia. Atelephobia, fear of imperfection. Autophobia, fear of being alone.”

“You’re not alone,” he assured her, but she kept going.

“Noctiphobia, fear of the night. Somniphobia, fear of sleep. Wiccaphobia, fear of witchcraft—”

“Hermione,” Draco interrupted her, cupping her cheek against his palm and trying to get her to meet his eyes. “Granger, what’s going on?”

She didn’t answer him, simply closed her eyes and leaned into his touch. His hands were warm, and she was always so cold, she liked that he was warm.

“She’s not alone,” he pointed out. “You wore it at Hogwarts too. Why that one?”

“When I was a baby I didn’t like blankets or teddys to sleep with.” She said quietly, surprising him, as he didn’t think she would answer right away—if at all.

“Once, I wouldn’t stop fussing in the car and my mum said it was because I was cold, but they didn’t have any blankets because I didn’t like them, so my dad took off his shirt…” She tugged the heavy plaid tighter around herself beneath the comforter, the hand that had been holding Draco’s, slipping back into the blankets. “I slept with it all the time after that. Wouldn’t sleep without it. My mum used to use it to swaddle me, and then when I was older I would cuddle with it. Something to do with recognizing my dad’s scent, I suppose, thinking it was safe…”

She trailed off, regret clearly evident in her eyes.

“I wore through the first shirt when I was little, and so they got me another one, and then another one. This was the fourth. They gave it to me for Christmas fifth year… I thought it was sentimentality.”

She let out a sniff of laughter and Draco frowned, not quite understanding why she was scoffing at the idea.

“They just didn’t want to spend money on someone they couldn’t wait to get rid of. I might as well have been a House Elf being given an old smock.” She sniffled slightly and hid her face. “But I wear it anyways, stupid thing that I am.”

“You’re not stupid,” Draco spoke up immediately, pulling the comforter from her face and looking
her square in the eye. “You, Hermione Granger, are not stupid.”

“I wear this shirt because it makes me feel safe,” she argued sadly. “Because I think of my dad and for a few minutes, I feel better, but you know how much my dad cared about keeping me safe? When he remembered who I was, he tried to have me thrown in prison. He told the police that I was a menace to society, a ticking time bomb that could blow and kill them all at any minute. When he was interviewed by the Ministry officials disguised as Police, he told them I was a manipulative cunt and he was sorry that he hadn’t drowned me in the closest river the day I was born. He wanted them to throw me in the closest prison, and let the inmates do with me as they pleased. My father didn’t give two shits about my safety, and yet I can’t stop wearing this fucking shirt, because somewhere in my mind I think it’s going to change things. So yes, Draco, I am as stupid as stupid can be. An empty-headed bint with nothing going for her but the space between her legs.”

As she went on, the anger in her chest grew stronger and stronger, only to come crashing down in a wave of empty sorrow. There were no tears this time, no angry, heaving sobs or screams, just a barren wasteland of empty silence, startled only when she got up from the bed and locked herself in the bathroom, unable to bear the pathetic look in Draco’s eyes.

She had never wanted drugs more than she did in that moment. Sitting on her bathroom floor with her head in her hands, replaying what she’d just admitted to over and over in her mind, all she wanted in the entire world was something to make it all stop. She wanted to feel weightless and see the world in technicolour, or to be so completely baked out of her mind that it didn’t matter what she’d said or that it had all been true. She didn’t much care what kind of high it was, so long as it meant she didn’t feel like this- like the empty, heartbroken, shattered mess of girl that she really was.

She was standing at Blaise’s front door before she’d even realized that she’d apparated, so caught up in the need to make the pain stop that she hadn’t been paying attention to anything else. Before she could talk herself out of it, she knocked, but even as she did, the arguments broke out in her head. That damned Old Hermione that had crawled out of the mental attic reared her rational, guilt-provoking head once more, quietly scolding her in that oh-so-caring way that she did.

You’ve been doing so well, though. It’s just a moment, she reasoned. You’re going to regret this before the drugs even hit you.

Junkie Hermione was doing her best to drown her out, though, playing a mantra of all the excellent nights they had had together, nights where she’d only felt the moments, and forgotten all the shit that was going on in her head. That was what she needed, to forget.

“Miss!” Mippy opened the door and greeted Hermione with a bright smile, ushering her inside quickly. “Mippy was missing Miss very much. We was worrying that you’d been hurt.”

“I’ve been travelling.” Hermione told the elf shortly, pulling her shirt tighter and crossing her arms to hide the fact that she was shaking. “Is Blaise in?”

“Master is being in the living room,” Mippy nodded. “Miss can go right in.”

Hermione gave her a nod of thanks and carried on, all the while trying to drown out the voices in her head.

What happened to that determination you had yesterday? You were so sure that you could kick this,
you're just having a moment!

Listening to her inner monologue, Hermione wondered if this was how Harry and Ron had felt when she lectured them as children. Gods, she was an annoying swot! Why in Morgana’s memory had they been friends with her?!

Because they needed you, her mind answered. And when they were done, they tossed you away. Just like everyone else. They weren’t your friends. You were their pet, the dog that did their homework and whined a lot.

“Stop it!” Hermione hissed under her breath, hugging herself tighter.

Blaise was on his feet the second he saw her, rushing across the room to pull her into a hug, then fixing her with a severe glare. “Where the fuck have you been?!”

“Travelling,” she repeated her story. “What have you got in?”

Blaise scoffed, looking mildly offended. “You’re not getting a thing until you tell me what the fuck happened! You just disappeared into thin air—literally! It took me weeks to fix those wards!”

“I just needed some space,” she tried to evade him, refusing to meet his eyes. “I’m sorry I didn’t write or whatever, I was busy.”

“You were wasted,” he countered. “There’s a difference. We were worried about you, Mi.”

“Well, I’m fine,” she shrugged, daring to look at his face and praying that her eyes wouldn’t betray her. “Safe and sound, back home and disease free. Now, are you gonna help a girl out, or what?”

“Don’t.”

A deep, aristocratic voice spoke out behind them and Hermione visibly winced. Of course Draco had followed her here. He’d followed her around the entire fucking globe, of course he would follow her here.

“And you!” Blaise waved at his best friend demandingly. “What the fuck have you been doing? You’re here one day, gone the next, nothing but vague letters filled with nothing to remember you by!”

Draco ignored him, his focus entirely on the shaking brunette between them. “What are you doing, Granger?”

“Fuck off, Malfoy!” Hermione hissed, her back turned to him, eyes on the floor. “Just let me be.”

“No, I won’t. What are you doing?”

“Hello?” Blaise waved his hands for attention, glaring between the two of them. “Does somebody want to tell me what’s going on here and where the fuck you two have been?!”

They both ignored him.

“What are you doing?” Draco repeated his question, watching Hermione tense more and more.

“What do you fucking think I’m doing?!” she snapped, turning to face him angrily.

“I think you’re doing something you’re going to regret,” he replied calmly. “And I want to hear you
“Fine, I’ll regret it. Now, will you kindly, FUCK THE FUCK OFF!?” She screamed, angry tears building up behind her eyes.

“That’s not what I meant, and you know it,” he challenged coolly. “What are you doing, Granger?”

Hermione’s hands dropped to her sides in tight fists, her jaw clenched violently, and her eyes tightly shut.

“Just leave me alone,” she ground out. “Please, for the love of God, leave me alone.”

“No,” Draco adamantly refused. “What are you doing?”

“Please.” She was begging now, desperate for him to leave so that she could just find something to make it all stop. “Please.”

“No,” Draco repeated, his voice softening as he stepped towards her.

“Gods, just make it stop!” Hermione pleaded, her anger quickly crumbling to the wave of guilt and pain that seemed to emanate from her chest. “I just need it to stop!”

His arms surrounded her just as her legs gave out, pulling her into him and holding her tightly as she caved in. She could hear him muttering something to her, his face in her hair, reassuring her, but she couldn’t distinguish the words. All she could hear was her desperate pleas for nothing, for the blackness that came with a good high.

She just wanted it to stop.

Draco waited for Hermione to cry herself out before he moved, picking her up with ease and carrying her over to the sofa so they could sit. She didn’t make any sort of effort to move away from him, so he settled comfortably with her in his lap, his arms still around her and her head resting against his shoulder. She was muttering apologies to him, repeating the words over and over again as she did when she was hallucinating or having one of her dreams.

“Shh,” Draco tried to quiet her, brushing her hair out her face and kissing her forehead. “It’s okay. You don’t need to apologize.”

“You’re angry,” she shook her head. “I fucked up-”

“You didn’t fuck up,” he promised. “And I’m not angry, I’m proud of you.”

“What the fuck do you have to be proud of?” She demanded, lifting her head to look at him, her face making it clear she thought he was nuts.

“Are you high right now?” Draco asked, his voice calm and quiet.

Hermione shook her head, casting her gaze to her hands in embarrassment once again, but he lifted her chin so she would look at him.

“That’s why I’m proud of you,” he smiled. “You know where Blaise keeps things, you didn’t have
to talk to him before you got something. You could have gone to any of your dealers and had something in seconds, but you didn’t."

“I wanted to,” she admitted shamefully.

“There’s nothing wrong with that,” Draco reasoned. “You’ve been hiding behind the highs for so long, of course you’re going to want to go back to that. It’s been your crutch for years. The point is that you fought back, you didn’t let that part of your brain that thinks a good high is the answer win. That’s why I’m proud of you.”

As he spoke, Hermione gaped at him, absolutely dumbfounded. How could he think so much of her after witnessing everything she’d done. He’d picked her up out of gutters, literally, and yet he looked at her like she was the strongest person he’d ever seen. How could someone be proud of something like her?

You weren’t always this, old Hermione spoke up. You used to be strong. He just believes that you will be again.

Throughout Draco and Hermione’s standoff, Blaise stood to the side watching the pair in silent awe. In all the time he’d been friends with Hermione, all the nights she’d crawled into his bed- after nightmares and before- he’d never seen her so vulnerable or desperate, even during the worst of withdrawals. And beyond that, he’d never seen her accept help from anyone.

Now, as Draco challenged her over and over, he watched her façade shatter, watched the internal war she was fighting seep out into the air and fire upon her until she couldn’t stand it anymore, but when she fell she seemed to know that he would catch her.

And he had. Seemingly without any thought at all, his arms wrapped tightly around her, and his face buried in her shoulder, quietly speaking into her ear as she fell apart.

Blaise watched as Hermione’s hands moved from hanging limply at her sides to grip the front of Draco’s shirt, anchoring herself to him, and he wondered how close the pair had really become since he’d last seen them.

What had changed to make her so attached and seemingly reliant on Draco? And what the hell had Draco done to get through to her?

His mind raced with all kinds of questions, but he also recognized when he wasn’t wanted, and so gave them some space to talk.

When he walked into the kitchen, Daphne was stood making herself a cup of tea, an open box of biscuits sitting on the counter next to her and he helped himself to one.

“Did I just hear Hermione?” Daphne asked, smacking his hand away.

“You did,” he nodded. “And why are you hitting me? They’re *my* biscuits.”

“They’re communal biscuits,” she argued. “And I want them. You’re going to eat them all before I even get a chance to have one.”
“I only took one!” Blaise started to argue but decided to simply let it go. There were more important things to care about right now. “Draco’s back too.”

“Well, he was stalking her around the globe. It makes sense that he would reappear when she did,” Daphne reasoned, moving over to the kitchen table.

“Yeah, but it seems like they came back together,” Blaise followed. “I mean, together together.”

“Why do you say that?”

“Because she just melted down in his arms after he talked her out of getting high, seemingly by deferring to her own thoughts.”

“Excuse me,” Daphne choked on her tea, eyes wide with shock.

“This is what I’m saying,” Blaise waved his hands in an ‘I told you so’ way.

“Where are they now?” she asked, looking like she wanted to hunt them down and interrogate them immediately.

“In the living room. I thought I’d give them a minute, Mi’s in a bad way.”

“I mean, it sounded like it, but…” Daphne trailed off, a pensive look on her face. “Do you think she’s sober?”

“It certainly seems like it,” Blaise admitted.

“That’s… that’s…” Daphne just shook her head, unable to find the right words.

“Yeah,” he nodded. “Exactly.”

“What the fuck happened?” Daphne demanded, pushing the hair out of her face, still in shock.

“I was trying to find out, but she was demanding drugs and then she was yelling at him, and then she was having a breakdown. There wasn’t a lot of time to get answers in between.”

“Well we’re going to damn well get some now!” Daphne decided. “Mippy!”

The house elf popped into the room beside them and turned to face the eldest Greengrass expectantly. “Miss is calling?”

“Yes, would you please get tea ready? We’re going to be having a chat with Draco and Hermione, and I think we’re going to need it.”

“Of course,” Mippy nodded genially and turned to the stove, setting the kettle to boil with a snap of her fingers.

“And bring biscuits, would you Mippy?” Blaise requested. “Daphne won’t share hers.”

“Master is having more than enough biscuits,” Mippy scolded him lazily. “Miss is not needing to share.”

“Good to know who’s side you’re on,” Blaise grumbled at the elf, ignoring Daphne’s victorious smile.

“Come on,” she pulled his arm impatiently. “It’s time we got some answers.”
“Hermione!” Daphne smiled warmly as she entered the living room, leaning over to hug the witch still sat in Draco’s lap. “You’re back.”

Hermione shrugged, surprised by the warm welcome. “I suppose,” she mumbled.

“We missed you,” Daphne assured her. “I’m glad you’re home.”

“Me too,” Blaise piped up. “And now that that’s out of the way- WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON?!”

Hermione and Draco both flinched at his obnoxiously loud tone, disturbing the quiet they had been maintaining with all the subtlety of an American cowboy.

“Don’t shout!” Daphne scolded the Italian, smacking the back of his head before sitting down in one of the armchairs across from the sofa. “Mippy’s bringing tea, we were hoping you would tell us what’s been going on with you.”

Unlike Blaise, Daphne’s soft, diplomatic tone seemed to calm Hermione somewhat, as she slipped off of Draco’s lap to settle into his side. As soon as she moved, his arm came around her protectively, and Daphne narrowed her eyes. There was definitely something there.

“You’re clean,” Daphne started the conversation once everyone was settled. “You are, aren’t you?”

Hermione nodded, her head down, focusing on the sleeves of her shirt.

“That’s great, Mi,” Daphne grinned. “We’re really happy for you.”

“Absolutely!” Blaise joined in immediately, bobbing his head up and down enthusiastically. “Why?”

Once again, Daphne reached over and smacked him, while Draco glared daggers at him.

“What?!” Blaise cried. “It’s not an odd question.”

“It’s a rude question,” Daphne pointed out.

“Why should I care about that? Mi and I have always been straight with each other,” Blaise frowned at the witch in question, eyebrows raised. “Right?”

“Yeah,” Hermione nodded once again, this time offering Blaise the slightest of glances.

“Right,” he nodded firmly. “So, what happened?”

“Draco stalked me around the world and somewhere I eventually came to my senses,” she shrugged. “I’m a fucking mess.”

“You’re not a mess,” Daphne tried to comfort her. “You’re just going through a rough patch.”

“No, she’s a mess,” Blaise shook his head, riding the honesty train. “A completely certifiable one. I’m glad you’re willing to admit it, that’s a big step in the right direction.”

“Since when do you know where the right direction is?” Hermione scoffed.
“There she is!” Blaise beamed at her, finally recognising the woman he’d been friends with for the last year. “I’ll have you know that I am perfectly sane. I simply choose to fall in with you lot and your eccentricities because you’re good for a laugh.”

“You’re a cunt,” Draco rolled his eyes.

“That too,” Blaise nodded agreeably.

“Either way, I’m trying not to be so messy anymore,” Hermione shrugged. “So, no more drugs.”

“That’s amazing, Mi,” Daphne congratulated her again. “We’re here to help you however we can. Aren’t we Blaise?”

“Absolutely,” the Italian nodded eagerly. “And I think the most helpful thing I could do for you would be to relieve you of whatever remaining stock you might have. You know, to remove the temptation.”

“How very kind of you,” his best friend said flatly. “Unfortunately, we flushed it all yesterday.”

Blaise looked at him like he’d completely lost his mind, earning a laugh from Hermione, much to everyone’s surprise.

“It’s not like they were the crown jewels, Blaise,” she chuckled. “You can get them without me.”

“Well sure, but that’s gonna take so much more effort,” he complained. “I’ll have to go out!”

“It’s good for you,” Draco rolled his eyes.

Blaise didn’t seem to agree with this, but he shrugged it off, choosing instead to ask what had happened to help Hermione see the need for a change.

“I had a really, really bad trip in Ibiza,” she admitted grimly. “It… it hit me pretty hard.”

The second that she seemed to become uncomfortable, Draco’s arm tightened around her, stroking her arm reassuringly. Daphne noticed and raised an inquiring brow, but he only frowned at her sternly.

“Well, whatever it was, I’m just glad that you’re doing better,” she turned to Hermione. “You are doing better, aren’t you? I mean, you seem better.”

Hermione frowned. “This seems better?”

“Compared to three months ago?” Blaise reasoned. “Yeah, you seem a lot better. You were in a bad way, Mi.”

Her face fell, eyes refusing to meet anyone else’s, her focus once again on the sleeves of her shirt which she knotted and twisted in her hands.

“You look a lot better, though.” He continued earnestly, not meaning to have made her upset. “Seriously.”

“Told you,” Draco whispered, poking her in the ribs.

Hermione simply stared at them in shock. How bad had she really been, if this was considered better?
“Hermione, this is the first time you’ve sat and talked for more than ten seconds at a time without a dose in your system,” Daphne explained carefully. “It’s great.”

“Thanks,” Hermione mumbled, still not meeting the other girl’s eye. “Um, I think I should get going. Sorry about earlier.” She got to her feet quickly and started heading for the floo room, not waiting for Draco to follow. As she went, Daphne jumped up and pulled her into another hug.

“I’m really glad you’re back,” she repeated quietly. “And I’m really happy that you’re clean. Whatever you need, I’m here for you.”

Hermione nodded awkwardly and pulled away, turning quickly and rushing from the room while Draco got up to follow.

“Seriously, mate,” Blaise stopped him before he could get too far. “What’s going on with you two?”

Draco shrugged. “We’re friends, and she needs help, so that’s what I’m doing.”

“That’s it?” Blaise looked sceptical, there was definitely more going on than he was saying.

“Yeah,” Draco nodded. “Right now, that’s it. She needs friends, people that she can trust, so right now that’s what I am.”

“And in the future?”

“The future is up to her,” Draco shrugged again. “I’ll see you later, alright?”

Blaise nodded, clapping him on the back. "Yeah, don't be a stranger."

Draco gave him another nod, then hurried after Hermione, leaving Blaise and Daphne to wonder just how that future might play out.
Hermione didn't say anything when they returned to her flat, choosing instead to curl up on the couch and read for the afternoon, and Draco didn't bring it up. It wasn't until he started making dinner that she sat down at the breakfast bar and began to talk.

"The night I left," she started to explain. "I don't really remember… but I thought…" She shook her head, trying and failing to put her thoughts together.

Draco prompted her kindly, though he kept his attention on the vegetables he was cutting up. "You had a panic attack in the morning, you remember that?"

Hermione nodded as the memory bubbled to the surface. "He warded the door," she recalled. "He wanted to give me a lecture without Blaise and I sniping at each other, so he warded the door shut, but then I couldn't leave. I thought he was coming after me and I couldn't… I couldn't get out."

She stumbled over the words, repeating them more than once as she tried to keep her emotions in check despite the vivid replay going on in her head. Abandoning his vegetables, Draco came to lean on the bar beside her, rubbing her back soothingly.

"I don't… The potion, it's awful." She winced, recalling the feeling of the needle piercing her arm, the thick potion forcing itself into her veins. "It hurts. It makes my head so heavy, and I dream… they say you don't, but I do, and they're always so much worse. I don't… I can't do it again."

Draco nodded along, but it wasn't until she turned to face him that he saw how truly scared she was. The look in her eyes was the same one he'd seen during her worst hallucinations and panic attacks, and it occurred to him that some of those might well have been fueled by memories of dreams she'd had while under the Draught of Living Death.

"I won't let him do it again," she insisted, pleading with him. "Draco, please, you can't. You can't let them do it again. That's why I was so upset earlier, why I… I can't do that again."

"Hermione, look at me," Draco spoke with deep authority, his tone demanding her attention. When she complied, he took her face in his hands carefully and met her eyes. "I will never let anyone put you under the Draught again. I promise. I'll make an unbreakable vow to it if you like, we can get a witness here in five minutes."

Hermione studied his face in disbelief— he was completely serious.

"You never have to be afraid of that ever again," he insisted. "No matter what, no matter the circumstance, I will never let anyone put you under the Draught again. Okay?"

She nodded, unable to find the words to correctly portray how much his promise meant to her and how thankful she was to have him. Instead, she wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him into a crushing hug, burying her face in his neck, knowing that he would understand what she couldn't say.

"Thank you." She pulled away finally, her eyes slightly foggy, and gave him a smile. "And your word is more than enough."

"Okay," Draco smiled. "Want to help me with dinner?"

"I'm a terrible cook," Hermione admitted, wrinkling her nose. "You probably don't want my help."
"How can you be a terrible cook?" he scoffed. "It's just potions."

"Trust me, I've heard the argument before," she shrugged. "I don't know what it is, I've just never been able to get the hang of it. You can ask the boys if you don't believe me, they'd happily tell you."

For a moment, she laughed, not having realized what she said, but as the words processed she fell silent, a sad look in her eye.

"Well, I don't think they know what they're talking about," Draco shook his head. "Come on, I'll show you how it's done."

Without giving her a chance to refuse, he pulled her off her stool and around to the kitchen, stationing her at the chopping board and ordering her to cut an onion into ¼ inch pieces. Hermione did as she was told, even summoning a ruler to make sure she was exact, but Draco could see that she was thinking about her friends. When she finished with the onion, he gave her three carrots to peel and chop to the same size.

"Do you want to talk about it?" He asked as she worked, his back to her as he cooked up some bacon.

"Talk about what?"

"Whatever soliloquy you've got playing in your head," he drawled matter-of-factly. "You might feel better saying it out loud."

"I doubt that," she muttered.

"Humour me," Draco pushed a little, looking at her over his shoulder. "Their opinion of your cooking, I'm assuming they formed it while you were in hiding?"

For a second, she stopped peeling, her hand hovering less than an inch from the carrot, seemingly frozen in time. She recovered quickly, though, and Draco took that as a good sign.

"Will you tell me about it?" he asked hesitantly.

The sound of peeling stopped again, and he heard her start cutting the carrots into sections, then slices. He was just about to apologize for asking when she spoke.

"It wasn't so bad at first," she said quietly. "We were at Grimmauld Place, planning. It was comfortable, familiar, but then we broke into the Ministry and in the escape the Fidelius charm was broken, so we had to run." She paused for a minute, the only sounds in the room the chopping of the knife and the sizzling of bacon. When she spoke again, her voice was a little firmer.

"I'd been prepared to leave for weeks, we'd known that was how things would end up, but when it happened it was a blur. If I hadn't been able to shake him, or if I'd taken even a second longer to disapparate, we would have been dead. Then when we landed Ron had been splinched badly, there was so much blood..." she shook her head, trying to push away the sound of Ron's screams, the image of the blood-soaked forest floor. "I finally managed to stop the bleeding and get the wards up, but those first few minutes were some of the scariest of my entire life."

She finished cutting up the carrots and put them in a bowl, which she handed to Draco, then took the celery he handed her and returned to the cutting board. Once again, the only sounds in the flat came from the knife on the cutting board and the vegetables simmering in a pot, until Hermione decided to continue sharing.
"We were taking turns wearing the horcrux," she spoke quietly. "Harry was terrified of losing it, and he was the only one wearing it at first, but I could tell that it was affecting him. He was so angry all the time, and frustrated, it didn't help that we didn't have nearly enough food or any idea where we were going. One night he and Ron almost came to blows and I insisted that we share the necklace from then on, wear it in shifts."

She finished with the celery and carried the cutting board over to Draco, who dumped the contents into a large soup pot and instructed her to stir.

"How long did you have to wear it?" he asked after a minute, glancing over at her.

"I don't really know," Hermione shrugged. "It was so hard keeping track of the dates, but it was months. Then when Ron left—" She stopped, biting her tongue as she thought about that night. It still haunted her dreams, the way he'd looked at her when she'd said she was staying.

Draco placed his hand on the small of her back tentatively and she jumped slightly, but then stilled, relaxing slightly under his touch.

"He left, and it was just Harry and I," she muttered. "I tried to wear it more than he did, he needed to keep a clear head, but he's stubborn."

"Really?" Draco gave her a shocked look. "I would never have guessed!"

Hermione actually smiled at this, chuckling lightly, but her face quickly became serious again, a far away look in her eyes. "I miss it sometimes," she admitted. "That time we spent living in the tent. I know it's an absolutely ridiculous thing to miss, it was horrible and dangerous and terrifying, and we just wanted to throw our hands up in defeat all the time, but…"

She sighed heavily, closing her eyes for a moment and allowing a sad smile to cross her lips.

"But we had each other," she reasoned. "We knew that no matter what happened we would be in it together, and something about knowing that made everything else not so bad. I miss that."

"You still have it," Draco said softly. "He'd be here in a second if you'd let him."

Hermione only nodded sadly, biting her lip to keep the tears in her eyes from falling.

They were silent the rest of the evening, except for Draco's occasional instructions in regard to dinner—vegetable and bacon soup with crusty French bread. When they sat down to eat, Hermione barely finished half a bowl before excusing herself to go to sleep.

When Draco laid down on the couch to sleep later that night, he heard her get up and open the window in her bedroom. A few moments later, he heard the telltale click of a lighter. She was on her fourth when he got up.

In her bedroom he found her sitting in the window, straddling the ledge with one leg inside and one out, leaning back against the frame. She wore only her plaid shirt, despite the chilly night air, and was looking out at the sky, void of stars thanks to all the light coming from London.

"I thought you were sleeping," he mused, leaning casually against her door frame, ankles crossed.

Hermione shrugged, not bothering to look at him. She finished off the last drag on her cigarette and tossed it down to the street four stories below, then reached for another. As she lit it and took a drag, Draco stepped further into the room, perching against the dresser near the window instead.
"I failed him." She mumbled, still facing away from him, but Draco could tell from her profile that she was crying.

"Failed who?" he asked softly.

"Harry. I failed him in ways you can't even imagine," she admitted, her voice completely void of emotion.

"You didn't fail him," Draco shook his head. "You could never fail him."

"Harry's greatest fear in the entire world is losing the people he loves," Hermione shook her head. "It's what keeps him up at night, it's what he has nightmares about. Nearly every person he's ever loved has been taken from him, and the ones that he has left, he's fiercely protective of because he's so afraid that they'll be taken too."

Something in the back of Draco's mind began to tingle, an inkling as to where she was going with this train of thought, and he remained ghostly quiet.

"I know that. I've always known that," she muttered. "And when it came down to it, I let him down. I failed him. I fail him every fucking day."

"You haven't failed him," Draco repeated quietly, but Hermione shook her head.

When she finally looked at him, her eyes were bloodshot and full of remorse, her face absolutely haunted.

"I tried to kill myself," she admitted, her voice almost carried away by the wind it was so quiet. "I tried to kill myself, even though I knew that it would kill Harry. I was selfish and heartless, and I failed him, and I just can't seem to stop. Every single day, I fail him. I fail to be the girl he wishes I was, or thinks I am. I fail him over and over and over again."

Draco stood and crossed the small space between them. "Hermione look at me. You have not failed him."

"I drank a bottle of firewhiskey and some muggle pills and tried to drown myself," she continued speaking as though he wasn't even there. "I laid in the bath and felt my head slipping, and I thought that it would all be for the best. I wanted it. And then he found me, and I saw the look in his eyes. I'd never seen him look like that, it was like..."

She shook her head, unable to find anything to compare.

"I see it every time I black out. That look he had when I came to, it's always the last thing I see," she told him. "Of all the things I've done, all the people I've hurt, maimed and killed, knowing that I failed Harry is the thing that hurts the most."

"Hermione look at me." Draco ordered, reaching out to hold her shoulders as he spoke, determined to make her listen. "You did not fail Potter. You didn't. Nothing you could ever do would make him think that you failed him. That man loves you more than anything in the world, and if he knew that you thought this, he would move mountains to prove you wrong."

"Don't try to make me feel better," Hermione sneered.

"I'm not," he cut her off. "I'm telling you the truth. I have never seen someone care about another person as much as Harry Potter cares about you. The thought that you could ever fail him is laughable."
"You don't get it," Hermione snapped, pushing him away. "All the people he loves were taken from him, one by one, over and over, but they were taken for a good reason. They laid down their lives to protect him, to fight with him, to make the world a better place. I was all he had left, and I chose to leave. I made the decision. I left him!"

"You didn't!" Draco snapped. "You're right here!"

She almost laughed at the thought, crossing her arms over her chest and turning to look out over the city once again. "I left him the moment I slipped under the water in that tub, and I've just kept doing it over and over again since."

When the sun came up the next morning, Hermione was still sitting in the window, an empty pack of smokes on the floor and a lighter in her hand. Occasionally she would flick the lighter open and let it play against her fingers, pushing herself to touch the flame for longer and longer.

On the street below, people began their days, heading off to work or out for a jog, pushing prams and walking dogs, going about their lives. She couldn't help the feeling of jealousy that bubbled as she watched them. They were all so normal. Just regular, everyday people, who went about their business without fuss or drama. They left their houses at the same time every morning to go to the same job, where they ate the same lunch and thought about the same things.

They weren't fighting a war that had ended three years earlier. They didn't have the weight of 152 lives on their shoulders or carry the guilt of leading those people into a slaughter.

They were just normal, everyday people with normal, everyday lives.

"I made coffee." Draco disrupted her thoughts, stepping into the room with two mugs in his hands. "I figured you'd prefer it over tea since you were up most of the night. Unless you want to get some sleep."

"Coffee is fine," Hermione took the mug. "Thanks."

She blew away some of the steam and took a drink, burning her tongue. Not caring, she took another.

"Are we going to talk about this?" Draco asked, frowning at her.

"Nothing to talk about," she muttered. "I think I'm going to go to the shop today."

"You need to sleep," he pointed out.

"I'm fine."

Not wanting to argue with him, she finally climbed out of the window and padded towards the bathroom, grabbing some clean clothes on her way.

Draco watched her go, increasingly concerned. This was not normal behaviour, and her deep-seated idea of having failed Potter wasn't doing her any favours.

Even after he'd stopped trying to talk to her, Draco had sat up most of the night watching to make sure she didn't fall out of the window, terrified that her sudden admission of failure was going to push her over the edge.

When he heard the shower turn on, he stepped out to the kitchen and found a Pepper-up potion, then
sat down and penned a quick letter to Potter.

If he hadn't known any better, Draco would have thought she was high watching her work that morning. She jumped from cauldron to cauldron, journal to journal, cabinet to cabinet, unable to focus on one thing for more than a minute or two at a time. He'd been with her all morning, though and knew that the energy was simply from a mixture of high caffeine doses and sleep deprivation. He expected her to crash at any moment.

When the knock came at the door, he rushed to answer it before she had the chance, ignoring the look of sheer unadulterated fury that she shot him. This was for her own good.

"Just talk to him," Draco pleaded with her as he let Harry in. "You need to, you know you do."

"Fuck you, Draco!" Hermione snarled dangerously, a look of betrayal passing through her eyes.

"Hermione please," Harry spoke up, eyes shining with hope. "Just a few minutes. Then, if you want, I'll go."

Hermione glared between the two men, arms crossed over her chest and jaw clenched in frustration, but realizing that they weren't going to give in just because she was ready to kill them, she nodded.

"Fine," she snapped, stomping over to her desk and sitting down. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Whatever you want," Harry shrugged, following her across the room. "How have your potions been coming?"

"They're fine."

"That's good," he nodded slowly. "Teddy got his first broom. I've been teaching him how to use it when he's over. He was pretty hesitant to begin with, the first few times he tried it he wouldn't let go of my shirt, but he's gotten the hang of it now. He likes to ride it around the kitchen while Ginny's cooking, he's always getting tangled in between her legs."

He chuckled fondly, but Hermione remained stoic, her hands curled into fists.

"How have you been?" Harry asked, his face morphing to a look of concern. "You were gone for awhile."

"I'm fine." She shrugged again, but this time he almost thought her voice caught on the words. It seemed too much to hope for, but he was almost certain…

"I was really worried about you," he pressed on. "When you left, I felt awful about it. I'm really sorry, I shouldn't have let him attack you like that."

"It's not your fault," Hermione shook her head quickly. "Don't worry about it."

"I do worry about it, though." Harry insisted. "I worry about you, Hermione."

She tried once again to tell him that she was fine, but he spoke over her.

"You're not fine!" he cried desperately, all patience gone. "You're so far from fine, and watching you go through this alone, it kills me. I know that you think you're doing me some sort of favour keeping your distance, but you're not. Just because you push me away, that doesn't mean I'm going anywhere, and it doesn't mean that eventually I'll stop caring, because I won't. I could never do that, Hermione. You're my best friend, my sister, and if you think that anything is ever going to change
"What the hell was that?!" Draco demanded, following Harry down the corridor, ready to punch the other man in the jaw. When he turned around and faced Draco with a smile, though, he paused.

"That is going to work," he said certainly.

Draco gaped at him, completely lost. "What do you mean it's going to work? You just yelled at her and called her crazy!"

"Yep," Harry nodded happily. "And did you see the look on her face?"

"Yeah, I did," Draco assured him. "You crushed her."

"No, I got through to her," he corrected. "I got her mind working, and now she's going to spin what I said in circles for hours, and then she's going to cry."

"None of those things are good!" Draco fumed. "And she's not going to cry, she's going to go looking for something to get high with."

"Maybe," Harry conceded. "But I think you and I both know that you're going to talk her out of it, and then she's going to melt down."

"Again, not a good thing!"

"Not in the moment, but afterwards?" Harry smiled again, the smallest hint of relief in his eyes. "Afterwards, she's going to be better."

"Or she'll be ten times worse," Draco snapped in opposition. "Fuck, Potter, you didn't hear her last night!"

"No, I didn't, because she doesn't talk to me, she talks to you," Harry reminded him. "And the fact that she does, means that she's getting better. You need to trust me on this, Malfoy."

"She thinks she failed you," Draco hissed, unable to keep the information to himself. "She thinks that you think she's a failure, and you just fucking confirmed it!"

"I didn't," Harry shook his head. "I know what she thinks, you don't think I've heard the drunken apologies? I know exactly what she thinks she's done, and what I just told her is that her staying away makes me think she's failed me even more."

"WHAT PART OF THAT SEEMS LIKE IT'S GOING TO HELP HER?!" Draco roared, all patience for Potter's little plan lost.

"She's going to come back," Harry said calmly, his voice completely sure.

"You better hope you're right," Draco fumed. "Because if you're not, I don't know if either of us will be able to get to her in time."

"I am," Harry promised. "Trust me, I am."

She was rummaging through her desk drawers when Draco walked back into the lab, completely frantic. He took a moment to compose himself, forcing his muscles to relax, and crossed the room.
"Why the fuck did you bring him here?!" Hermione demanded, her voice constricted by tears. "Why the fuck would you do that?!"

"Because you needed to hear him," he explained.

"He hates me!" she screamed, looking at him with pure hatred.

"That's not what he said." Draco kept his cool, meeting her glare. "He loves you. I don't know how he could have made that clearer."

"He said I'm killing him!" Hermione scoffed, turning back to her desk and slamming closed another empty drawer. "FUCK!"

"Hermione, stop." Draco reached out to her, but she shoved him away to rummage through another drawer. "Stop," he repeated, this time grabbing her wrists tightly.

"Let me go!" She struggled against him, but Draco barely even noticed as he turned her chair to face him and crouched in front of her, holding her hands.

"Listen to me," he ordered softly. "He said that having to watch you go through this alone is killing him. All he wants is to help you, to be in your life. He works so hard to protect you. Even when you don't let him in, he spends every day trying to take care of you."

"I'm just going to let him down," Hermione pleaded, still trying to pull away from him. "All I ever do is let people down."

"That's not true," Draco shook his head. "You have never once let me down, and you have never let Potter down."

"All I do is let him down!" she screamed. "Every single thing I've done since winning the war has let him down!"

"The only person you're letting down, Hermione, is you," Draco said firmly. "You think that you're a failure, but you're not. You have achieved so much, and you don't even realize it. You only ever focus on the rest of it, and that's just not the whole picture. The fact that you're sitting here right now means that you're not a failure. You are the strongest person I have ever met, and there is nothing that could make me believe otherwise, and there's nothing that could make Potter believe otherwise."

He let her absorb what he was saying, watching the guilt in her eyes.

"All he wants is for you to let him in," he repeated after a minute. "Just think about it, okay?"

Hermione only stared at him for a while, silent tears still pouring down her cheeks, and Draco wondered if she'd even heard him, but then she nodded almost imperceptibly.

"You're not a failure," he repeated, pulling her into a hug. "You are absolutely not a failure."
"Harry, I just don't see how this is going to help." Hermione complained as her best friend pulled her out of her chair and over to an empty space in the tent.

"It's fun, that's how," he rolled his eyes. "Come on, humour me."

"You're being ridiculous!" She continued to complain as he took her hand and wrapped an arm around her waist.

"That's the point." Harry grinned and began moving to the music playing on the wireless, an old muggle song that she vaguely recognized.

With all the grace of a concussed elephant, he danced her around the tent, occasionally spinning her out and pulling her back against him. The third time he did it, she laughed, and wrapped her arm tightly around his neck.

"See?" He beamed at her. "It's fun."

"You're mad," Hermione laughed fondly, resting her head on his shoulder.

"Yeah, but you like me anyways," he reminded her.

Hermione woke to find Draco laying in bed beside her reading. The minute she stirred though, he put it away and rolled onto his side to look at her.

"Hey," he smiled softly.

"Hi."

"Bad dream?" he frowned slightly, taking in her tense form.

"No," Hermione shook her head, a lump forming in her throat. "No, not at all."

Without giving it much thought, she rolled over and pushed Draco onto his back, so she could lay down on his chest. When his arms wrapped around her, she burrowed even closer to him, putting one of her legs over his.

"We used to dance," she said quietly. "While we were in hiding, he would put the wireless on and make me dance with him."

Draco remained silent for a moment, trying to gauge what the right response would be, before asking quietly, "was he any good?"

Hermione laughed, and he felt a little spark of hope fill his chest.

"No," she shook her head. "He was awful, we both were, but it made us forget. Just for a few minutes, it made me forget that we were fighting a war and that Ron had left us and that we had absolutely no idea what we were doing. Just for a minute, everything was okay."
As she spoke, Draco ran his fingers up and down her back, his nails softly raking over her spine through her t-shirt, and Hermione let out an almost content sigh.

"That's how it feels with you sometimes," she admitted sheepishly. "Sometimes I feel like I'm not falling apart or desperate for something. You make everything not hurt so much then."

Draco smiled proudly at the compliment and lifted his head to kiss her temple.

"When we were back at Hogwarts, that's how I felt with you," he shared, not at all shy to admit it. "When we started working together on things, even when we just sat together in the library, for a while I could forget that the rest of the student body hated me and that my life was basically in ruins. You reminded me what it felt like to be a person."

As he spoke, Hermione listened to the way his words echoed through his chest, smiling when his heartbeat sped up ever so slightly. "Thank you," she leaned up and kissed him.

It wasn't like the last time, when she'd been trying to forget, trying to get him to take her. This kiss was soft and chaste, just a simple peck on the cheek, but it meant more to him than any other kiss he'd ever had, because it had just been her. She wasn't high or desperate for a hit, she wasn't trying to sleep with him just because he was there, and she needed it, she was kissing him because she wanted to, because this moment meant something to her, and when she settled against his chest again, Draco beamed.

Hermione found that she was calmed by the sound of his heart, and before she knew it she was asleep again. Instead of nightmares, though, she dreamed of Harry- and for once the memories were happy.

When Draco woke up, the bed was empty, and he could hear Hermione puttering in the kitchen. When he stepped out of the bedroom, he found her making eggs and bacon, a cup of tea in her hands, and an absent-minded smile on her lips as she hummed to herself.

She was wearing an emerald green jumper that was at least three sizes too big, falling to halfway down her thighs, with the sleeves bunched up at her elbows. When she turned around, he saw that there was a large 'H' emblazoned on the front.

"Morning," Hermione smiled, catching sight of him.

"Morning," he smiled back. "You seem cheery."

"I am," she practically beamed at him. "I slept last night. Slept the whole night without a single nightmare."

"That's great!" Draco congratulated her, making himself a coffee.

Hermione nodded eagerly. "Yeah, it really is. I can't remember the last time I slept well without taking something first."

She turned off the burners on the stove and began splitting the eggs and bacon across two plates, then set them on the breakfast bar and took her seat.
"It's safe," she promised as he sat beside her. "Eggs are the one thing I can do."

"You did rather well with that soup," he pointed out.

"I had pretty intense supervision," Hermione shook her head. "Besides, all I did was stir."

"Hey, from the way you were describing your abilities, I wasn't sure if it was safe letting you do that," he joked. "For all I knew, the pot would revolt and burn it all."

"Well rest assured, I can scramble an egg with the best," Hermione laughed. "I even picked out the shells."

Draco chuckled and gave her a small round of applause, earning another laugh, before digging in. To her credit, she did make an excellent egg, and there was not a single shell.

As they ate, he could feel her watching him, seemingly trying to decide something. He left her be though, focussing on his food and coffee, only speaking to compliment her efforts.

"I thought about what you said yesterday." She finally said, resting her elbow on the counter and leaning her head on her hand to look at him. "About Harry."

"And?"

"And I know you're right." She let the words hang between them and Draco turned to look at her, watching as her hands dropped to her lap and she began to fidget.

"But?" he prompted.

"I'm scared." Her cheery demeanor turned nervous, her lip caught between her teeth and her eyebrows knit together, creating a wrinkle in her brow.

Draco reached out and smoothed the crease with his thumb, cupping her cheek gently. "What are you scared of?"

"Letting him down," she mumbled, her eyes downcast. "I really hurt him, Draco."

"He doesn't care," he assured her. "He just wants to be your friend again."

"What if I can't be his?" she asked fearfully. "I don't want to be a burden to him- to anybody."

"You are not a burden," Draco told her firmly. "You could never be a burden, Granger. You're a gift."

"Don't be stupid, Malfoy," she rolled her eyes at him.

"I'm being completely serious," he said. "Hermione, you're brilliant and funny and beautiful, and anyone would be lucky to have you in their life. You are not a burden."

Hermione's eyes remained on the floor, refusing to look at him as he spoke despite his attempts to make her. Her hands twisted the sleeves of her sweater, and he reached out to still them.

"All Potter's asking is that you give him an open door, he'll take it from there. Hell, he'd probably settle for a window being left unlocked."

Hermione nodded slowly, her eyes focussed on his hand covering hers. When he squeezed, she squeezed back, and Draco smiled warmly.
"Did you steal that jumper from him?" he asked.

Hermione's lips twitched upward in a momentary smile, and she finally lifted her eyes.

"The packages were mixed up," she recalled fondly. "I got Harry's and he got mine. He insisted that they were exactly right, though, and refused to swap back. He spent the day walking around in my purple sweater that just barely covered his stomach. The sleeves were practically at his elbows."

A warm smile spread across her face as she remembered the day, it had been the first time in quite a while that she'd had a laugh. That was before things had gotten so bad, before the drinking and the drugs had truly started, when her parents had still been missing.

Watching Harry strut around in the too small sweater, she hadn't known that it would also be the last time she truly laughed for quite a while.

She hadn't realized that she'd been saying all this out loud until Draco responded.

"What happened when you went to Australia?"

Hermione's entire body tensed, her head began to pound, and her jaw clenched painfully. She didn't talk about Australia, not ever. Not even when things had been good. She knew that she told him some of it when she was angry, but that had been a mistake.

She didn't talk about Australia.

"The longer you keep it locked up, the more you don't talk about it and just let it stir, the more painful it's going to be," Draco reasoned softly. "Not talking about what happened is only hurting you."

Hermione didn't answer, too busy trying to push the memories back into the little box she kept them locked in. There was no possible way that the pain of it could get any worse. Talking about it would just make it more noticeable.

"I know you don't think it can get worse, but it can," he read her mind. "Not talking about it is tearing you apart. It just keeps eating at you, and eventually you're not going to be able to ignore it anymore, and it's going to consume you. You can't deal with these kinds of things alone. Things like this, they feed on your mind. They take everything you have and leave you nothing but a shell."

"Then it's fine," she joked darkly. "There's nothing left for it to take."

"There is," Draco insisted. "Hermione, you know there is."

He looked at her imploringly, silently begging her to believe him. He remembered how hard it had been keeping his enslavement to Voldemort a secret, remembered the way it had slowly sucked the life from him, removing him from his friends and family and making him feel like he'd been buried alive. He'd barely made it out.

Now, spending time with Hermione, he knew that she was circling the drain, as it were. She'd been fighting this for so long, and she didn't have much left.

"I swear to you," he pleaded. "Keeping this locked up, it's going to kill you."

Hermione tugged the sleeves of her sweater and wrapped them around her hands tightly in an attempt to make the tingling effects of her anxiety and panic disappear. He was right, of course, she knew he was, but that didn't change the fact that talking about it was just as painful as living with it
Tears gathered in her eyes and Hermione felt her heart clench painfully in her chest. She wished that she could just curl up and forget it all, just wake up without a single idea of who she was or what she'd been through, but she knew that wasn't going to happen.

So, here she was, between that metaphorical rock and hard place. She could shut down and let the wounds she'd been nursing continue to fester until the infection well and truly killed her, or she could take the hand that Draco was offering and let him help.

She chanced a glance at his face and was struck by the emotion that it contained- the kindness and care that he had- and just maybe, love. *You can't deal with these things alone.* His words echoed in her mind, a serious reminder that she hadn't been dealing with things at all, she'd been medicating them into silence and praying that they would go away.

*Just let them in,* the old Hermione whispered. *It'll be okay. Just let them in.*

Hermione got up from her stool and walked across the room, her arms wrapped tightly around herself as she silently debated.

*What if it doesn't work?*

*What if it does?* old Hermione countered. *Let him try.*

*What if I can't?*

*He'll help you,* she promised. *You know he will.*

As she paced back and forth in front of the sofa, Draco watched patiently. She would get there, he just needed to let her think.

When she sat down and crossed her legs beneath her, pulling a pillow into her lap, he slowly got up from his own seat and followed, perching on the other end of the sofa.

"They were living in Melbourne," she began shakily, staring at the pillow in her lap. "Over a flower shop that they'd opened."

She stopped, and Draco waited patiently, knowing that she needed to take this at her own pace. When she looked up at him, there was a wistful look in her eyes and a sad smile on her lips.

"I almost didn't do it, you know," she told him. "I almost didn't reverse it. They seemed happy, happier than I remembered them ever being. I watched them for over a week debating it…"

She shook her head in regret. If only she'd left them be...

"When I walked into the shop my mum was behind the counter, and I swear I stopped breathing for a minute," she carried on after a moment. "I'd been watching them from afar, but being in the same room as her, hearing her voice… it was indescribable. I was so scared that they were going to be angry, but also desperate to run to her and have her hug me. She was kind to me then, said I was sweet to say she reminded me of someone…"
Another long pause, and her hands began to fidget with the pillow again, she pulled her knees up to her chest and squished it in between, burying her face in the fabric.

Though Draco desperately wanted to comfort her, to pull her into his arms and tell her that it was okay, that she didn't have to go on, he knew he couldn't. She needed to do this.

"Reversing the spell was surprisingly easy. I'd already discussed it with the Australian ministry's Obliviators, so I knew what to do. Everything worked as it was supposed to," she sighed heavily, her knees falling open once more. "They were annoyed at first, confused and disoriented, but I had expected that. I sat them down and I told them everything- from the first time I got into trouble with Harry and Ron, to the week before when the Ministry had contacted me. It wasn't until I finally finished that I noticed how tense things had become."

She took a shuddering breath, her hands beginning to shake, and Draco finally inched closer, preparing to offer his strength.

"I'd never seen my dad so angry," she whimpered. "He was absolutely fuming, but it was more than that. When I looked at him, the look on his face, he was disgusted with me. That look… it was the same look your father gave me when Bellatrix finished torturing me, like I was the vilest thing he'd ever set eyes on."

Tears fell freely from her eyes as she spoke, and Draco reached out to take her hand, holding it tightly.

"He was repulsed by me," she admitted brokenly. "He said… he said he'd always know I would come to no good, that I was using my demonic powers to play God when I had no right. I tried to explain, to tell them that it was for their own safety-"

A sob broke free from her throat and she covered her free hand with her face. In an instant, Draco closed the distance between them, wrapping the hand that wasn't holding hers around her shoulders.

"They said the only thing they needed protection from was me," Hermione pressed on, unable to stop herself now that she'd started. "They accused me of playing with their heads all my life, and then my dad got up and dialled the police, just as he'd wanted when they first found out I was a witch. I- I don't know what happened then, not really. The next thing I remember is the Ministry officials calling at my hotel room. I remember the things they said to me, though…"

She broke down completely, collapsing into Draco's side and clinging to him as she sobbed, the dam she had worked so hard to build up finally broken, releasing a torrent of pain and despair.

Draco held her all the while, his hand coming up to cup the back of her head, tangling in her hair, his lips pressing soothing kisses to her temple and crown as she sobbed.

"I'm sorry," he muttered sadly. "I'm so sorry."

He repeated the apology over and over, unable to find any words to possibly bring her comfort. He knew what it meant to have a parent despise you, knew what kind of pain it left a person with, and he wasn't even close with his father. Hermione had spent her entire life believing that her parents cared for her, that they loved her, only to have the rug ripped out from under her when she was at her most vulnerable.

"I don't remember the details." She pressed on, finally able to control her sobs*. "I know that the Ministry got involved, that they were worried about the Statute of Secrecy. They brought them in to be interviewed, and I was there, but I don't remember it, not really. I just know that when it was all
over, the obliviation was reversed and they went back to their lives as Monica and Wendell Wilkins, under strict Ministry watch to ensure that they never remembered the truth. Never remembered me."

With that, she slumped against him in exhaustion, her emotions churning dangerously through her in a maelstrom of thoughts and memories that she couldn't quite make out, all of them vying for her attention, scrambling together loudly.

"They hated me." She muttered against his chest, her voice completely void of emotion despite her inner battle. "They thought I was from the devil."

Draco didn't know what he could possibly say to that. He wanted to tell her that it wasn't true, of course her parents had loved her, but he knew that he couldn't. All he could do was hold her.

When she turned around and climbed into his lap, Draco wasn't surprised. A small part of him had been expecting this, she'd done it before after all. In lieu of drugs, sex was her way of forgetting, and she desperately wanted to forget.

He didn't push her away- not wanting her to pull back into herself- instead he simply held her and kissed her slowly. Whenever she tried to push faster, he just slowed her back down, his lips soft and welcoming, but only to a point. When she reached for his belt he carefully moved her hands, placing them on his shoulders and cupping her face in his hands. When she pulled back in annoyance, becoming more insistent, he stilled her.

"No," he spoke softly, his voice warm and comforting despite the denial.

She snapped at him in exasperation, but Draco remained firm, taking her face in his hands and using his thumbs to wipe away the remaining tears on her face.

"Please," she whimpered, her face crumbling. "Please, I just want it to stop!"

"Sex isn't going to do that," Draco shook his head. "I know you think it will, but it won't. Sex won't fix you."

She became angry again, pushing at his chest and trying to get off his lap, but Draco held on and pulled her in, kissing her slowly again.

"Just slow down," his lips brushed against her ear. "You're okay, just slow down."

He kissed her cheeks, her neck, her shoulders, his hands slowly tracing her spine and ribs, and she eventually relaxed into him, her resolve gone, and her soul spent.

"I'm sorry," she muttered quietly.

Draco pressed a kiss to the very corner of her mouth, before resting his forehead against hers and meeting her eyes, marveling at the deep sadness he found in them, tinged with the smallest hint of adoration. "It's okay," he promised.

Her eyes closed, and Draco tucked her head into his shoulder, telling her to rest, promising that he wasn't going anywhere.
She can hear the pounding knocks, the voices calling her name, but getting up to open the door is just not something she can do. She doesn't think her muscles will tense enough to allow her to sit up, let alone stand. What's the point anyways?

"Miss Granger!" the voice called out again, their fist still pummeling the door. "Miss Granger, if you don't open the door, we will open it ourselves."

Go right ahead.

When the hotel agent opens the door, two other people step into the room behind him, a man and a woman dressed in professional looking clothes that are just slightly mismatched, an immediate giveaway that they're from the Ministry.

The man dismisses the hotel agent with a quick nod, assuring him that they can take it from here. When Hermione doesn't immediately refute him, the agent nods and leaves them alone.

"Miss Granger?" It's the woman speaking now, her tone kind and soft compared to her partner's shouting. "Hermione, my name is Pamela, I'm an Auror. This is my partner, Walter."

She doesn't bother giving any indication that she's heard her. What does it matter?

"Hermione, I'm sorry, but we need you to come with us," Pamela tells her. "We understand that there was an incident with your parents' obliviation reversal, and that Muggle police were called."

Her eyes fill with tears once again, the sound of her father's angry shouts filling her head.

"I'm so sorry, sweetheart," Pamela rubs her back kindly. "I can't imagine what you must be going through."

"Pam, we need to move," Walter puts in testily. "The coppers are gonna be here any minute."

"Give her a second," Pamela snaps quietly at him. "Can't you see she's upset?"

She can't see his face, but from the grunt he offers in response, she assumes that he's agreed.

"Hermione, I'm sorry, but we need to get you to the Ministry," the witch turns back again. "I'm sorry. Come 'ere."

She wraps an arm around Hermione's shoulders and helps her to sit up, gently brushing away the hair that has stuck to her face. Her partner joins her then, and summons Hermione's luggage, magically packing it all away and handing her her wand to hold. A moment later, they disapparate, landing in a Ministry office that Hermione assumes belongs to one of them.

"Here you go, love," Pamela guides her to a chair and helps her sit. "How about Walter goes and gets you a brew?"

When Hermione doesn't answer, Pamela nods for her partner to go anyways, then pulls another chair up. She sits down and takes both Hermione's hands, trying to convey how sorry she is, but Hermione doesn't care. Pity isn't going to get her anywhere, and she's got more than enough without anyone else adding to it.

"Hermione, can you tell me what happened?" Pamela asks, leaning forward so that they're face to face.
She shakes her head. She's sure that she's lost the ability to speak. If she opens her mouth, it will only allow the screams she's been holding in to escape.

"Okay," Pamela nods. "That's alright. If you can't talk about it, though, would you be willing to let me see the memory?"

Hermione's eyes widen in fear and the other witch is quick to reassure her.

"I'm a very skilled Legilimens, it won't be painful, and I'll only look at the events of this afternoon," she promises. "Do you have any Occlumency training?"

Hermione shrugs noncommittally, she'd never quite gotten the hang of the art.

"Okay, if you'll just recall this afternoon, I can take a look easily. Would that be alright?"

Not having any better options, and simply thankful that the Auror was being so kind, Hermione nods.

"Just squeeze my hand when you're ready," Pamela instructs. "I promise to go slowly."

She nods and takes a few deep breaths, trying to calm herself enough to at least partially shield her mind and ensure that the intrusion truly isn't painful.

She has to give Pamela credit, when she squeezes her hand to signal she is ready, the witch is exceptionally gentle with her, slowly allowing Hermione's mind to acclimate to her presence. It's a stark contrast to the way her mind had been excavated by the British Ministry when they were extracting evidence for the Death Eater trials.

When she's finished viewing the scene, Pamela eases herself out of Hermione's head and offers her a sad smile.

At the same time, Walter returned with three large mugs of tea and a selection of milk and sugar. He offers a cup to Hermione and she reaches out with shaking hands to accept. When he offers her milk, she nods and holds the mug out to him, nodding when it's the right shade.

Sipping at the drink, she actually did feel a little better, the warmth of the tea spreading through her and making her feel slightly more human. She suspects that there might be a potion of some sort mixed in to revive her a little, but she doesn't mind.

"W-what happens now?" she asks quietly.

"Your parents have been brought in for an interview," Walter explains. "We have concerns regarding their secret keeping ability."

"They're being interrogated?"

"Not at all," Pamela jumps in quickly. "No, they think they're being interviewed by Muggle police. They're just going to be asked to tell us what happened."

"You're doing the interview?"

"I will be," Walter offers. "Pam will observe."

"I- I'd like to observe as well," she requests.

"I don't think-"
She can tell that Pamela is about to object, but she insists. "I need to know. Please."

She gives both officers a pleading look, begging them to understand, and Pamela sighs and nods in agreement.

"Thank you. Are they ready now?"

"If you think you're ready," Walter nods. "We have them filling out a report."

Hermione nods and sets her mug on a nearby filing cabinet before carefully getting to her feet. Pamela offers her a hand, but she waves her off.

She's Hermione Granger, she could do this on her own.

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She woke with a start, her head still cuddled into Draco's neck as she straddled him.

"You okay?"

Hermione sat up in confusion, looking around. "I fell asleep."

"Just for a couple minutes. What's wrong?" He frowned at the conflicted look on her face, something like confusion mixed with fear.

"I remember…" she frowned and got up from his lap, suddenly feeling restless.

"Remember what?" Draco prompted, watching her closely.

"I dreamt something," she shook her head, the memories already slipping away. "Fuck, I dreamt…"

She grasped desperately for the details. There had been a woman… a man and a woman…

"Fuck!" She turned and lashed out at the wall, slamming the heel of her hand into the drywall.

"Hey!" Draco jumped up immediately to stop her, pulling her away before she could hurt herself.

"Take a breath. You remember the dream?"

"I can't…" Hermione shook her head again, her jaw clenched in anger. Goddamn her stupid brain and its inability to hold it's shit together!

"Take a breath," Draco instructed again. "Calm down a bit."

Begrudgingly, she followed his instructions, breathing in through her nose and out through her mouth.

"Okay," he nodded. "Now, what do you remember? Not the whole thing, or the intricate details, just what you thought you had."

Hermione took another breath and closed her eyes, reaching out for the shadowy remains.

"It was in Australia, I think," she said slowly. "There was a woman, she was kind… and a man…" She frowned, unable to pull up any other details.
"Can I offer an idea?" Draco asked tentatively.

Hermione opened her eyes and saw that he looked uncertain, but she nodded. Anything would be better than this damn feeling of not knowing.

"Maybe your mind needs some help sifting through the haze," he reasoned. "A guide of sorts."

"What do you mean?" Hermione frowned, not quite following.

"Have you tried working with a Legilimens?"

Even as he asked, the memory burst forth- she'd done this before!

"Oh!" Hermione gasped, the haze clearing ever so slightly to reveal a woman with short blonde hair and slightly mismatched muggle business clothes. "Pamela, her name was Pamela," she breathed, a weight lifting off her chest. "Draco, her name was Pamela!"

She looked up at him and he couldn't help but smile, it had been far too long since there had been hope in her eyes. Even though her tone was excited, however, her face fell as the memory became clearer.

"What is it?" Draco asked.

"They came to my hotel," she said, her voice empty as she related the events playing out in her head. "They came to get me before the police, they'd responded to my parents' call..."

She reached for his hand and he led her back to the sofa, turning his body so he was facing her as she recalled the dream.

"I was right," she finally said. "The dreams, the ones I don't remember, they are memories. They must be. This is exactly what they always feel like, and they're always in that haze, I've never been able to muddle it out before, but it's the same feeling."

"That's good, though, isn't it?" Draco mused. "If you figured out this one, you might be able to remember others."

Hermione nodded slowly, chewing her lip. "But there's a reason they've been hidden, isn't there? The things I'm forgetting, they're not happy. What if remembering only makes things worse?"

"Do you really imagine that it could?" he asked. "Not knowing is causing you so much pain, maybe if the memories come back you'll be able to deal with things better, understand them."

He had a point. The not knowing wasn't doing her any good, it only served to make her angry with herself... but still, she'd forgotten for a reason.

"Maybe this is your mind's way of telling you that you're ready for this now," Draco reasoned. "Maybe its time to start healing."

Hermione nodded slowly, the argument sounding reasonable. Perhaps the memories had come back when that voice of Old Hermione had returned, a guiding light of sorts to the person that she had once been.

One thing was for sure, the only way she was going to find out was if she tried.

"I think... I think it's time for a trip to the Ministry," she said. "You're right, I need to know to be able to move forward, and if I can't outright remember, I can at least watch the replay."
In the time it took her to get dressed, Hermione's courage began to dwindle.

On the one hand, she wanted to get better, to not crave the release that drugs offered her from her own mind, to understand what had happened and to be able to move on with her life. For the first time in a very long time, she actually wanted a future.

On the other hand, however, she was terrified of what she was going to learn. She'd fought a war, been tortured and maimed, and she remembered it all. What could be so painful and awful that her mind felt the need to protect her from it more than her memories of the war?

"You ready?" Draco knocked on the door, startling her from her thoughts. When she didn't answer, he let himself in. "What's going on, Granger?" he smiled knowingly, coming to stand behind her where she stood in front of her vanity mirror.

"What if this is a bad idea?" she voiced her fear. "What if it just makes everything worse? I don't know if I can do this."

"You don't have to," he allowed. "But what if uncovering these missing memories is the thing that lets you move on? What if understanding them is the tipping point?"

"What if it's not?" she countered quietly.

"That chance is always going to exist," Draco reasoned. "The choice is yours either way, but I think you want answers."

Hermione nodded slowly, watching her reflection. It had been a long time since she'd willingly looked in a mirror. The woman who looked back at her usually made her ashamed, but now there was something different. Her reflection didn't talk back, she didn't sneer at her or look at her like she was less than dirt. For once, she was just a reflection.

"I want to move on," she said, still watching herself. "I want to be able to do the things that I used to, to live my life without needing a fix or a drink to make it palatable. I want..." She trailed off, her eyes shifting from her own reflection to Draco's. He was so sure, so hopeful and strong as he watched her. "I don't want to be scared. I'm tired of being scared of myself, of everyone else being scared of me, of what I'm going to do."

"I'm not scared of you," Draco assured her.

"No, you're scared for me," she countered.

"No." He shook his head, his reflection meeting her eyes. "I have faith in you. I know that you can do whatever you set your mind to. So, yes, for a while there I was scared, because you'd decided that you were going to die, and that terrified me."

"You think my decision's changed?" Hermione asked.

"Has it?"

Once again, she studied his reflection, reflecting on how safe she felt having him stand behind her. It reminded her of the way she'd felt with Harry and Ron, as though together they could take on the
whole world and survive- and they had.

Now though, she was taking on herself, and thus far she'd been losing the battle- until Draco came along. He'd suited up and waded into the trenches to find her, and now stood faithfully by her side, and she felt her strength returning.

"Yes," she turned to face him, meeting his eyes. "I was so scared of the future before, I still am, but now it's different."

"Different how?"

"I used to be scared that it would be like this forever, that I'd just live in a constant state of fear and sadness and guilt," Hermione explained. "Now... now, there are things that I'd like to have a future."

"What kind of things?" he asked, trying not to sound too hopeful.

"Things like you and me," she smiled shyly, and he smiled back. "And that scares me, because the last time I let myself hope for a future with someone..." She trailed off uncertainly.

"I'm not him," Draco reminded her, reaching out to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. "I'm nothing like him."

"I know that," Hermione assured him. "But it's still scary, thinking about something that I never really thought I'd get again."

Draco frowned at her, not quite understanding what she meant, and she ducked her head in embarrassment.

"I- I never really thought I would be happy again," she admitted. "But now, sometimes..." She shrugged, not sure how to finish the thought, but Draco understood.

"I'm scared too," he told her. "I got my head sorted out awhile ago, but I still have all those fears, Granger. I still have the nightmares and the sudden feeling that this is all a dream and I'm going to wake up in the Manor to find that Potter didn't kill the Dark Lord and I'm still enslaved to him. And as for being happy, I never in my wildest dreams thought that I would find happiness. And then I watched you do a line of cocaine off Blaise's dining room table."

Hermione let out a bark of laughter, some of the tension she'd held in her shoulders releasing as she leaned her head against Draco's chest, enjoying the way his own laugh rumbled through it.

"We're all a little broken, Hermione," he continued when she looked up again. "But broken things can be fixed. It's okay to be scared, it's normal, just don't give up hope."

Without thinking, Hermione stood on her toes and kissed him, one hand tangling in his hair as she pulled him down to her level.

"Thank you for having hope in me," she said when she pulled back.

"It is my absolute pleasure," he grinned at her. "So, are you ready now?"

She didn't need to think about it this time, nodding her head.

Yes, she was still scared, but she had a hand to hold, someone to give her a push when she needed, and for now that was enough.
Chapter 27

Hermione found herself in yet another crisis of faith as they stepped off the elevator in the Ministry. Yes, she wanted to do this, but she was terrified that Harry truly did hate her, despite his repeated promises otherwise.

Not letting her dwell on the thoughts for too long, Draco immediately draped his arm over her shoulders and shuttled her forward. When they got to the door with Harry's name on it, he didn't even pause before knocking sharply and throwing the door open.

"What do you want?" Harry frowned, barely looking up from the paperwork he'd been doing at the sound of the door opening.

At his rough tone, Hermione tried to retreat, muttering something about it being a bad time, but Draco overpowered her without effort and pushed her inside.

Harry finally looked up at her squeak of protest, and his eyes widened in surprise. "Hi!"

Hermione chewed her bottom lip anxiously and raised her hand in a small wave, her eyes cast downward. Behind her, Draco stepped into the room and closed the door again.

"What's going on?" Harry asked, getting up and cautiously rounding his desk.

Hermione started to speak, but stopped almost immediately, her arms crossed tightly over her chest, shoulders hunched tightly near her ears. Glancing back at Draco, she gave him a pleading look and he smiled warmly.

"Is everything okay?" Harry prompted, slightly worried. "Are you okay?"

"Yes," she nodded sharply, still not looking at him. "Yes, no, I'm fine."

"That's good," Harry's own anxiety quelled slightly. "It's good to see you, then."

Hermione nodded again, this time less sure of herself, and Harry glanced questioningly at Draco. When he received a nod of encouragement, he pulled a chair out from the desk and offered Hermione a seat, taking one himself. Nervously, she accepted, her leg jiggling anxiously.

The silence in the office was suffocating, but she just couldn't bring herself to break it. What if this had all been a horrible mistake? She couldn't help but wish she'd taken a few puffs of a joint before coming here, maybe it would have made her a little less tense. At that thought, she began to crave a regular smoke, wishing for something to hold in her hand if nothing else.

"Hermione, listen," Harry finally broke the silence. "I'm sorry that I yelled at you yesterday-"

"No," she shook her head to stop him, suddenly finding her voice. "No, don't be. Y-you were right. I..." she trailed off, trying to find the right words. There were so many things that she wanted to tell him, so many things that she should tell him, but that voice in her head still whispered at her to let him go.

"He doesn't need you, it spoke cruelly. You're just a deadweight he's hanging on to for the sake of appearances."

Before Hermione could dwell on this thought too much, though, another voice spoke up.
"That's bullshit," the old Hermione said sharply. You're his best friend and he's yours and that's that. Now woman up and say it, or so help me!

"I'm sorry," the words fell from her lips in a tidal wave. "I'm so sorry, Harry. For everything. Gods, I was awful to you, I was a wretch and you just took it and I will never be able to apologize for that enough. I put you through so much, and you should hate me, you should wish that I was dead. I don't even know-"

"Stop." Harry cut her off sharply, and she finally met his eyes, which shone with unshed tears. "Stop, you have nothing to apologize for either. I don't hate you, Hermione, not even remotely. And you can't even comprehend how utterly thankful I am that you're not dead. Please, please never say that, because it's not true. I am so happy that you are not dead."

A tear escaped to his cheek and Hermione launched herself at him, her arms wrapping around his neck and her face burying in his shoulder as she began to sob.

"I'm so sorry," she mumbled into his robes. "I'm so sorry."

Harry was quick to pull her into his lap, hugging her so tightly that he worried she might not be able to breathe, but unwilling to loosen his grip even a little bit, for fear of losing her again. He'd waited for this moment for so long, it almost seemed unreal. She was finally here, finally home, back in his arms where she belonged.

As the two friends embraced, Draco leaned against the door and watched them with a warm smile on his face. This was progress. The guilt of trying to distance herself from Harry had been affecting Hermione far more than she realized, and Draco could already tell that a small weight had been lifted from her shoulders. Even as she sobbed apologetically on the Auror's shoulder, the tension in her body seemed to ease. Yes, this was definitely a very good thing.

Eventually, the two friends were able to pull themselves together, Hermione taking her own seat again and Harry removing his glasses to clear them of the teary fog they'd gathered. She was still apologizing occasionally, but each time she did Harry silenced her, promising that everything was okay. "I'm just so glad to see you," he smiled at her. "The real you, I mean."

This brought a sarcastic laugh to Hermione's lips. "I don't know about that," she frowned. "I'm trying, though."

"That's how I know it's really you," Harry assured her, reaching out to take her hands.

"Ask him." Draco finally spoke up, startling the pair, who seemed to have forgotten that he was there as well.

"Ask me what?" Harry looked between Draco and Hermione, who was chewing her lip nervously again. "You can ask me anything, Hermione."
With this warm reassurance, and an encouraging nod from Draco, she began to explain.

"I'd like to view the memories of my parents… of the interview," she stammered. "From Australia."

Harry's brow furrowed in concern and he glanced over at Draco anxiously, but the blond man nodded for him to keep listening.

"I- there are things," Hermione continued to muddle through. "There are things I can't- I can't remember. Important things… and I think that if I can, maybe…” she trailed off, shaking her head uncertainly, but Harry got the gist.

"Okay," he agreed. "If you think it will help, I can reach out to the Australian Ministry and have them send the files."

"I- I think I'd like to go there," she said nervously. "I remembered some things earlier, an Auror, I think maybe talking to her might help."

"Pam?"

Hermione nodded, a surprised look on her face. "How do you know that?" She asked, not remembering ever having talked to Harry about Australia. She didn't talk about Australia, that had been the one hard and fast rule that she lived by- until today. But maybe she'd told him and forgotten that too.

"She was the one who…" Harry frowned, obviously trying to think of what to say. "She was the one who told you they had passed."

Well, that would explain it, Hermione mused. That was another day that she didn't really remember. By that time she'd already begun drinking to forget, so she'd probably been hungover, possibly even high. She vaguely remembered Harry coming to see her in her lab, telling her that she'd been summoned, but beyond that there wasn't much.

"I spoke with her after I took you home," Harry continued to explain. "She told me what had happened… the first time."

Hermione nodded stiffly.

"Can I ask…" he started, but then stopped nervously.

Hermione squeezed his hand, which was still holding hers tightly, urging him on.

"What do you remember from that day?" he asked. "The day you undid the charm."

Hermione closed her eyes and took a deep, shuddering breath, preparing to relate the story once again.

"You don't have to tell me-" Harry was quick to take her off the spot, but she shook her head.

"I do," she looked up at him, a look of nervous determination in her eyes. "I do. You deserve to know."

"Hermione, if you don't want to talk about it, it's really okay," he insisted.

"No," she shook her head again. "No, I need to. I need to talk about it, to let it out."

She glanced back at Draco, as if checking to see if she was right, and he smiled warmly, sending a
wave of reassurance over her. Taking another minute to steel herself, she repeated the day's events to Harry, just as she had with Draco. This time, however, a few more details revealed themselves, and a deep sense of pride filled her at the accomplishment.

"I don't remember the interview, though," she finished. "Not really."

"And you think watching it will help?" Harry confirmed.

This time, she seemed more sure of the answer when she nodded, so he agreed to send a letter to the Aurors requesting access.

"I'll let you know as soon as I hear back," he promised. "It should be within the next day or two."

"Thank you," Hermione smiled and got to her feet.

Harry copied the movement and pulled her into another strong hug, and her arms wrapped around his stomach just as tightly.

"Don't go away again," he pleaded into her hair quietly. "Take all the time you need, do whatever you have to, but don't just disappear again, okay?"

"I promise," she pulled away to meet his eyes. "I- I know I'm not exactly the same, but-"

"None of us are," he shook his head. "And there's nothing wrong with that. No matter what, you will always be Hermione to me, just Hermione, my best friend. That's all that matters."

She felt herself tearing up once again and hid her face in another hug. "Thank you," she spoke into his shoulder. "For everything, Harry."

He only held her tighter in answer, kissing her hair.

When she finally pulled away, telling him he should get back to work, Harry beamed at her. Realizing why, she smiled back.

"Come for dinner when you're ready," he told her. "Ginny would really like to see you, so would Teddy."

She nodded stiffly, her lip pulling between her teeth nervously, but Harry reached out to give her arm a squeeze.

"No timeframe," he assured her. "Just whenever you're ready. You can even bring your shadow if you like," he nodded to Draco. "I'm sure Gin would enjoy poking him with a stick."

This brought another smile to Hermione's lips, especially when Draco made a sound of protest.

"I'll talk to you tomorrow," Harry promised, ignoring the blond.

"Tomorrow," she smiled in agreement.

When they stepped out of the office and back into the hallway, she slumped against the wall and let out a deep breath.
"Are you okay?" Draco asked, putting a hand on her shoulder.

"Yeah," she gave him a tired smile. "Yeah, I am."

"Come on." He smiled back and pulled her into his side, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and leading her back to the lifts. "Why don't we go get some lunch- and maybe some groceries. Your icebox is disgustingly sparse."

"You know, you don't have to stay here if you don't want to," Hermione said as she and Draco ate dinner. "I mean, I know you've got your room at Blaise's and everything. I can be on my own."

"Do you not want me here?" Draco asked, setting down his cutlery carefully.

"No," she shook her head, eyes on her plate. "No, I like having you here. It's just, I don't want you to think that you have to stay if you don't want to. You have your own life."

"I'm not here because of some obligation, Granger," he assured her. "I'm here because I want to be."

"I just…" Hermione frowned seriously, trying to get her thoughts in order, already regretting having brought the subject up. "I don't want you to be here because of some idea that you have to be, that I can't take care of myself, because I can. I know I haven't exactly been doing it very well, but I can do it."

"I know that," Draco nodded. "I know exactly how capable you are, Granger, but that doesn't mean you have to do all this alone."

"I'm not-"

"You're trying to," he interrupted her quickly. "This is the thing about you, you think that you have to do everything alone, and that's just not true."

"I don't think I have to do things alone," she argued.

"You do," Draco insisted evenly. "You've always been the brains of whatever situation you were in, the person that made the tough calls because you looked at things logically. You and Potter might have relied on each other in your time on the run, but really, have you trusted anyone since then?"

"I trust Harry," she snapped. "I've always trusted Harry, he's my best friend. And I trust Blaise and Daphne and..."

"There's a difference between trusting people and being friendly with them," Draco frowned. "The truth is, you haven't trusted anyone since Weasley walked out on you and you've convinced yourself that the only way you can deal with things is by doing it yourself, because everyone else has let you down at some point or another."

"Harry never let me down," Hermione glared daggers at him. "I let him down."

"No, you pushed him away because you were scared," Draco countered. "Come on, Granger, you haven't trusted anyone in years."

"I trust you." She practically spat the words at him, obviously meaning them as a bad thing, but
Draco only smiled as if she'd made his point.

"That's why I'm here."

Hermione's face fell, her look of fury replaced with confusion, and he took her silence as a chance to explain himself better.

"You asked me once, why I was here, why I was following you around," he recalled. "I told you it was because someone had to take care of you, and that's true, but not for the reason you think. It's not because I think you can't take care of yourself, it's because you shouldn't have to. You saved the world, Hermione, let someone else save you."

"I don't need to be saved," she snarled. "I'm not some damsel in distress, Malfoy!"

"No, you're Alice down the rabbit hole," he reasoned. "You're meant to save the world, you have saved the world, but nobody can fight a Jabberwocky without some help along the way."

"What?" She shook her head. "What do Jabberwockies have to do with anything?"

"It was a metaphor, Granger," he rolled his eyes. "What I'm trying to say is, I don't fancy myself some night in shining armour come to save you. You're right, you are a very capable, self-saving sort of damsel, but even the strongest of heroes needs someone to lean on every once in a while."

Hermione nodded slowly at this, her eyes still focussed only on the plate in front of her as she mulled over his words.

"What made you follow me in the first place?" she asked, finally glancing up, forehead furrowed in thought. "Why were you so insistent?"

"Because you looked like you could do with a friend," he answered honestly.

"I have plenty of friends," she argued, but Draco shook his head.

"Not that mattered," he told her. "You'd pushed Potter so far away that he was terrified you'd cut him out completely, you needed someone to call you out, and I thought I'd be the perfect candidate."

"Because you're so naturally contrary?" she guessed.

"Because you'd done it for me," he said seriously. "From the day I met you, you made me question everything I had ever been taught, because you were so phenomenally different than I was convinced you should be. You were everything I had ever been taught to hate, but I just couldn't bring myself to truly do it after spending time in class with you. Your habit of constantly calling me out and putting me in my place made me the person I am today, and I owed you at least that much."

"So this is about owing me," Hermione frowned. "Or at least it was."

"No," Draco shook his head, regretting his choice of words. "It wasn't about owing you, it was about wanting to give back to you what meant so much to me. I wanted to be a good friend to you, because your friendship means a great deal to me, and I figured the best way to do that would be to hold you to the same standards you'd always held the rest of the world. Besides that, I understood some of what you were going through."

"I'm sorry?" she asked, slightly accusingly.

"I've been at rock bottom," he shrugged easily. "We might not have dealt with it the same way, but I
knew what you were going through, at least a little bit, and I knew that if I just held on, I would be able to help you see that you weren’t nearly as alone as you thought you were.”

Hermione certainly couldn't argue with that. It had been his persistence and constant acceptance of her ways of dealing with things that had made her let him in, just slightly, and once he’d gotten that inch he’d gone straight for the mile.

"The first night I was back, at my welcome home party you tried an experiment," Draco continued. "And the next day you were in rough shape. Seeing you like that… it was heartbreaking, Hermione."

He cleared his throat, finding himself slightly emotional at the memory.

"You looked empty, but everyone insisted that given a bit of space you would be fine. I couldn't do that, though. Seeing you like that, it seemed wrong. I couldn't remember a time when I'd ever seen you be quiet... it was eerie. You, Hermione Granger, are not quiet. You're loud and vibrant and sincere and a complete pain in my ass."

"Wow, thanks," she rolled her eyes, but Draco only smiled.

"If you weren't all those things, I wouldn't want you," he assured her. "Those are the things that make you you. They're the things that I counted on when I was stuck living with Voldemort. You were my last hope, Granger. I didn't know if Potter would be able to pull it off on his own, but I knew that as long as you were still around, I could believe in him."

Hermione's eyes began to mist over at his confession, her heart clenching tightly, but Draco wasn't done.

"I'm here because I believe in you, Hermione," he continued seriously. "I believe that you are just as capable as you've always been and that you deserve someone that has absolute faith in that."

"What if I'm not, though?" she asked, her voice so small he barely heard her. "What if that girl really is gone?"

"Then I want to be here to help you find whoever you are now," Draco shrugged. "Because there isn't any chance that there is a Hermione Granger not worth knowing. I'm rather certain that the old you is just waiting for the right moment to reappear, though."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Well you're just as stubborn and cross as you used to be-" he laughed as she chucked a piece of broccoli at his head in protest. "See! Just like old times."

"You're ridiculous," Hermione shook her head, her lips pressed into a thin line to keep from smiling.

Draco only shrugged in agreement. "But you like me anyways," he pointed out.

"I suppose I do," she admitted, finally meeting his eyes.

Draco practically beamed, his smile was so wide, and Hermione couldn't help but smile back. Yes, she was a mess, and she had no idea what she was doing, but she could be sure about one thing: She truly wasn't alone.
The next day found Draco and Hermione back in Harry's office, where they were about to take a portkey to Australia. Hermione hadn't slept a wink the night before and was terribly on edge, and while Draco took her sniping and sneering with practiced nonchalance, Harry seemed to be walking on eggshells, making her feel even worse.

"Drink this," Draco shoved a vial of Pepper-Up into her hand finally.

"I don't need a bloody potion," she snapped at him. "I'm fine."

"Drink it, Granger," he ordered, towering over her menacingly.

Hermione glared at him defiantly, but eventually gave in and did as she was told. As she knew it would, the potion made her ears pop and her spine fizzle pleasantly, making her feel as if she'd just opened a window in the middle of a snowstorm.

"Better?" Draco raised an eyebrow.

She said nothing, only shoved the empty vial back into his hand and crossed her arms stubbornly.

"It's time," Harry announced, producing an old key. "Ten seconds."

They all gathered around and put a finger on, and Hermione felt the familiar tug behind her naval. While she no longer became ill after portkey travel, it was still a thoroughly uncomfortable means of transport, and when she felt her feet touch floor once more, she immediately buckled over and put her hands on her knees to try and catch her breath.

"Hate those bloody things," Harry muttered beside her.

"Tell me about it," Draco groaned.

When they'd recovered, Harry led the way through security and up to the Auror department, occasionally glancing back to see if Hermione was alright.

"Stop it," she ordered the fourth time he did it.

"Sorry," his cheeks pinked slightly.

"I'm fine," Hermione assured him, trying not to sound as rough. "I don't remember any of this."

Harry nodded, but his face said that he didn't think her lack of memory was a good thing. Beside her, Draco kept his face forward, but she knew that he was watching her from the corner of his eye as well.

She'd been telling the truth, though. She had absolutely no memory of the Australian ministry. When she'd first been there, she'd apparated directly into an office, and the second time she'd been off her tits. None of this was striking up emotion for her, aside from her dread of what she was going to learn.

"Mr. Potter!" A woman called out as they turned a corner and Hermione immediately recognized her. Her hair was a little longer than it had been, more of a bob than a pixie cut, and it was feathered with natural highlights, but her face looked exactly the same.
"Miss Granger," Pamela smiled warmly and held out her hand. "It's nice to see you again."

"Hermione, please," she offered. "And this is my… this is Draco."

Behind her, she could feel him smirking at her small fumble and was tempted to take a small step back onto his foot, but he recovered almost immediately and shook the Auror's hand amiably, thanking her for her help.

"It's no trouble," Pamela assured him. "If you want to follow me, I've got a pensieve set up in my office so that you can view the files privately."

She turned and began leading them away, chatting with Harry, while Draco and Hermione lagged slightly behind.

"So, I'm your… Draco?" he asked quietly, leaning close to her as they walked.

"Shut up," Hermione muttered, feeling herself blush.

"I mean, I'm not complaining," he carried on cheekily. "But I think I deserve a better title than that. I've put a lot of work into this."

"Keep it up and you'll be the man who got his arse kicked in the middle of an Auror's department," she snarled.

"But then who would you snipe at when you're in a mood?" Draco grinned.

"Whoever I bloody well please."

"They wouldn't be as fun as I am," he reasoned simply. "I think co-conspirator would have been appropriate."

This drew a snort of laughter from Hermione, sufficiently distracting her from the fact that they were now walking into an office that she was all too familiar with.

Once inside though, she stilled, taking in the space. It hadn't changed at all since she'd last been there. The desk was in the exact same spot, with a regal looking chair behind it and two suitably comfortable armchairs in front. In one corner of the room there was a small collection of shelves and filing cabinets, and in the other a mini fridge. The only difference was that there was now a large stand off to one side with a collection of vials atop it, filled with silvery wisps.

"They're all labelled," Pamela told her, nodding to the vials. "You have a choice of your own memories, or mine and Walter's, though they're all the same. I've pulled your entire file, from your original visit to begin the search, to the last time you were here, you're welcome to it, or if you'd like I can make you a copy to take home and examine when you're ready."

"Thank you," Hermione nodded at the suggestion, her voice tight and small. She cleared her throat and tried again. "Thank you, I think I'd like a copy."

"Of course," Pamela smiled. "I'll get it done and give you some privacy."

She picked up the thick folder on her desk and slipped out of the room, leaving them alone, and Hermione heard the click of the door locking.

"She's just ensuring no one disturbs you." Harry was quick to reassure her, knowing how much she hated being locked in anywhere. "The door will still open without issue from this side."
Hermione nodded tersely, studying the floor. Now that they were here, she was completely unsure of what to do.

"Why don't we figure out what's what?" Harry suggested, walking over to the pensieve and collecting the vials. "Come sit."

Not without effort, Hermione slowly stepped over to one of the armchairs and sat. As soon as she did, she was assaulted by the memory of Pamela helping her sit, pulling her chair over and taking her hands, trying to comfort her.

When Harry's hand touched her knee, she flinched, but reached out to cover it with her own before he could pull away.

"You want to see the interview?" he asked carefully, picking out a vial.

Hermione nodded again, this time more sure of herself, and he got up to pour the memory out. As he did, she turned to look at Draco, who was hovering near the door.

"Will you come?" she asked, wishing she didn't sound so terrified.

He immediately nodded and crossed the room, offering his hand, which she gladly took. She definitely needed a hand to hold today.

"Okay," Harry turned away from the pensieve and gave her an encouraging look. "You're all set."

"Right," Hermione nodded, slowly getting to her feet.

Draco gave her hand a squeeze and took a step forward, waiting for her to follow, but Hermione's mind began to spin. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea. Maybe she was better off not remembering.

*But you do remember,* that damned sensible Hermione spoke in her mind. *It's hazy, but you remember what he said about you. You know you do. You hear it when you sleep.*

She was right, of course. While she couldn't remember the details of it, she remembered the vile things that had come from her father's lips, the things she'd shared with Draco. There couldn't be anything worse awaiting her than the sound of her father suggesting she should be gang raped and left to die.

"You don't have to do this." Harry offered once again, stepping towards her, but she shook her head and forced herself to step up to the stone basin.

When she looked over at Draco he nodded, telling her that he was ready whenever she was, and just before putting her face to the milky reflection, she reached out to take Harry's hand as well. He smiled and interlocked their fingers.

"I'll be right here," he promised.

With that small piece of extra reassurance, she nodded and let herself fall.

The room that she found herself in was bare and small, an observation booth, with a door to the left and a large window taking up the entirety of the wall in front of her. On the other side of the glass
was a bright room with a table and some chairs, and sitting in them were Jean and Richard Granger.

She watched as the door to the other room opened and Auror Walter stepped inside, his arms full of paperwork.

"Sorry to keep you waiting," he apologized to the Grangers as he took his seat. "I'm Detective Walters. I'm going to be taking your statement. Can I get you anything before we start? Water? Tea?"

"No, we'd simply like to get on with it," Richard Granger snarled. "We've been here for hours already, and no one will even tell us if she has been apprehended!"

"By she I assume you mean your daughter?" Walter confirmed.

"I do. Though it brings me no pleasure to claim the demon."

Beside her, Hermione felt the presence of another person. In the memory, Pamela reached over and took her hand, offering silent support, but to her other side, Draco's ghostly figure had wrapped his arm around her shoulder. She shuffled closer, pulling his other arm around herself and holding it tightly.

"If you need to stop, just tell me," he said quietly.

She nodded and turned her attention back to the interview.

"From the moment she was born, I knew something was wrong with her," Richard was ranting. "The damn lights in the hospital kept flickering, and I was sure that some sort of evil was at work, but the midwife wouldn't hear of it. Well, if she could see us now, I bet she wouldn't have been so worried about that damned umbilical cord."

Walter pursed his lips almost imperceptibly and pulled something from his pocket. "Do you mind if I record this?"

"Not at all," Richard shook his head. "But don't be surprised if you never get to hear it. She'll do her damndest to get rid of the evidence, just like always."

"Alright, let's start from the beginning, why don't we?" Walter suggested. "You say your daughter is possessed?"

"A witch," Jean corrected, her eyes full of fire. "She's a witch. I know it sounds ridiculous-"

"Not at all," Walter shook his head. "How long have you known about her… condition?"

"I told you, I suspected something from the start," Richard repeated. "I knew that there was something wrong with her. Between the lights and the silence- the thing never made a peep- I didn't want to take her home. What kind of child doesn't cry?"

Walter nodded vaguely and pretended to take notes, though Hermione could see that he was simply making observations about the couple.

"I should have just left her there like I planned, but Jean wanted a baby." Despite the words, he didn't seem to be angry with his wife over the situation. Instead, he almost sounded like he pitied her, that he thought her naïve and foolish. "I can't tell you how many times I thought about just taking her out the river and dumping her, but I'm not a murderer. I couldn't take another life, not even hers, as much as I wish I had."
"You wanted to drown her?" Walter confirmed, and Draco's arms tightened around her.

"You try living with a demon like that," Richard snapped. "Just watching us all the time, never making a peep. The damn thing barely even blinked."

"So she was a well-behaved child?"

"At first," Jean nodded wistfully. "For a while we thought maybe... but then there were the school incidents."

"School incidents?" Walter looked up from his notes. "Could you tell me about those?"

"She doesn't make friends," Richard spoke for his wife. "Couldn't make friends. She was bloody sociopathic the way she scared kids off. None of them wanted to go near her."

"Because they were afraid of her?" Walter asked.

"No, she bored them to tears," Jean rolled her eyes. "The girl didn't know what playing meant, she was always reading. I suppose it wouldn't have been so ridiculous if she hadn't been so obsessive. It was like she couldn't exist without a book in her hands. We would lock them away in the basement to try and make her play with other children, but somehow she always got her filthy little hands on them."

Hermione remembered that. She remembered her parents taking away her books and telling her she needed to go play outside with the other children, that she needed to make friends, and she tried. She tried exceptionally hard, but no matter how much effort she put into it, she was always laughed at and ridiculed for not knowing the games, and eventually she would return home wishing she'd never gone. The first time she'd done accidental magic had been to open the basement lock. She'd been sitting against the door, crying, wishing that she could just have her books back, and then she heard a click and the deadbolt was open.

"She'd lock the doors so we couldn't get her," Richard was saying when she tuned back to the interview. "She damn near killed me when she was seven, hid herself in a cupboard somewhere and fucking electrocuted me when I tried to get her out!"

She certainly didn't remember that!

"And then there were those children she mutilated."

Hermione's hands tightened dangerously around Draco's arm, fear gripping her. What the hell was he talking about? Mutilated?

"I'm sorry?" Walter frowned.

"Burned them within an inch of their lives," her mother shook her head. "It was just a bit of childish tomfoolery, a simple shout for a teacher would have sufficed, but she had some sort of fit. Soon after we learned what she was. She would never admit to it, of course, but I'm certain that she did it on purpose. Those poor boys, Charlie and Owen, they were never the same afterwards. They were in hospital for weeks afterwards, but at least they were safe. We had to live with the wretch, fearing for our lives every moment. I spent six months fearing she'd kill me in my sleep."

"We locked her in her room after that when she went to bed," Richard nodded. "Just to have some sense of security in our own home."

*Charlie and Owen*, Hermione mulled the names over trying to place them. They would have been in
her primary school, her last year before Hogwarts...

"Oh!" she gasped as the memory burst forward. The children surrounding her, Patricia holding the scissors against her scalp, their hands holding her so tightly she couldn't move.

"Hermione?" Draco was speaking to her, but she barely heard him, and a moment later she felt him pulling her free of the pensieve.

With Potter's help, Draco pulled Hermione from the pensieve, and set her in a chair. Crouching in front of her, he called her name, his hands on her face, trying to get her to look at him, while Potter perched on the arm of her chair and rubbed her back.

"Hermione, look at me!" Draco ordered, pinching her just a little to make his point.

"Oh," she flinched, and he breathed a little easier.

"Sorry, just making sure you're with me, here."

"Hermione, what happened?" Harry asked gently.

"I remember," she breathed, on the verge of tears.

"Remember what?" Draco asked. "The interview?"

She shook her head, as much as she could with him still holding her face at least, and he frowned.

"C-charlie," she stammered. "The boys..."

While Draco seemed to follow this train of thought, Harry was completely lost, but he kept this to himself as he rubbed her back.

"They were hurting me," Hermione whimpered. She could still feel their hands on her, the way they squeezed so tightly that she'd been bruised for weeks, the way they wrenched her arms back at an unnatural angle, forcing her to remain still. She broke down into incoherent sobs, unable to explain herself no matter how hard she tried. Her hands gripped Draco's wrists tightly, his own hands still cradling her face. She needed him to know, needed him to see.

"Draco," she managed to choke his name out.

"I'm right here," he promised. "Harry and I, we're right here."

She shook her head against his hands, and squeezed his wrists tighter.

"What?" he understood. "What do you need?"

"Look," she choked out another sob, and felt him still.

"Hermione," he sounded concerned. "Hermione, are you sure?"

She nodded fiercely, tightening her hold on him once again. She needed him to see it, she needed someone else to know. If she could have forced the words out, she would have begged him, but she
simply couldn't make her voice cooperate. He understood, though.

"Okay," he nodded and pressed his lips to her forehead in a comforting gesture. "Okay."

"Okay what?" Harry frowned at him, though he kept his voice low, not wanting to upset Hermione.

"She wants me to use Legilimency," Draco frowned, then looked back at Hermione. "Right?"

Another sharp nod and squeeze, followed by a sobbed, "please."

"Okay," Draco nodded once more. "Shh, it's okay. C'mere."

He rested his forehead against hers, his hands still cupping her face carefully, and focussed his mind before carefully sliding into hers.

What he saw made his blood hot with anger. A bit of tomfoolery her mother had called it? Those children were assaulting her! He could feel her pain, hear the way she begged them to stop. Of course she'd done magic to save herself! He could tell too, that the burns wouldn't have kept the children in hospital. They would have been treated at St. Mungo's and had the entire incident obliviated, they had told Hermione that lie to make her guilty and even scared of her own abilities.

If they hadn't already been dead, Draco would have had half a mind to kill them himself for what they'd done to her, and he didn't think he even knew the half of it yet.

Not wanting his anger to hurt her, he quickly pulled back, his focus returning to the witch in front of him. She'd stopped sobbing and was now whimpering brokenly, her hands fallen from his wrists to reach for his shirt.

"I'm so sorry, love," Draco choked, fighting between the sheer rage he was feeling towards her parents, and the need to comfort her. "It wasn't your fault."

Potter looked ready to burst from not knowing what was going on, but Draco didn't care. The only thing that mattered to him in that moment was Hermione.

"I didn't mean to," she whimpered, just as she did during her nightmares. "I didn't mean to."

"I know," Draco promised. "I know you didn't. It's okay. It wasn't your fault."

He repeated the reassurances over and over, but she didn't seem to hear him, her own words stuck on a loop.

"I think we should take her home," Harry spoke to Draco quietly. "She's too upset."

The blond was about to agree when Hermione spoke, her voice thick with tears, but determined.

"No, I have to do this!"

"You don't have to do it today, Granger," Draco said.

"I do," she insisted petulantly. "I have to do this!"

Despite her steely resolve, though, she couldn't bring herself to move back to the pensieve- or stop crying for that matter.

"Hermione, you don't want to push yourself too hard," Harry tried to reason with her. "This is obviously really difficult, you need to take your time-"
"No!" she snapped, hands curling into fists. "No, I have to do this!"

The two men exchanged worried frowns, both sure that this was a terrible idea.

"Okay, how about this?" Harry quickly made a plan. "How about I get Pam to sign the memories over to me, and you can take them back to your flat and watch them at your own pace? Or we can go to Grimmauld place, or wherever you like, just somewhere that you'll be more comfortable."

When she didn't argue with this suggestion immediately, he took it as a yes and hurried off to find Pam and get the paperwork they needed.

"Come on," Draco pulled back a little, having curled himself around her as she sobbed. "Why don't you let me take you back to your flat? You can take a little time to calm down, and Potter will bring everything later."

"I have to do this," she told him once again. "I have to."

"Okay," he nodded his understanding, brushing some hair out of her face.

"I have to," she repeated, looking at him desperately. "I have to know what else-" She shook her head, not sure how to finish that. What else she'd done? What else they'd done? What else she'd locked away to gather rust and emotional damage?

"Okay." Draco agreed once again, and she finally stopped repeating the plea.

When Pamela knocked lightly at the door, Hermione jumped, but seemed to calm when she saw that it was just the Auror.

"I've had my office connected to Mr. Potter's home floo. He said to tell you that no one is there, so you're free to wait for him, or to go home. He promises to find you when we've finished the paperwork," she relayed quietly. "Hermione, I'm so sorry you're having to go through this again. If I can be of any help at all, please let me know."

Hermione nodded her thanks to the woman and tried to offer a smile, but it only came off as a grimace of pain. Pamela didn't seem to mind, though, offering a smile of her own as Draco helped Hermione to the floo.

"Just hang onto me, okay?" he said, tucking her close.

Hermione nodded and pressed her face to his chest, her eyes squeezed shut as she felt them begin to spin.
They'd left a note for Harry with her address and gone straight to the flat, where Draco convinced her to lay down on the sofa and rest.

"You know you didn't hurt them, right?" He sat on the floor in front of her, holding her hand and talking quietly.


"That's what I'm talking about," Draco nodded. "That's not true."

"Of course it's true!" she started to get upset again.

"Hermione, think about this logically," he reasoned with her. "Okay, you know what happens when children do accidental magic."

She nodded slightly, not seeming to understand where he was going with this.

"Tell me," he encouraged. "What happens when children perform accidental magic in front of muggles?"

"The ministry sends a warning letter."

"Before that," Draco prompted. "Come on, Granger. You know this."

He watched as she thought about it for a moment, obviously unhappy with him for forcing the issue, but then her eyes lit up slightly, her mouth opening ever so slightly in surprise. "A-a Magical Accident reversal squad is called."

"They would have been taken to St Mungo's," he nodded. "Hermione, they would have been healed in a matter of minutes and had their memories changed. Same with everyone else that was there. You didn't scar them or mutilate them, that wasn't true."

"But why would they say that I had?" she frowned. "Why would they lie like that?"

"I don't know," Draco shook his head sadly.

Hermione was quiet again for a while, simply staring into space, trying to process what was going on in her mind.

The more she thought about it, the clearer the memory became, slowly extending beyond the moment and into the aftermath. She remembered speaking with the Headmistress about the incident, insisting that she was terribly sorry and hadn't meant to hurt them. She remembered how the old woman had let her off with a warning, assuring her that other children had come forward to say she was only defending herself.

She'd thought it absolutely mad at the time that there hadn't been a larger deal made of it- she had burned the boys with her skin, after all- but thinking about it now, she realized Draco was right about the Ministry handling things. They probably thought she'd punched them, or something like that. Her parents had been reserved when confronted. They'd told her off, but not been overly severe, they'd seemed more interested in shaming her than punishing, but she also remembered them bringing it up.
on several occasions, reminding her what she'd done.

The incident had taken place about five months before she went to Hogwarts, and in that time, Hermione had been convinced that she'd almost killed them. It had eaten at her every day, made her terrified to leave the house or even her room. Perhaps that had been the point though, the reason her parents had lied to her so greatly, to keep her away from them...

"I could hear them arguing," she said quietly, tilting her face to look at Draco. "From my room. We shared a wall, and I would hear them talk about it."

"About what?" He asked, rubbing his thumb over the back of her hand.

"About what I'd done. How they were scared I would do it to them," she sniffled. "They thought I was the devil."

"They were very, very wrong," Draco promised.

"I- I think it was before they knew," she ignored his comment. "They were just scared."

Draco wanted nothing more than to refute this. To tell her that it didn't matter if they were scared, they had no right to treat her the way they did, to lie to her and make her think she'd done such a thing, but he knew that she wouldn't appreciate it. She couldn't think about them like that, she needed to find a way to explain it to herself, so he kept quiet for the time being and simply let her muddle through an explanation of sorts.

When Potter knocked at her front door, she nodded for Draco to answer it and sat up, a blanket wrapped tightly around her shoulders.

"She lives here?" He muttered to Draco as they walked in. "This building looks like a crack den."

"One problem at a time, yeah?" Draco reasoned, giving the other wizard a pointed look.

Harry nodded, albeit unhappily, and started setting up a pensieve on the breakfast bar.

"I can do that," Draco offered immediately. "You should try and talk to her."

"Are you sure?" Harry frowned, not wanting to overstep the timid boundaries that he felt in place, but Draco nodded and elbowed him out of the way.

As he walked over to the sofa Hermione gave him a small smile and he found himself encouraged, taking a seat beside her.

"How you doing?" he asked, looking her over.

Hermione shrugged rather listlessly, her bottom lip trapped between her teeth. "I remembered something," she shared, though she knew that was rather obvious. "Something they said about an incident when I was still in Primary school."

"Accidental magic?" Harry asked carefully.

Hermione nodded, her eyes cast down. "I didn't have friends before you," she admitted quietly. "I mean, I honestly still don't understand why you decided to be my friend-"

"Because he has at least half a brain!" Draco called over helpfully.

Hermione glared at him, but he didn't turn around and Harry only chuckled. "Unfortunately, he's not
wrong. Being your friend is the smartest decision I've ever made.”

Hermione blushed at his compliment, but pressed on. "Other children, they didn't like me, they were always finding something to pick on me for and I was an easy target. I mean, between my hair and my books and the strange things I made happen…” she trailed off and shrugged. "I didn't have friends before you."

Without hesitating, Harry reached out took her hands, stopping them from picked at the ends of her blanket and holding them tightly. She squeezed back and tried to smile at him, but only managed a tiny twitch.

"I tried to ignore them," she continued. "I knew they would get bored if I just didn't react, but they would just make things worse, and…”

"You reacted?" Harry guessed, his tone kind. She knew that he understood, of course, he'd told her about the times he'd magicked himself onto the roof of the school or such to hide from Dudley, but this somehow seemed worse. Harry had protected himself by performing magic on himself, she'd hurt others.

"There was a girl, she was The girl, you know?"

Harry nodded and she went on.

"She had some of the boys hold me so that I couldn't move, and then she cut my hair."

Once again, Hermione felt the boys' hands on her, felt the bruises and the pulled muscles they'd left her with afterwards, but she pushed the thoughts away, determined not to cry about it anymore. She'd done enough of that today.

"I burned them," she told Harry, a sharp pang of guilt in her stomach. "My skin, it burned them- the way you did to Quirrell first year. I just wanted them to let me go, and I didn't know what I was doing-"

"It's okay," Harry shuffled closer and wrapped his arm around her. "Of course you did, you were just protecting yourself."

"I thought I'd killed them," Hermione continued quietly. "They said I'd almost killed them."

"Who said?" He questioned, forcing himself to sound calm despite the swell of anger in his chest.

"My parents," she whimpered slightly. "Th-they said I'd maimed them, that they would never recover properly, and I was so scared. I was so scared that it would happen again."

She turned in her seat to wrap her arms around Harry's waist, her face pressing into his shoulder to keep from crying, and he immediately hugged her tighter. Over her head, he met Draco's eye and knew that he felt the same sheer, unadulterated anger in Harry's chest.

"What else am I going to remember?" Hermione asked in a small voice, pulling back to look at him. "Harry, what else have I forgotten about?"

"I don't know," he sighed helplessly. "I wish I did, but…”

"Did you bring the files?"

"I brought everything," Harry nodded. "But maybe now isn't-"
"No, I need to keep going," she interrupted him. "I need to know."

He nodded sadly and squeezed her arm, trying to be encouraging. It didn't matter what he thought, he just had to be here for her.

"I want you to come too," she decided. "You deserve to know."

"That's not how this works," Harry shook his head. "I'll watch them if you want me to, of course, but I don't want you to let me see because you think I deserve it."

"No, I want you to," Hermione insisted. "I don't want to push you away anymore, Harry. I don't want to hide things anymore."

The broken look in her eyes was what made him nod. She was trying to make things right between them, trying to make the last few years up to him and even though he didn't need her to, he knew that she did. She squeezed his hand in thanks and slowly moved to get up, not letting go of him as she did, then made her way to the pensieve.

Back in the observation room, Draco took up his stance behind her again, arms wrapped around her tightly, while Harry stood beside her holding her hand. Through the window, they listened as Richard and Jean recounted the events of Hermione's accident once more, then moved on to the day they'd found out what she was.

"I tried to kick the woman out," Richard said, speaking about Professor McGonagall. "Of course we didn't believe her, but she wouldn't leave. And then she started talking about the strange things that might have happened. Strange! As though they were nothing but oddities, a pair of socks gone missing or a cookie stolen!"

He let out a bark of deranged laughter, and Hermione winced.

"I told her we weren't getting involved," he continued menacingly. "Said she could go to the dogs for all I cared, we weren't going to put up with her magic shite in our house. But she threatened us, said it would get worse, that eventually she'd hurt someone else. She was so very worried about the little brat- that she was going to hurt herself, that it would make her ill- as though we were nothing! Whatever she did to herself, that was her own fault, it was her deformity not ours, but what would have happened to us if we hadn't done it?!!"

"It seemed the right thing to do," Jean added. "I just got this feeling that it would work out. We were wrong, of course, but at the time it seemed…"

"It was probably her doing," her husband snarled. "The little imp was probably playing with our minds even then, and we didn't even know it."

"I'm sorry, you think your daughter altered your minds at the age of eleven?" Walter asked, unable to completely mask his disbelief.

"If not her, then that cunt who came for her," Richard nodded. "All I know is that I was ready to send her packing, off to whatever hole would take her, and then suddenly I was agreeing to pay for that bloody school! If that wasn't some sort of witchcraft, I don't know what is."
"At least it got rid of her," Jean breathed a little easier. "Oh, it was such a relief not to have her looming over us anymore. We could finally sleep at night!"

"Yes, but then we had to take her back for Christmas," Richard snarled. "God forbid the family realize what she was. I don't know how much clearer we could have possibly been with her, but the little cunt just wouldn't mind!"

Once again, Hermione felt the familiar tingle of returning memory, a dark sense of foreboding curling at her temple. Something had happened that Christmas.

She'd been friends with Harry and Ron by that point, and they'd been trying to learn about Nicolas Flammel. She'd left them in charge of the search because she was going home to see her parents and wouldn't have much time for research, though she'd taken a few books home just in case…

"Normal, I told her," her father continued speaking in the memory. "You're to act completely normal. Not a hint of that magic nonsense, not even a bloody whisper, I told her. And she promised. Oh, she promised left, right and centre. 'Of course, Daddy. I would never, Daddy.'" He mimicked Hermione mockingly. "And I was stupid enough to believe her."

"She seemed sincere," his wife tried to comfort him. "You shouldn't blame yourself, dear. It wasn't your fault."

"No, of course not," Richard agreed quickly. "Still, I should never have trusted her."

"I assume there was another accident?" Walter questioned flatly.

"Accident!" Jean scoffed humorously. "I highly doubt that it was an accident. She got a warning letter that time. Oh, I was so sure they were going to take her away!" The look on her face was absolutely gleeful for a moment, then fell when she related how nothing ever came of it.

Hermione sensed how tense Harry and Draco were beside her, felt the way they held onto her just a little tighter as they listened, but she appreciated that they stayed silent. As difficult and heartbreaking as it was to listen to her parents talk about her in such a way, she needed to hear it, needed to remember.

"We always had dinner with my Great Aunt, you see," Jean continued to explain. "She was the last remaining member of the family, really. All the other relatives were on her husband's side, I was the last relation she had."

"Thank God for that," Richard put in. "If she hadn't died the next month, who knows what we would have had to do."

In a vaguely human moment, Jean seemed upset about the aunt's passing, and Draco had to bite his tongue to stifle an accusatory laugh. The mere idea that the woman could have kind feelings toward a distant relative and not her own daughter was ridiculous, yet she needed to take a moment to recall the dead woman's memory.

"She did well at first," Jean continued. "I almost thought we would make it through the night, but I don't think she could have fucked it all up any more spectacularly."

Hearing her mother swear like that, Hermione actually found herself taken aback. Never in her entire life had she heard such a thing come out of the woman's mouth. It seemed almost unreal.

"Are you okay?" Draco questioned her softly, obviously noting her reaction.
"Fine," she nodded sharply, pushing past her surprise. "I just- I'm fine."

She turned her attention back to the interview, trying to recall what she was about to learn, but there was nothing but cloud in her mind.

"Sitting around the tree, opening presents, and all of a sudden the fucking ornaments take flight," Richard growled. "She turned the damn thing into some sort of ruddy ballet, everything flying about and whatnot. It's a wonder the old bag didn't drop dead then and there. Oh, I could have killed that girl!"

Unlike earlier in the day, Hermione still found herself having a hard time remembering the incident. She knew that her father was telling the truth, that she had done something to the tree, but the details remained lost, much to her frustration.

"She's lucky we didn't chuck her out onto the streets after that," he continued. "I wanted to, mind you, I wouldn't have given it a second thought. I was ready to pull the car over in the middle of Croydon and leave her, she certainly would have deserved whatever she got."

Once again, the boys' grips tightened, both understanding exactly what her father had meant, despite Draco's unfamiliarity with muggle London.

"But she might have come after us," Jean reminded him. "As it was, she was distraught, we controlled her."

"Yes," Richard nodded tersely.

"Controlled her?" Walter questioned. "What do you mean by that?"

"She was apologetic- not that we believed her- but she at least seemed it," Jean explained. "Richard dealt with her."

Walter looked at the man expectantly.

"I gave her what for and sent her down to the basement," he snarled in answer. "And that was where she stayed until that damned school would take her back."

"You beat her?" Walter confirmed.

"I punished her as she deserved," Richard responded tightly. "As is my right. I am her father, whether I want to be or not."

"Of course," Walter nodded agreeably, though he was clearly not in agreement with the other man's views. On his notepad, he was writing 'admits to abuse' 'belt?'

"His hand," Memory Hermione answered the written question.

"Sorry?" Pamela turned to her.

"He backhanded me before he used the belt," she responded flatly, nodding towards Walter's note. "And then again when I tried to stop him from closing the door."

"I fell down the stairs," the real Hermione added to the story as the memory began to clear, her voice as lifeless as her memory's. "I had to go see Madam Pomfrey when I first got back to school because I thought I might have cracked a rib."

"Why didn't you say anything?" Harry asked painfully.
"I was embarrassed. No one else was having accidents anymore, and I was supposed to be the best in our year, I didn't want you to think I was stupid."

"We could never think that," he shook his head. "And I had plenty of magical accidents after starting Hogwarts. Remember when I made my Aunt blow up like a balloon?"

Hermione nodded shyly.

"You could have said something then," he continued sadly.

"I'd forgotten by then," she shook her head. "I- I'd forgotten a lot of things…"

Without a word to either of them, Hermione suddenly pulled back from the pensieve.

When Draco and Harry followed a second later, they found her pacing the kitchen.

"Granger?" Draco was the first to speak, studying her carefully for some sign of what was going on in her head.

"It's not the drugs," she answered, not stopping.

"What's not the drugs?" he prompted.

"The memories, I didn't forget them because of all the shit I've pumped into my body."

"We already knew that," Draco pointed out. "You said that in the first place."

"Yeah, but I didn't really believe it," she admitted. "I figured that it would at least have been part of the problem, that if I got clean and really started trying to deal with things that they would come back."

"Isn't that what's happening?"

"No," she shook her head. "No, because this has happened before. I've done this before."

Harry and Draco shared a look of confusion, not exactly sure what she meant. Suddenly, she stopped pacing and stood in front of the bar, hands leaning against either edge, a look on her face that might have been either relief or terror.

"I know what happened."
"Care to share with the class?" Draco asked, his tone resembling the uppity drawl he'd always spoken in in school.

"The things I can't remember," Hermione started pacing again as she explained. "The gaps, the dreams. They're not new."

"Alright..." Draco frowned, still confused.

"I've been repressing them for years." She carried on without taking any notice, clearly not needing him for the conversation she was having. "I must have been, or else I would have told Harry and Ron. We didn't have secrets."

"That's true," Harry smiled a little smugly.

"The things I don't remember, they're the times when they must have made it most clear that they didn't like that I was a witch- hated it. My subconscious must have hidden it from me, convinced me that everything was fine, because they kept pretending that it was. I thought if I just pretended everything was normal, it would be, and so my brain made it happen- oh!"

She stopped pacing again, one hand covering her mouth in surprise, the other pushing her hair back from her face, pulling it tightly.

"Oh?" Draco questioned. "What, oh?"

"I remember," she turned to face them again, hands falling to her sides. "I remember."

She leaned back against the sink and pulled her hair up into a ponytail then let it fall again, pushing it out of her face, an act Harry recognized well from when she was studying for a particularly difficult test.

"When I went home for Christmas first year, I realized that there was something wrong," she began to share with them. "My dad was late to pick me up from the train, really late. There was a porter that sat with me, and I think if he'd been any later he would have called Social services. When I told them about school they would find ways to cut me off. I convinced myself that I'd been being rude, talking too much about myself. Then they took my books and said that I was home to spend time with them, not to do magic."

"I bet you took that well," Harry mused before he could stop himself, remembering the thousands of times she'd scolded him for not doing homework.

"I brushed it off," she shook her head in disbelief. "I thought that they just wanted to spend time together since I'd been away, and that they didn't want me to do my schoolwork because they didn't understand it. It never crossed my mind that they were ashamed of my being a witch, or disgusted by it. They never showed it to my face, it was always discussed behind closed doors. I think I heard them, though."

She frowned, wishing that all the memories would be clear, but it didn't help. There was still quite a bit that she couldn't make out, but she had a feeling that she was right.

"They kept saying that I had to be normal. 'None of that magic nonsense' dad said," her frown deepened as she remembered thinking this was alright. "I thought he meant in front of the family,
you know? Which made perfect sense, we couldn't tell them anything. But he was so adamant, so
cross about it. He went on and on about it, just kept pummeling it into my mind until it was all I
could think about- that I had to be normal, no magic, normal. I had to be the normal girl that they
wanted…"

Her heart clenched as she remembered the nights she'd cried herself to sleep wishing that
she had been normal. Even after learning that she was a witch, there had been times that she'd cursed
herself for it, been ashamed of it. Now, she realized that it wasn't her own insecurities that she'd been
bemoaning, but her parents quiet insistence that she act normal- as though she wasn't in reality.

She hadn't seen Harry get up from his chair, but when she felt his arm slide around her shoulders, she
allowed herself to lean into him.

"I just wanted to be what they asked me to be," she sighed. "I wanted them to approve of me- to be
proud of me. I tried so hard, but there was a Christmas tree. It was the most beautiful tree in the
world, even nicer than the ones we had at Hogwarts. I couldn't believe that it wasn't magical. I was
hiding from the other children before dinner and I just laid on the floor and watched it. The way it
shone, with the lights and the baubles and the tinsel, it was…" she couldn't find a big enough word
to describe it. "It was magical. I thought that the ornaments were dancing, the way the light hit them,
I could even hear the music…"

Even as she shared the memory with Draco and Harry, Hermione felt the fear and anxiety that had
gripped her at the time, bringing her dreams to a grinding halt.

"I was so angry with myself," she admitted. "I'd promised that I would be normal and well-behaved
and perfect, and there I was thinking about magic dancing baubles."

"Any child would have," Draco offered consolingly. "You were eleven years old, even muggle
eleven year olds think magic still exist, don't they Potter?"

He nodded helpfully, though that hadn't been the case in his own upbringing.

"Sure," Hermione shrugged in agreement. "But I'd promised not to. I'd swore to be good and normal,
and I'd broken my promise. So I spent the rest of the night thinking about being normal. I just kept
repeating it over and over in my head, it was all I could think about, all I could pay attention too. I
was so busy paying attention to it that I didn't realize how emotional I'd become. You know my
magic has always had a strong attachment to my emotions."

Harry nodded, remembering all to well how strong an attachment they had.

"I was putting so much focus on not doing magic that my core couldn't hold it in, and all of a sudden
everyone was gasping and the tree had turned into a turning ballet," she sighed heavily, the absolute
desolation she'd felt in the moment returning. To have been trying so hard, and to fail so miserably, it
had cut her to the quick. She'd been absolutely devastated, and beyond humiliated, but beyond that,
she'd been desperate for her parents to understand how sorry she was.

She'd begged and pleaded and sobbed the whole drive home, promising that she'd be good, that she
hadn't meant it, that she was sorry and would make it up to them. Her cries had fallen on deaf ears
though, and when her father had taken her arm and wrenched her out of the car, ordering her to be
quiet for fear of alarming the neighbours, she'd complied. Inside, though, she'd returned to her
lamenting, refusing to turn around and face the wall when her father took off his belt.

That was when he'd hit her. His hand had struck her so hard her entire body turned, sending her to
the floor on her knees in front of him. She'd lost count of how many times the belt came down.
Eventually she'd been unable to apologize through her pained sobs, though. Then, when he'd decided that it was enough, her father had grabbed her arm and wrenched her back to her feet before dragging her over to the basement door.

She'd watched as he pulled the padlock from a side table drawer beside it and began to plead again, but once again she was ignored. When she'd tried to reach for him, begging not to be locked away, his hand had struck her the second time. It held the same amount of force as the first, and with only a small piece of floor between the door and the stairs, she hadn't had anywhere to go but down.

Reliving the memory, her legs had given out beneath her as she sobbed. Harry had tried his best to catch her, but she'd ended up on the floor nonetheless, where she curled away from him into a ball, shaking.

She didn't remember what had happened after that. Presumably Draco and Harry had gotten her off the floor and into bed, because that was where she became aware next. Her hands were clutching Draco's shirt and her head was on his chest, his steady heartbeat thrumming beneath her ear.

Slowly, she unclenched her hands, laying them flat against him and Draco looked down at her, his eyes full of concern.

"Hey," he smiled warmly.

Hermione tried her best to smile back, but she couldn't seem to complete the action. Her forehead remained wrinkled with pain, her lips quivering slightly as she remained on the verge of tears.

"Potter had to go back to the ministry for a bit, but he promised to come check on you as soon as he was done," Draco filled her in.

"What time is it?" she asked, her voice thick and scratchy from so much crying.

"About 3. You slept for a little while."

Hermione nodded, trying to piece together what had happened. It was a far more disturbing task sober, the only thing she had to blame being herself. If she was remembering correctly, though, Harry had gotten to her flat at around noon. She turned her face into Draco and took a deep breath, hoping that his familiar scent might bring her just a little peace, then sat up slowly. Her head began to pound at the action, and she raised a hand to her forehead, wincing.

Draco shuffled over to open one of the drawers in her nightstand and pulled out a headache relieving potion, passing it to her. It didn't take the pain away altogether, but it at least stopped the pounding. Unfortunately, she was rather sure her headache stemmed more from the revelation she'd come on earlier than it did her sobbing breakdown.

Fiddling with the empty vial, she crossed her legs beneath her and closed her eyes, taking deep breaths. Beside her, she felt Draco sit up as well and knew that he was watching her. Not wanting to face him just yet, she got up off the bed and began digging around in the piles of clothes on the floor, emerging with a half pack of cigarettes and a lighter.

Taking her usual seat in the open window, straddling the frame, she lit one and took a deep drag, hoping that the nicotine would offer some sort of soothing effect. Draco remained seated on the bed,
his eyes following her every movement. She was halfway through the cigarette when he spoke up.

"Did you know that if you lick someone's elbow without them noticing, they won't feel it?"

"What?" Hermione frowned, looking over at him.

"If you lick someone's elbow but they don't see you do it, they don't feel it," Draco repeated.

"H-have you tested that?" Hermione asked, wondering what the hell was going on.

"No, but I definitely think it's worth a shot," he shrugged. He waited a minute, then nodded expectantly. "Your turn."

"Sorry?"

"I told you a fun fact, now it's your turn," he explained simply.

Ah! So that's what he was doing. Hermione couldn't help but smile at the realization- he really did know her too well.

"The first person to ever smoke in Europe was imprisoned for being possessed by the devil."

"Well that's cheery. What else have you got?" Draco mused.

She thought for a minute, trying to think of a less dour fact. "Have you ever had a Hershey's Kiss?"

"The little chocolates, yeah?"

She nodded, already smirking. "The little paper tail that sticks out the top? Its proper name is a Nigglywiggly."

"It is not," he scoffed.

"It is," Hermione laughed. "I swear."

"I think you've cracked," he shook his head. "Gone completely off your rocker."

"Go ahead and think all you like," she shrugged. "I'm telling the truth."

"I think you're having me on," Draco accused. "You just want to hear me say Nigglywiggly."

"I'm not," she held firm. "But that absolutely would have been worth it. Say it again."

She flicked her butt down to the street and swung herself back inside, a childish grin on her face.

"Not a chance," Draco shook his head.

"Please!" Hermione begged, holding her hands together in a supplicating gesture. "Pretty please with Honeydukes on top?"

"Not even if you bought the whole store," Draco rolled his eyes.

"You're such a killjoy," she huffed, dropping back onto the bed. "You know that?"

"You may have mentioned it once of twice," he assured her.

Hermione smiled again, and he smiled back, but this time it was more of a sad smile. They needed to
talk about what happened that afternoon.

"How about some tea?" Draco offered. "You haven't eaten anything since breakfast. I can make you a sandwich."

"I'm not hungry," she shook her head. "But tea sounds good. I'll go put the kettle on."

Before he could offer to do it himself, she got up and scurried out of the room, wanting a few more minutes to collect herself before she relived her worst nightmares once again.

Going about the menial task, she allowed her mind to wander just a little. Things were coming back now, slowly and sometimes a little hazy still, but definitely coming back. Most specifically though, she remembered watching the interview Walter had conducted. She remembered the confusion and then the realization that she had blocked the memories, and the shock and pain that came from dredging them up.

That time, though, she hadn't reacted. She'd been too shocked, and the moment she was free to go, she'd drowned her sorrows at the closest bar and allowed her subconscious to hide the memories once again. She didn't want to believe it, and so she hadn't. She’d allowed herself to continue taking the blame for everything that had happened, and had reasoned that her parents' anger with her was fully deserved. She had played with their minds, after all, and no matter the intentions that was still wrong. She had repeated the argument in her mind over and over, and by the time she returned to England, she believed it.

She believed it now, but there was something changed in her feelings, something she couldn't quite put her finger on…

The kettle whistled, and Hermione turned her attention back to the tea, pouring hot water and a splash of milk into each mug, then adding a spoonful of sugar to her own. She grabbed a packet of biscuits from the cupboard as well and tossed it onto the breakfast bar. She hadn't realized that Draco followed her to the kitchen, and she jumped slightly when she turned to find him sitting on a stool.

"You should eat something more than biscuits," he frowned.

"The biscuits were for you. I told you, I'm not hungry." She picked up both mugs and handed Draco his, taking her own to sit on the sofa.

Obviously not pleased with this, Draco grabbed a banana and followed her, placing the yellow fruit on the coffee table with her tea. He waited patiently as she let her tea steep, occasionally poking at the bag with her spoon. When it was just the right colour, she took a small sip and smiled. There truly was nothing like a good cup of tea.

She was halfway through the mug when someone began knocking on the door. Figuring that it would be Harry, Hermione got to her feet and went to answer it.

"You're up." Harry smiled in relief when he saw her, stepping into the flat and pulling her into a hug.

"I'm up," she agreed, patting his back.

"Are you feeling better?" He asked, removing his Aurors robes and hanging them over one of her stools.

"I'm… okay," she shrugged. "Do you want some tea?"

"Sure," Harry nodded.
Hermione waved for him to sit and went about making tea once again, well aware of Draco and Harry whispering about her as she did. They weren't at all quiet, and so she could plainly hear Draco relating the events of the last half hour or so since she'd got up. Apparently she'd slept fitfully, but she hadn't felt it. Maybe she was just used to it by now.

When she brought over Harry's mug, they quickly stopped talking, making her raise an accusing eyebrow. Harry blushed and looked down at his tea, Draco didn't even blink.

"You know neither one of you can whisper," she shook her head.

"Sorry," Harry muttered. "I was just worried."

Hermione smiled softly and took his hand, much to Harry's surprise. "I know," she assured him. "I'm okay, though."

"We're not doing this again, are we?" Draco groaned exasperatedly, but Hermione continued to smile.

"I'm not in denial," she assured him. "But I'm not about to have a nervous breakdown either, so that's something."

"What about-" Harry started to ask, then stopped himself, looking back down at his tea anxiously. Hermione didn't need to be a Legilimens to know what he was thinking, though.

"I don't want a hit," she shook her head. "I thought I would, but I don't. I don't want to be foggy. As much as it hurts, I want to remember these things. I'm tired of living in the dark."

This made both Harry and Draco smile encouragingly, and she couldn't help but smile back. It was a big deal, and she was willing to acknowledge that.

"It's coming back," she told them sheepishly. "The memories, they're getting less hazy. Not all of them, but it's better than it was before."

"That's good," Harry nodded reassuringly.

There was a lull in the conversation then, and Hermione immediately felt her anxiety grow. Picking up her mug, just for the sake of having something to hold, she kept her eyes focussed on the dregs of her tea as she spoke again. "What- what did I say, before?" she asked nervously. "Before I…"

"You were telling us about Christmas," Draco saved her. "What happened with the tree."

She nodded slowly, having suspected that would be the case. Steeling herself, she closed her eyes and told them exactly what had happened next. By some sort of miracle, her voice didn't shake or crack as she did so, remaining rather empty throughout. She kept her eyes closed too, not wanting to see their faces when she admitted what had happened. She knew that it wasn't her fault, of course, but she was still rather ashamed. How could she have let something like that go?

"You were twelve," the voice in her head reminded her kindly.

When Harry put his hand on her arm, unable to take her hand since she was still holding her mug, she almost faltered, almost allowed herself to feel the emotions that were crowding her throat and chest. She held on, though, determined to get it out.

"It only happened once," she finished. "He never laid a hand on me again, but I kept my distance too. I told myself it was because we were drifting apart, as any family does, I was just becoming
Harry's hand squeezed her wrist tightly, and she finally opened her eyes.

"It wasn't your fault," he assured her. "Do you understand that?"

She nodded, but he wasn't convinced. Taking her face in his hands, he forced her to meet his eyes.

"No, I need you to really understand, Hermione," he insisted. "You didn't do anything wrong and he did not have the right to put his hands on you. I need you to truly and completely understand that."

His green eyes flashed with pain, and not just for her. She knew perfectly well why he was so adamant about this- he'd suffered more than his share of corporal punishments while living with the Dursleys, and he knew exactly the kind of thoughts she would be warring with.

"Promise me," he ordered her. "I need you to promise me that you know that, and that you believe it."

"I know," Hermione nodded again, meeting his eyes. "I promise Harry, I know."

He searched her face for any hint of a lie, but finding none, he leaned forward and kissed her forehead.

"Good," he smiled. "As long as we're clear."

"Crystal," she promised. "Well, at least on that. Everything else is still rather murky."

"It'll get clearer," Harry assured her. "It's just going to take time. If you're right, which you usually are, your mind has been keeping this hidden from you since you were a child. It's not going to come back overnight."

Hermione nodded, be it grudgingly, and Harry laughed.

"I know patience has never been your virtue."

"It's not like you're any better!" she scoffed. "Honestly, the nerve of you!"

Harry only continued to laugh, and eventually she couldn't help but join in. Merlin, she had missed this. It had been so long since she'd sat with her best friend and laughed.

Sobering, she reached out and took Harry's hands, capturing his attention.

"Thank you," she said sincerely. "For everything, Harry. I love you."

"I love you too," he smiled, pulling her into a hug. "It's going to get better."

Hermione nodded into his shoulder, her arms squeezing him tightly. "Yeah, I think it is," she agreed.
Chapter 31

Over the next week or so Hermione avoided going into the pensieve or looking at the files Harry had brought for her. Her epiphany, as she had taken to calling it, had taken a toll and while she wasn't dealing with massive cravings as she had in Ibiza, she still wouldn't have said no if someone had offered. No one did, not even Blaise, who dropped by to see how she was doing a few days after her impromptu visit. It wasn't until the following Friday that Hermione was truly tested, though, when Draco had to go in to deal with some Malfoy company business.

It was the first time in almost two weeks that she was going to be by herself, and while she had assured Draco more than a dozen times that she would be fine, the blossoms of doubt began to set in only a few minutes after he'd gone.

Figuring that it would be best not to just sit in her flat and stew, she decided to go into the shop for a few hours and do some work herself. She had three months worth of paperwork to catch up on after all, so after a quick stop at her favourite café for a chai latte and a scone, she pulled her hood up, stepped through the Leaky Cauldron and made her way through Diagon Alley.

By some miracle, she walked through the doors during a lull and was able to slip quietly behind the counter to retrieve all the files and ledgers she needed without hassle, and after a quick hello to Harmony she apparated down to her lab. She recalled the last time she'd done the accounts with a mixture of guilt and wistfulness, remembering the way Draco had watched her as she did a line before starting.

_We could do one now_, the voice in her head taunted. _It's not like it'd be hard to find. You never cleaned this place out._

Hermione winced at the thought, instantly regretting her decision to come to work.

_You don't need it_, her old self spoke up. She'd become a steady presence in the last couple weeks, and Hermione couldn't help but be thankful for that. She'd spent so long listening to that drug-fueled bitch that controlled her mind, she'd worried that the old Hermione might have been gone forever, but Draco and Harry had been right to assure her otherwise. Now, when she needed her old self the most, she never failed to appear and reassure her that the other voice was wrong, that she was stronger than the drugs and the booze.

_You don't need them. You need to heal_, she reminded her kindly. The drugs didn't heal, they hindered, and she had more than enough of that without a hangover to add to it. Nodding to herself, Hermione opened the first ledger and got to work.

When she'd finished the January ledger, Hermione decided to call it a day, feeling herself getting a tad twitchy, and headed back to her flat. When she got there, she could immediately tell that there was someone within the wards and assumed that Draco had finished his own work early. When she opened the door, though, she was accosted by a different blonde entirely.

"Well it's about damn time!" Astoria complained dramatically. "I've only been waiting three fucking months!"
"A little patience would serve you well," Hermione smirked at the blonde woman.

"You, Hermione Granger, are an absolute slag," Astoria stated, getting up from the sofa. "All those lovely parties you were photographed at and not a single call to your dearest friend. What kind of a bitch does that?"

"Only one that would be friends with you," Hermione countered easily.

"Well that's for sure." Astoria's serious expression disappeared, replaced by a delighted grin. "I missed you, Bitch!"

"I wish I could say the same," Hermione pulled her into a hug. "I'm sorry I just up and dashed like that, it was a bitch move."

"Not to worry, I kept myself entertained while you were gone," Astoria shrugged easily. "I even got myself a man."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up in surprise and Astoria scoffed disapprovingly as she pulled her over to the sofa.

"Don't give me that look! I'm perfectly capable of keeping a man."

"I have yet to see evidence to support that statement," Hermione frowned.

"I'll have you know we've been together for two months, and things are going swimmingly," Astoria said haughtily.

"Alright, well, what's his name?" Hermione propped her feet up on the back of the sofa, contorting herself into a sort of u-shape.

"Seamus."

"Finnegan?!"

"Gods no!" Astoria practically cackled at the suggestion. "But you should have seen your face. No, Hermione, there is more than one Seamus in the entirety of Britain."

"Yes, thank you, I know that," Hermione rolled her eyes. "And I was just surprised at the thought of you going with Seamus Finnegan, not that anyone wouldn't. He's grown up rather nicely."

"I'm sure you would know," Astoria gave her a meaningful look, causing Hermione to roll her eyes once again. "Anyways, his name is Seamus O'Callen, I met him in Dublin."

"Is he a wizard?"

"Squib," Astoria corrected with a shrug. "But what he lacks in conventional magic, he certainly makes up for in sexual prowess."

Hermione let out a deep, bellowing laugh at this comparison, but Astoria only grinned smugly.

"I'm just saying, I'm not missing out on anything," she shrugged in explanation. "And he's more than acquainted with the wizarding world, so it's working out perfectly."

"I'm very happy for you," Hermione told her friend meaningfully. "You deserve a nice man."

"Who said anything about nice?" Astoria demanded.
"You know what I meant," Hermione pursed her lips.

"I know, I just like taking the piss," Astoria grinned. "And what about you? What interesting things have I missed in your life?"

Hermione sighed heavily, not quite ready to have the conversation turned on her yet. "Who knows. I don't even know what might have made the papers."

"You're better off," Astoria's face mimicked Hermione's more serious tone. "You didn't seem good."

She and Astoria hadn't ever really discussed heavy things throughout their friendship, but she had been there for some of Hermione's lowest moments, and for that, she figured she deserved to know the truth. "I cracked, Stor."

The blonde woman reached out and took her hand, squeezing it tightly.

"I… I'm working on it," Hermione shrugged. "I suppose you could say I've hit a turning point. Draco- I don't know what I would do without him."

"The two of you certainly looked cozy in some of the stories," Astoria gave her a pointed look.

"It's… complicated," Hermione frowned uncertainly. "I don't really know how to possibly explain what he did for me… he was just, he was there. Whenever I turned around he was there, and at first I was ready to kill him, but then…"

"Then?" Astoria prodded her.

"Then it stopped being annoying and started being… comforting," Hermione admitted. "He never seemed to be judging me, and he never got in my way, he was just… there, and if I went too deep or got myself in trouble, he stepped in and took me back to his hotel to sleep it off, but then he never forced me to stay. I would run away and he just kept chasing me down."

"You seem good, though," Astoria frowned. "Calm, even."

"I am," Hermione nodded. "I haven't taken anything since Spain."

"Bad trip?" Astoria asked, recognizing the look on her face.

Hermione shuddered. "Gods, Stor, you can't even imagine. Draco got me through it though, and it knocked some sense into me. Helped me see how bad off I was, how much stuff I need to work through."

"Stuff to work through, huh?" Astoria tilted her head curiously. "Stuff from before?"

Hermione nodded, not meeting her eyes.

"Is that what the pensieve is for?" she asked, nodding to the bowl that was still set up on the breakfast bar.

"I've been using it to watch some memories of my- my parents," Hermione nodded, her voice catching slightly. "I've realized that there are a lot of things I… didn't know about them."

Astoria nodded, understanding from her tone that Hermione wasn't ready to talk about what kind of things. "So you're taking some time away, then," she assumed.

"Yeah," another nod.
"Good." Astoria's smile had Hermione sitting up in shock.

"Seriously," the blonde woman laughed. "Mi, I know we've really just been friends because we both like a good time, but even I can see that you need help. I'm glad you're ready to try and sort yourself out. You're not like Blaise and I, you're not just having a good time for the sake of it, you've always done it because you were in too much pain otherwise, and we can all see how much worse it's gotten. You're one of my best friends, I want you to be happy—properly happy."

Hermione had tears in her eyes as Astoria spoke, and when she'd finished, she threw her arms around her. "You're one of my best friends too," she promised. "Thank you."

"We're here for you," Astoria promised when they pulled apart. "Me and Daph and Blaise, whatever you need to get well, we're here. We really do care about you."

"Thank you," Hermione repeated soberly. "I just, I'm working on being quiet, you know?"

"Yeah," Astoria nodded. "I know exactly what you mean."

The two women shared a moment of silent understanding, and Hermione smiled at how normal it actually felt. She'd been worried in the time she'd been back that her relationships with Astoria and Blaise and the others would fizzle out if she wasn't going out with them anymore, but so far they didn't seem to care about that at all. They truly seemed to care about her, and that thought sent a wave of warmth through her chest. She'd thought she was so alone, but now she saw how wrong she'd been.

"So, tell me about this boy," she smiled brightly at Astoria. "Other than how good he is in bed."

Saturday morning, Hermione decided that it was time to venture back into the pensieve, feeling more in control than she had in a while. She'd had more of her dreams in the interceding weeks, and while they hadn't disappeared completely when she woke, they were still too hazy to properly make out and continued to leave her upset. She was hoping that going back into the pensieve would spark something again.

Starting from the beginning, she watched as she was taken from the hotel to the Ministry, and then the first half of the interview. She still had no memory of electrocuting her father, but something about Hogwarts stirred.

"What is it?" Draco asked, noting the look on her face.

"I don't know," she frowned. "Something about that… about McGonagall's visit…"

She shook her head and nodded for him to return to the flat with her, where she began to pace.

"Do you remember getting your letter?" Draco asked.

Hermione shook her head. "I know that it was delivered by Professor McGonagall, all muggleborns letters are. It sounds… familiar, though."

"Like you've dreamed about it?"

"Maybe. Probably." She sighed angrily and hopped up onto the counter, pushing her hair out of her
"I hate this!"

"I know," Draco tried to sound comforting. "It's getting better, though. Why don't you talk to McGonagall? Ask her what happened."

Hermione perked up a little at the suggestion, a little annoyed that she hadn't thought of it herself, and immediately scribbled out a note to her former Head of House, sending it off with Draco's owl Xerxes.

"You should really get your own owl," Draco mused as she tied the note to Xerxes' leg. "I don't know why you haven't."

"Because in the last two years I've barely been able to keep myself alive, let alone an owl," she frowned at him as though this were obvious. "Do you really think I would have remembered to feed an owl? Or leave windows open for it?"

"They're rather self sufficient," he pointed out.

"I'd have found a way to kill it," Hermione shook her head. "And if I hadn't, it probably would have killed me for being wretched."

"Well that's a possibility," Draco allowed. "What about that orange beast you used to tote around Hogwarts? If he didn't kill you in your sleep, nothing will."

"Crookshanks would never kill me in my sleep!" she immediately jumped to the cat's defense. "He was a lovely familiar, you all just never got to know him!"

"A crying shame," Draco deadpanned, earning a glare.

"It was! Anyways, he lives at the Burrow now," she continued glumly. "He stayed there when I went off with Harry and... and then he didn't want to leave."

She winced as she stumbled over Ron's name, cursing herself for being so ridiculous. 'Fear of a name...' she reminded herself stiffly.

"So he's still there?" Draco confirmed, politely ignoring her trip-up.

"Well I'm not exactly a welcome visitor these days," Hermione shrugged. "And after graduation... well, he's just been better off there. Honestly, there's a very good chance he's passed on now. Either way, it doesn't matter. He liked it there, there were always gnomes to bite."

Draco looked as though he wanted to say more on the matter, but Hermione seemed to be finished discussing it, turning away from him and making her way to the kitchen to put on the kettle.

"I always wanted a dog," he filled the silence. "When I was young."

Hermione quirked an eyebrow interestingly, so he continued.

"A big one, you know, the kind that a small child could ride around if they really wanted."

The image of a very small Draco Malfoy riding a Newfoundlander through the Malfoy Manor gardens, blond head shining in the sun, brought a giggle to Hermione's lips- especially since the child she imagined was wearing his signature sneer.

"I was going to name him Prometheus."
"What happened?" Hermione asked, fixing her tea.

"Father wouldn't let me," he shrugged. "He said it was because dogs were common muggle pets, but I think it was really because he was afraid a dog would go after his precious peacocks."

"It would have," she agreed.

"Of course it would have," Draco nodded eagerly. "That's the main reason I wanted one. Those peacocks were the bane of my existence."

"I'd have thought you all would have been bosom buddies," Hermione quipped. "You share so many qualities after all."

"Very funny, Granger," he narrowed his eyes at her.

"I certainly thought so," she chuckled to herself.

"Mock all you like, but those damned birds terrorized me," he shuddered, only making Hermione laugh harder.

"I'm sorry," she apologized through her giggles. "I am, but the thought of you being scared of a peacock-" Another wave of giggles overtook her, and she had to put her mug down for fear of spilling.

"They are vicious animals," Draco insisted. "Vicious and vindictive. And they bite!"

Hermione doubled over, tears in her eyes, gasping for air.

"Come to think of it," Draco continued over her. "So do you."

This brought a stop to the laughter, or at least stemmed it, as she stood up straight again and wiped her eyes. "Excuse me?!"

"Forgotten that, have you?" he smirked knowingly. "You bit me."

"I did not!" Hermione cried. "When did I bite you?!"

"We were in Amsterdam," Draco smiled fondly. "You were high as a kite and I was carrying you over my shoulder back to my hotel, and in between telling me all about the 'turvy' world around you and that my bum was far better than Blaise's, you decided to take a bite out of it."

Hermione stared at him in absolute horror, which only made Draco's smile grow.

"Not so fun when you're the one on the chopping block, now is it?" He taunted happily, turning around to fix his own tea.

"Well, it is a rather nice bum," Hermione studied him. "I understand why I did it." And just to make her point, she gave it a sharp pinch.

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When Xerxes returned, it was with an invitation to Hogwarts for tea the next day. Hermione had been quick to accept, but when the time had come for them to floo over, her nerves began to fray.
"This is a bad idea." She shook her head, stepping away from the fireplace.

"Why?" Draco asked patiently, knowing that this was going to happen. "What's so bad about it?"

"I haven't been back to Hogwarts since graduation," Hermione reasoned, pacing the living room. "I haven't seen Professor McGonagall since then."

"Okay?" Draco frowned, trying to catch up to her thought process.

"I've never been back to see her," she repeated anxiously.

"It's not a requirement after school finishes," he reasoned. "I've never been back either."

"You don't have a reason to go back," Hermione shook her head. "Snape isn't there, why else would you return?"

The mention of his godfather set off an alarm in his mind, telling him the connection was important. If Severus had still been alive and at Hogwarts, Draco certainly would have returned to visit him at some point. He was important to him— the father figure that he'd desperately needed throughout his childhood… and there it was. Minerva McGonagall was the last semblance of a parent that Hermione had. As her head of house, she would have been the person Hermione went to with her problems during school, and it was no secret that the elderly woman was extremely fond of her former students— especially the members of the Golden trio.

"I can't," Hermione was shaking her head again. "I can't do this."

"Come here." Draco took her hand and led her over to the sofa, pushing her to sit and crouching in front of her, holding both her hands in his to stop her fidgeting. "You're worried about how McGonagall will look at you."

"I don't need to worry about it, I already know what will happen," she scoffed.

"Oh really?" He raised an eyebrow sarcastically. "Have you become a Seer in the last day and not told me?"

"I'm a disappointment," Hermione muttered, ignoring his tone. "We both know it. I was her star pupil, and what did I do with that? I turned into a tabloid star whose crowning glory was having her boobs plastered on the front page of every magazine in the Wizarding world."

"Hermione, you built an apothecary empire from the ground up and have invented dozens of life-saving potions," Draco argued. "The last thing you could possibly be is a disappointment."

"She doesn't know that," Hermione pointed out. "All she knows is that I've been wasting my life away, partying and shagging anything with a pulse. Why should she care about anything else?"

"Because she cares about you," Draco said simply.

"Maybe she did," Hermione shook her head. "But now?" Her shoulders caved in defeatedly, her hair falling in front of her face as her head dropped.

"If she didn't want to see you, she wouldn't have invited you to tea," Draco tried to reason with her.

"What possible reason could she want to see me?" Hermione muttered, her face still hidden by a curtain of hair. "Other than to make it abundantly clear what a disappointment I am."

"Granger, look at me," Draco ordered, letting go of her hands so he could push her hair back and see
her face. "I know that you're scared, and that's okay, you have good reason to be-"

"Is this you trying to make me feel better," she scoffed. "Because it's not."

"-but not everyone is going to attack you," he spoke over her. "There are people in this world that truly care about you, Hermione. People who aren't going to throw your mistakes in your face or question your choices in life, but are going to applaud your efforts and tell you that everything is going to work out. You have people in your corner, and McGonagall is going to be one of them."

"Why?" she asked emptily. "What reason does she have to stand by me? I'm a disgrace to her. I disgrace her legacy, her house, the education she gave me. I've dragged the name of Gryffindor house through the mud, she has every right to tell me how she feels."

"You're right," Draco allowed. "She does have that right, but did it ever occur to you that what she might feel seeing you, is relief?"

Hermione almost laughed at the suggestion. What in Godric's name would make Minerva McGonagall feel relieved at the sight of her greatest failure? She had put years into Hermione's education, had spent her valuable time and shared her considerable skill with her, only to have it all thrown in her face as she watched Hermione give it all away. She'd taken that time and effort and thrown it back in the Headmistress' face as though it were nothing, the older woman had every right to tell her exactly what she thought about it. She deserved it, just as she had deserved the hatred her parents had displayed after she'd taken their lives away, and the looks of sheer agony she saw on Harry's face every time she closed her eyes and remembered that December night when he'd found her in the bath. She deserved McGonagall's ire, just as she had deserved Ron's disdain and hurt when she'd wanted to go to her own family instead of supporting his- his family that had loved her like their own, when her own never had.

She deserved everything that she was going to get and more, yet she knew that if she allowed the Headmistress to voice those feeling it would break her, and she wasn't sure anyone would be able to put her back together after.

"McGonagall doesn't hate you, Granger," Draco was insisting. "She doesn't even hate me!"

His attempt at humour got him nowhere. Hermione wasn't listening to him anymore, she was too stuck inside of her own twisted narrative. He could tell by the glazed look in her eyes and the way she tugged at her hair as she rested her head in her hands, her mind was spinning out. It was time to call in reinforcements.

Thankfully, Harry had been home when Draco flooed. He'd been chasing Teddy around the living room as the little boy rode his broomstick, both of them laughing uproariously. The little boy had almost flown straight through Draco's face when he appeared, stopped only by Potter's quick shout of 'arresto momentum'.

"Nice save," Draco complimented. "I have a feeling that would have hurt."


"She's fine," Draco's head swayed from side to side in a sort of shrug. "Well, sort of. I think she could do with one of those famous 'Harry Potter Pep talks' though."
"My pep talks aren't famous," Harry scoffed. "They're usually mumbled and awkward."

"Sure they are," Draco rolled his eyes. "That's how you convinced an entire school to rise up against tyranny, with bumbling awkwardness."

"Actually, yes," Harry nodded. "It was Hermione who did the pep-talking."

"Well, the shoe's on the other foot now," Draco told him. "Could you come through?"

"Of course," he nodded once more. "I'll have to bring Teddy, though. Gin's at practice. We'll come through in a second."

Draco thanked him and pulled his head out of the fire, taking Hermione's wand from the coffee table and adjusting her wards so that Potter could enter. A minute later, the dark haired wizard stepped into the flat, toddler in his arms. The blue-haired child sneezed comically, and Draco almost smiled—almost.

"We were supposed to be having tea with McGonagall," he explained to Harry quietly. "But she's convinced herself that the old woman hates her and only invited her so that she can express her hatred to her face and ensure that she knows how thoroughly ashamed she is of her."

Harry grimaced, taking in Hermione's anxious posture, then turned and held Teddy out to Draco. "Here, take him."

"Why?" Draco took a step back.

"Because I need to talk to Hermione," Harry explained obviously. "Come on, Malfoy, he doesn't bite."

Draco looked skeptically between the drooling child and Potter, not believing this for a second.

"Alright, he mostly doesn't," Harry allowed. "Just take him!"

Without waiting for an answer, he thrust Teddy unceremoniously into Draco's arms and went to sit down on the sofa, his hand reaching out to touch Hermione's knee tentatively.

"Hey," Harry greeted her softly, not wanting to startle her.

She didn't respond, but she also didn't pull away from his touch, so Harry continued.

"I hear you're late for tea," he mused. "That's not very like you."

"I can't do it, Harry," Hermione muttered, her voice shaking slightly. "I can't face her."

"Why not?" Harry asked. "What are you afraid of?"

"She must hate me," she voiced her fears. "She gave me so much, and I just threw it back in her face via tabloid covers. She must think I'm a disgrace—she's right, of course. I am. I'm a disgrace to her, to Gryffindor house, to Hogwarts… I'm a disgrace to everyone."

"Hermione," Harry chided her gently. "You are not a disgrace. Not to anyone."

She snorted derisively, and Harry was forced to amend his words.

"Not to anyone that matters," he insisted. "And especially not to McGonagall. Hermione, she loves you like you were her own, she's always cared about you."
"Maybe before," Hermione allowed. "But now? Who could love a child that betrayed them so horribly?"

"What do you mean, betrayed?" Harry frowned. "What is it that you think you've done to make her hate you?"

"You can't be serious!" Hermione finally looked at him, her eyes full of guilt. "She took me under her wing, gave me an education, spent her time mentoring me and teaching me, and I practically threw it all away! She wanted me to be brilliant, to change the world, and I went and drugged myself into oblivion, and drank until I couldn't see anymore. Every time I showed up on a tabloid, it was like slapping her across the face and flipping her off. I cared about the things she did for me so much, that I threw them all away for a hit and a shitty fuck."

Harry winced slightly as her voice rose, he was sure that by the time they got home Teddy would be running around shouting 'shitty fuck' at the top of his lungs, but that was the least of his worries right now. The important thing was getting through Hermione's head that Minerva McGonagall didn't think any of those things.

"Hermione, she doesn't think that," he said, his tone insistent. "I swear to you, McGonagall doesn't give a crap what those tabloids had to say about you, or what anyone else has to say. She only cares about you."

Hermione scoffed at this, but Harry carried on.

"She was the first person to jump to your defense at the memorial last year, do you know that?" he shared. "Someone made a crude comment, and before I could even turn around to look at them, she'd stripped them down and made it clear that anyone who thought you were anything short of a brilliant young witch, would be answering to her."

This caught Hermione by surprise, giving Harry time to share more insights into their former Head of House, while she gaped at him.

"She keeps in touch, we have tea sometimes, and every time we do, she asks if I know how you're doing, and if there's anything that you need. The first time the Prophet ran one of their horrific stories about you, I went to give the editor a piece of my mind. I walked into the office, and from the other end of the building, I could hear the Howler McGonagall had sent him. She was outraged that they would put you on display and say the things they had when you were so obviously in pain." He paused to give her time to absorb this information, watching closely as her mind spun.

When he was sure that she was listening, he spoke again. "I know that you've been remembering a lot of terrible things, Mione, and I wish that there was some way for me to make that better. What I know, though, is that the things that your parents said to you, the way they treated you, they were so wrong. They had absolutely no idea how lucky they were to have a daughter like you and if I could, I would take great pleasure in telling them just how wrong they were. But you can't let their stupidity mar the way you think everyone sees you. There are people in your life that love you unconditionally, and Minerva McGonagall is one of them."

This statement was followed by silence, broken only by Teddy giggling at something Draco was presumably doing. Harry didn't look at them, though, he only had eyes for Hermione.

"People lie," she eventually said quietly. "They save face, and you think that everything is fine, and then it all falls apart."

"I know," Harry rubbed her back soothingly.
"I don't think I could take it, if she-" Hermione shook her head, unable to even say the words now for fear of making them true.

"She won't," he promised sincerely. "I swear, Hermione, on anything you like. I swear, she's not going to hurt you like they did."

Meanwhile, as Harry tried to talk Hermione around, Draco had taken Teddy into the bedroom to give them some privacy. The only problem with this, was that once they were alone Draco didn't have a clue what he was supposed to do with the toddler. The result of this was a rather serious staring contest, in which both Draco and Teddy took a moment to study each other carefully.

The child seemed well enough behaved, Draco thought. After all, he'd happily allowed himself to be handed over to a complete stranger and hadn't made a peep, his hair was rather questionable though. Draco assumed that blue was his favourite colour.

"Down!" the child suddenly demanded, jumping in Draco's arms and pointing to the bed.

"Hm," Draco frowned. "Your manners certainly have something to be desired."

"Down!" Teddy repeated the order, lunging towards the mattress.

"Merlin's balls!" Draco barely caught him, only really succeeding in cushioning his fall. Teddy didn't seem to mind, though. In fact he seemed thoroughly amused with the action and held his arms up expectantly.

"Again!" he grinned.

"You want me to almost drop you?" Draco gave him a disparaging look.

Teddy's smile only grew as he got to his feet and reached up for Draco to lift him. "Again!"

"You're a very strange child." Draco observed, but followed the tiny human's order, lifting him up and surreptitiously tossing him onto the bed.

Teddy squealed with laughter and scrambled to repeat the game, not the least bit bothered by Draco's less than friendly expression. They repeated this game until it grew tiresome to the toddler, latching onto Draco's neck and shouting "No!" directly in his ear to inform him that the game was finished.

"Fuck!" Draco recoiled from the scream.

"Fuck!" Teddy repeated the word gleefully and Draco winced.

"No, don't say that, that's a bad word," he tried to explain. "It's not nice."

"Fuck!" Teddy squealed again.

"No," Draco shook his head seriously. "No, that's bad. Bad word. You're not to say it."

"Fuck!"

"Great," Draco sighed. "Potter leaves me alone with is godson for five minutes and I've already
corrupted him."

He looked around the room desperately for something to entertain the child, in the hopes that it would be distracted and forget the new word, but came up empty. There wasn't exactly a lot of toys in Granger's house.

"How about a story?" Draco suggested. "Do you like stories?"

"Moony!" Teddy squealed delightedly. "Moony! Moony! Moony!"

"Is that a story that you like?" Draco asked, thoroughly confused. "I don't think I know that one."

He looked around desperately for a volume that might have some sort of childish element to it- Granger certainly would have one somewhere. Setting Teddy back on the bed, still shouting 'Moony', Draco scoured the stray books in the room for one that looked appropriate. When he found a worn copy of Beadle the Bard, he let out a whoop of satisfaction and turned back to the bed- only to find it empty.

"Fuck," he cursed once again, looking around the room for a tiny blue head. "Where did you go?"

A tiny giggle, obviously meant to be quiet, came from the other side of the room. Ah, Draco realized, it's playing a game. Figuring it would just be easiest to play along, he began to slowly make his way over, occasionally wondering aloud where the child was.

"Hello?" he called, opening a dresser drawer. "Child?"

Another giggle.

"Are you here?" Draco drawled, peering behind the dresser.

He checked two more spots before the child suddenly scrambled out from beneath the bed and squealed, "Here!"

"Oh, wow!" Draco droned unexcitedly. "I never would have guessed."

Completely oblivious to his uninterested tone, Teddy continued laughing, then pointed at Draco emphatically and said, "You!"

"Me, what?" Draco frowned.

"You hide!" Teddy explained, as though this were obvious.

"No," Draco immediately shook his head. "I do not hide."

"You hide! You hide!" Teddy insisted, jumping up and down for emphasis. "Hide seek!"

"I do not play hide and seek," Draco informed him. "I will read you a story."

"Moony!" Teddy's eyes lit up again and he quickly forgot about wanting to play hide and seek, climbing onto the bed and making himself comfortable against the headboard and pillows before looking expectantly at Draco.

"Beadle the Bard," Draco held up the book.

Teddy made a face of dislike. "Moony!" he insisted.
"I told you, I don't know that one," Draco huffed. "Now, I will read you Beadle the Bard, and you will sit quietly and listen. Alright?"

Teddy didn't seem to think it was alright at all based on the distasteful look he was giving Draco, but he didn't say anything, so the blond wizard sat down on the edge of the bed and opened the first page.

"There was once a kindly old wizard …"

Draco didn't stop reading until he heard giggling coming from the doorway. Between the Hopping Pot and The Warlock's Hairy Heart, Teddy had moved from his spot amongst the pillows to sit beside Draco, resting his head on his arm so he could look at the pictures, but Draco had ignored him and simply continued to read. Now, though, he looked down at the child and found a very tiny version of himself looking back.

"Gah!" he recoiled slightly, and the laughter in the doorway grew louder.

Teddy grinned proudly.

"Well done, mate!" Potter congratulated the child, stepping into the room. "You're getting good at that."

"Mimey!" Teddy spotted the witch lingering in the doorway and his eyes lit up, his features returning to their normal state as he scrambled off the edge of the bed and ran towards her as fast as his little legs would carry him. "Mimey! Mimey!"

"Hi, Teddy," Hermione smiled softly and sank to her knees, catching him.

"Mimey!" Teddy squealed and threw his arms around her neck, hugging her fiercely.

Hermione held him with just as much strength, and Draco didn't miss the tears that gathered in her eyes as she cuddled the child.

"Mimey sad?" Teddy asked when he pulled away and saw her tears. "No Mimey sad."

"No, I'm not sad," Hermione promised him with a watery smile. "I just missed you."

"I misseded you too Mimey," he told her.

Not wanting him to see her cry, Hermione pulled the little boy into another hug, pulling him into her lap and cuddling him as close as she could. For his part, Teddy giggled and squirmed until she let him go, his nose wrinkling adorably when he pulled away.

"Tickles," he informed her, scrunching his face up like a little rabbit.

Hermione smiled. "What were you doing before? When we came in."

"Stories," he informed her, then became very serious. "No Moony."

"Draco doesn't know those stories, mate," Harry explained. "Those are special stories, remember?"
"Mimey knows," Teddy argued.

"Well, Mimey's pretty special," Harry chuckled.

"Very," Draco corrected.

Harry rolled his eyes at the Slytherin, but let his need to one up him go and turned back to Teddy. "Alright, mate, we've got to get going. Ginny'll probably be home soon."

"Mimey come?" Teddy asked, big hopeful eyes turning on the witch and making her heart clench.

"Not today," Harry answered for her. "Mimey's got to go see Professor McGonagall, remember her?"

Teddy frowned thoughtfully and shook his head.

"Well, Mimey has to go see her," Harry shrugged. "She'll come see us another day."

Teddy turned to Hermione for confirmation of this, and she nodded. "Promise."

This seemed good enough for him, since he allowed Harry to pick him up without argument, one arm coming around his godfather's neck.

"Can you say thank you to Malfoy for playing with you?" Harry prompted him.

"Thank you, Malfoy," Teddy waved brightly. "Bye Mimey!"

"Bye love," Hermione stood and pecked the child on the cheek, making him giggle, then did the same to Harry. "Bye."

"It's going to be good," Harry promised her. "Swear on 'Hogwarts a History'."

Hermione pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes at this promise, but Harry grinned impishly and kissed her cheek. "I'll talk to you tomorrow."

Before she could scold him for taking her favourite book in vain, he thanked Draco for watching Teddy and quickly rushed out to the living room to floo home.

"So?" Draco asked once Potter left. "Tea?"

Hermione nodded, obviously still nervous, but willing to take the chance. "You and Teddy looked like you were having fun," she mused.

Draco shrugged ambiguously, and Hermione smirked.

"You were having fun," she poked his arm. "Just admit it."

"I will admit no such thing," he shook his head.

"You were having fun," Hermione goaded him happily.

Not wanting to ruin her sudden good mood, Draco kept his mouth shut and gave her a small shove towards the fireplace. This only made her laugh, and as she stepped through the floo Draco smiled, still able to hear her giggling.
The giggles had stopped entirely when he stepped out of the fireplace in McGonagall's office. He almost ran over her, she had frozen so close to the mantel, wringing her hands and chewing a hole through her lip.

"It's going to be fine," Draco promised, wrapping an arm around her.

She nodded, but didn't stop fidgeting.

"Miss Granger!" Minerva McGonagall stepped briskly into the room, a warm smile on her face. "And Mr. Malfoy?"

"I-I hope it's alright," Hermione stammered nervously, head bowed.

"It's a pleasure to see you both," the Headmistress didn't skip a beat. "Come in, come in. I'll call for tea."

Ushering the pair further into her office, she gestured to a sitting area in front of a much smaller fireplace in the corner of the room, with a sofa and two leather armchairs.

While Draco and Hermione settled themselves on the sofa, she called for a house elf to bring up tea and biscuits, before joining them.

"I was so pleased when I got your letter yesterday," McGonagall smiled at Hermione. "It's been too long. You seemed distressed, though."

Hermione managed only a small nod in response, finding herself supremely overwhelmed. She'd been terrified of the welcome she was destined to receive, and yet Minerva had never been so warm in her life. The look in her eyes was one that Hermione could remember seeing only once before, when Harry spoke with her after the Final Battle. Seeing that same deep affection the older woman had for Harry focussed on herself, Hermione found herself completely and utterly dumbfounded.

As had become the norm, Draco swooped to her rescue, questioning McGonagall on her health and the state of Hogwarts. While the two of them chatted idly, tea arrived, and Hermione found a small amount of comfort in having something to hold. She always felt better with a cup of tea in hand.

"And Miss Granger," the Headmistress turned her attention back to Hermione, observing that she had calmed slightly. "How are you?"

"I-I'm well," Hermione answered quietly, only feeling that she was lying a tiny bit.

"I'm very glad to hear it," McGonagall nodded. "I must say, I worry about you."

"Sorry," Hermione dropped her gaze immediately, embarrassed and guilty.

"My dear, you have nothing to be sorry for," Minerva replied, her tone not dissimilar to the one she'd used when giving out detentions. "Nothing at all."

She was so firm in her conviction, that Hermione chanced a glimpse at her. She froze to find the elder witch watching her with such fierce sincerity, her eyes full of warmth and care, and without meaning to she burst into tears.

Before Draco could even put his cup down, Minerva had swept around the coffee table, plucked
Hermione's cup from her hands and perched herself on the arm of the sofa, pulling Hermione to her side.

"It's alright dear," she comforted her quietly, stroking her hair. "It's alright."

It was such a maternal action and so seemingly out of character for the Professor, who Draco had always thought of as being about as affectionate as her house mascot, that he couldn't tear his eyes away.

Though she was still crying, Draco could hear Hermione trying to explain herself and apologize, but while he only caught the occasional word or two, Minerva seemed to understand every syllable, responding appropriately.

"I know, dear," she reassured Hermione. "I understand… I could never think such a thing."

When her sobs finally quieted down to the odd sniffle, the Headmistress summoned a box of tissues and set it in Hermione's lap, patting her hand affectionately when she pulled away. Obviously embarrassed by her display, Hermione kept her eyes down as the older woman returned to her seat, but looked up when she called her name.

"Have a biscuit," Minerva ordered.

For some reason that Draco didn't understand, this brought forth a bright smile on Hermione's face and quite possibly what might have been a laugh, though it was short lived. Taking up her teacup once more, Hermione followed the instruction and nibbled at a shortbread while she composed herself. When she had finished, she finally met the Headmistress's eye once again.

"Thank you," she started breathlessly. "I- thank you."

The Headmistress smiled warmly and nodded, but didn't respond, obviously knowing that Hermione had more to say.

"I don't really know where to start," she frowned, trying to sort out her thoughts. "I suppose, well, I suppose I should ask if you knew.

"Knew what?" McGonagall asked.

"About my parents?" Hermione shrugged. "About their… views?"

McGonagall pursed her lips together disapprovingly and Hermione knew without her having to say anything that she had.

"I fear that I do," she said. "Or, I at least suspected."

"Why?" Hermione asked, and when the older woman frowned at her in confusion, she explained. "I don't remember very well, you see. It seems that there are a lot of things about my childhood that I've repressed, and I've only recently begun being able to recall them properly. I'm trying to piece everything together, trying to understand."

"I wondered…" Minerva nodded slowly. "Perhaps it would be best if you began, though."

Hermione wasn't sure that was best at all, but she had yet defy a professor, even all these years after school. "Did you suspect anything when you delivered my letter?"

"I did," the Headmistress nodded. "There were quite a few, warning flags shall we say, that went up
"And once I'd started school?" Hermione asked.

"Once you were enrolled, I kept an eye on you, but there weren't any serious concerns," Minerva said carefully. "Not beyond your first year."

"After Christmas holidays?"

"You remember then," the witch's lips disappeared into a thin line of disapproval.

"I remember what happened when I was home," Hermione nodded. "And seeing Madame Pomfrey when I returned."

"You don't remember discussing the matter with me?"

Hermione shook her head, frowning. "No, what did we discuss?"

"Poppy alerted me to your injuries and I called you into my office," McGonagall recalled. "You insisted that you had fallen down the stairs. When I asked about your magical accident, you shared with me that you were embarrassed by the matter, but nothing else. I assumed that you were keeping things from me."

"I'm sure you've guessed them by now," Hermione stared into her teacup.

"I knew perfectly well, then," Minerva informed her. "But you refused to speak of it, so I was forced to let it be. I kept a careful eye on you afterwards, though. I never suspected that you were harmed again."

"I don't think I was," Hermione shook her head. "You still thought something was wrong, though."

"I knew that your parents were not integrating as other muggle parents did," she explained. "Any encounters I had with them were incredibly brisk, and Sybill insisted that their auras were absolutely horrific- not that I put much stock in such things, but occasionally they have their uses."

Draco couldn't help but snicker at this defense, as he was well aware how Hermione felt about Divination. When she glared at him, he only shrugged and sipped his tea innocently.

"You said you wondered whether I had repressed things," Hermione turned back to her professor. "Why?"

"I occasionally had to deal with your parents over school matters," she explained. "Most poignantly, when you were unable to go home over Christmas your second year, and later on when you were petrified."

Hermione's cheeks blushed a deep red at the mention of her Christmas in the hospital ward, and she desperately tried to hide her face from Draco behind her hair. The last thing she needed him to know was that she had once accidentally polyjuiced herself into a cat.

"Their reaction was... lacking," the Headmistress plowed on. "Any parent should have been worried sick, and yet, I'm sorry to say, they did not seem to care."

Unsurprised, Hermione gave a slow nod, once again focusing on the teacup in her hands.

"What did that have to do with Hermione not remembering, though?" Draco asked, putting his hand on her knee and giving it a squeeze.
"You never showed any sign that you were being neglected or mistreated in any way," McGonagall explained, watching Hermione. "I made a point of keeping a very close eye on you, and never once did I even suspect something amiss. You were always excited to return home and more than happy to share what you'd done while there. I never had any reason to worry about you beyond that first year, and yet I continually found your parents to be cold and uncaring towards you. I knew that there had to be something I wasn't seeing."

Hermione nodded along at this explanation, understanding the Headmistress' reasoning. Yet there was still something that she couldn't quite wrap her head around. "When you delivered my letter," she said. "I don't remember that, and that seems to indicate something unpleasant occurred. They said that they were telling you no, that I wouldn't be attending Hogwarts, but then something changed."

"They were very adamant," Minerva agreed, remembering the day well. "Determined that they would stomp it out of you, as though they could have. That was the moment I knew that you would be extraordinary." She smiled fondly at the memory.

"What do you mean?" Hermione frowned. "What did I do?"

"Young magic is a strange thing," the older witch answered whimsically. "Untethered, emotional, you never quite know what it can be capable of. Your magic has always been connected strongly with your emotions, it remained so all through your time here at Hogwarts, and I feel safe in assuming that it still is."

"It is," Draco nodded quickly. "It definitely is."

Hermione snarled testily at him, but said nothing, waiting for the Headmistress to continue.

"You sat on the staircase while I spoke with your parents, listening to our conversation," Minerva told her. "I could just see you from the corner of my eye. You looked hopeful- like you might have found your place in the world. When your father tried to remove me from the house, your magic reached out and stopped him."

Hermione gaped at her, unable to comprehend what she was saying, so she carried on.

"Like I said, young magic is only contained by emotion, it reacts to you in a way that you later learn to train, but have little control over before your first wand. Most prominently, it protects you when you feel you are in danger. When your father announced that you would not be attending school, your core took it as a threat and reacted accordingly," she tried to explain. "I can't truly explain it, as it was your magic, but it was something akin to a blanket of calm."

Even as McGonagall tried to relate the feeling, Hermione felt the echoes of it in her chest. It had been a wish, like the ones she had made on birthday candles and shooting stars and eyelashes up to that point in her life.

"Granger?" Draco called her name, his hand resting on her back. "You alright?"

Hermione nodded, realizing that she had zoned out for a moment. "Yes," she turned to look at him, and could tell that he was worried, so she offered him a smile. "I- yes, I'm fine."

"Haze?" he guessed.

She nodded again. "I remember wishing."

Professor McGonagall nodded thoughtfully. "That could easily explain things," she mused. "A deep desire like a wish would be strongly entrenched in emotion, your magical core would have easily
latched onto it."

Hermione sat quietly for a moment, mulling this over, waiting to see if the fog in her memory would clear, but she found that she was still only able to catch whispers. What was clear, was the fact that her father had been right- she had manipulated them her entire life.

Without any sort of preamble, she set her cup down and got to her feet, anxiety gripping her throat.

"Th-thank you," she gave her former professor a curt nod. "This has helped."

Without waiting for any sort of response, she stepped around the sofa and sped towards the fireplace attached to the floo network.

"Miss Granger," Minerva called, quickly following her.

Hermione took a deep breath and turned back to face the her, forcing herself to appear collected. "I'm sorry, I really need to go. I've taken too much of your time as it is."

"You have done nothing of the sort," the elder witch said sternly. "I am exceedingly happy that you came, and while the subject matter may not have been pleasant, I have thoroughly enjoyed seeing you."

"Me too," Hermione mumbled, her hands fiddling with hem of her shirt.

"Please come see me anytime, my floo is always open to you," Minerva continued as Draco caught up to them.

Hermione nodded slightly, and it seemed that she would be able to leave then, but once again Minerva stopped her, this time reaching out to take her hands, pulling them from her ruined hem.

"Hermione, I want you to know," she began, her voice rather thicker than it had been a moment ago. "I care very deeply for all my students, former and current, but you hold a very special place in my heart. I know that your own family has hurt you deeply, but I hope that you will remember that family is not forged only by blood. Should you ever need assistance, or simply wish to see a friendly face, I hope that you will come to me."

Refusing to look at the older witch, Hermione nodded once again, tears filling her eyes. Judging by the quiet sniff that followed the professor's speech, it seemed she was on the verge of tears as well.

"Thank you." Hermione muttered quietly and pulled away before anything else could be said, tossing some floo powder into the fire and disappearing in a matter of seconds.

"It was nice to see you Professor," Draco put his hand out to shake.

"You as well, Mr. Malfoy." She took his hand, but instead of shaking it, held on with both of hers.

"I-I know it might not seem like it," he told her, "but she is doing better. A lot better, actually."

"I only hope it continues," McGonagall sighed heavily. She seemed to notice that she was still holding Draco's hand then and quickly released it, clearing her throat a little. "Well, as Albus always said, Hogwarts shall always give help to those who ask for it. I hope neither of you will forget that."

"Yes, Professor."

She gave a stiff nod of dismissal, then turned and walked towards her desk as Draco stepped through the floo, smirking.
They were right. The words echoed through Hermione's mind, running on a loop that didn't seem to end. They were right. They were right. They were right.

It had seemed preposterous at the time, of course she hadn't manipulated them! They were her parents, she loved them- she'd thought they loved her- she would never have done something like that. Yet, the more she focussed, the clearer the evidence became. She remembered sitting in the stairwell, remembered thinking how wonderful it would be to finally fit in somewhere. She'd been so desperate to belong, she hadn't even thought about how her parents might feel. She hadn't paid attention to their anxious tones, or took notice of their fearful glances. Perhaps if she had, things would have been different…

What, you wouldn't be a witch? A voice in her head asked. That's not how it works.

I might have given them a chance to acclimate, Hermione reasoned with the voice. Maybe if they hadn't felt forced to say yes-

You're deluding yourself, the voice scoffed. It was always going to be like this, and they were always right.

And there lay the problem- if they had been right about this, what else had they been right about? What else was she to blame for? Had she really almost killed her father as a child? Had that been the only time that her magic had meddled in their lives?

There were just so many things that she couldn't remember, so many times she might have forced their hands without knowing.

Her head was spinning from all the possibilities, each one worse than the one before, reminding her that she truly had no idea what she had been capable of. The things she had done to protect her friends and family extended to the far reaches of Dark Magic during the war, but had she been dabbling in such things all along?

No, she couldn't think about that. That was a dark tunnel that she could not enter- but now that she stood at its entrance, she could barely hold herself back. Her mind was filling with 'what ifs', and she couldn't deny any of them.

What else have you taken away? Her father had sneered at her, and she'd tried to say that she had only done it that once, only been trying to protect them, but perhaps he knew differently? Perhaps he, like her, had an idea that things were missing and knew that she was the one who had taken them.

Her mother had accused her of playing games with their minds- had she? When she'd wanted a cat and they'd said no, had she manipulated them into allowing her to have Crooks? When she'd asked them to sign her Hogsmeade form? When they'd taken her on holiday with them? When they'd given her funds for extra books?

The possibilities were endless, and Hermione found herself thoroughly overwhelmed by the thoughts. She'd thought she was getting closer to answers, that things were getting better, only to find out that she knew nothing about her life.

"And here I thought you'd gone and copped it," a voice leered at her. "Figured that was the only thing that'd keep you away for so long."
Hermione froze, slowly coming down from her frantic daze, and looked around in confusion. She found herself on a busy street corner a few blocks from her flat— which she didn't remember leaving—and directly in front of her, looking like a starving wolf, was her dealer, Max.

Max was fit, 6'4'' all muscle and built like a rugby player. Tattoos covered his arms and chest, his dark hair was always perfectly tousled. She'd picked him up in a bar one night—the first time she tried Ecstasy, to be exact. He'd always taken care of her, given her the good stuff, not the shady shit you usually found in the clubs, and they'd fallen into bed together on multiple occasions. Hermione had never felt threatened by him, though. Now, she found that she was terrified.

"So, where've you been hiding yourself?" he asked, stepping closer to her.

"I was away," she shrugged, trying to seem uninterested. "Travelling."

"And now you're back to see old Maxy," he smirked. "Gotcha."

"N-no," Hermione shook her head, taking a step back. "No, I, uh, was just out for a walk."

"C'mon, luv," Max chuckled dangerously, stepping in once again. "You don't have to pretend with me. I know what you're looking for. What's wrong, you skint?"

Hermione shook her head and stepped back again, but Max continued to follow, looming over her.

"You know I'll always take care of you," he assured her coyly. "We can come to an arrangement."

Her back hit bricks, and Hermione cursed herself. How could she have been so stupid? Why had she left the flat in the first place? And why in the name of all the founders, had she not turned and run the moment Max had appeared?

*You can analyze later,* the voice in her head scolded, *now you need to get out of here.*

Summoning every ounce of Gryffindor courage she could find, Hermione took a deep breath, squared her shoulders and lifted her face to look Max in the eye, batting her lashes at him.

"Thanks," she smiled sweetly. "I'm truly good, though. I'm not here to score."

"Just missed my company, then?" Max smirked, his hands coming up to rest against the wall on either side of her head, caging her in.

"Funnily enough, no," she rolled her eyes mockingly. "I was just out for a stroll, and up you popped."

"Aren't you a lucky girl, then," he leaned in so his mouth was right against her ear.

Hermione hummed ambiguously, and lifted one hand to push against his chest. "I've places to be, Max."

"Do you, now?" he nodded skeptically. "Moving up in the world?"

"Not at all," she shook her head. "Just moving on."

"What, you're tired of me?" Max demanded, an edge in his voice. "Found someone new to get you off?"

"That's not what I said," Hermione backpedaled immediately.
"No?" Max scoffed. "Cause it's what I heard. You slaggin' off with someone new? Letting him have his way with ya so you can take his goods?"

"No!" she insisted. "Max, I'm not going somewhere else. I'm clean."

This took him by surprise, making him pull back a little to look at her, and Hermione took her chance. Ducking under his arm, she took off at a run.

Behind her, she could hear him cursing at her, but she didn't dare turn back to see if he was following. Slipping through the crowds on the sidewalk, she didn't stop until she collided with something hard.

"Whoa!" Draco's arms went around her waist, before she could fall. "What's wrong? What are you doing?"

Her hands gripped his arms tightly as she caught her breath, finally stealing a look behind her, relieved to see no sign of Max's towering figure.

"Hey," Draco squeezed her hip, demanding her attention. "What's going on?"

"N-nothing," Hermione shook her head, turning back to him. "I ran into someone, is all."

"You mean besides me?" he confirmed, earning an eye roll.

"Yes, besides you. A- an old dealer," she admitted quietly. "I just-"

"Oi!" Max's deep voice called out to her over the crowd and Hermione winced.

"I take it that's him," Draco frowned, sizing up the muggle that stormed towards them.

Hermione nodded, her nails digging into his biceps and her eyes squeezed shut.

"Cheeky bint!" Max shouted at her. "The fuck was that?!"

Before she could answer, Draco's hand pressed against her spine, pushing her as close to his body as he could, his other hand slipping into his pocket where he kept his wand.

"Can I help you?" he demanded in his most aristocratic tone.

"Don't think I was talking to you," Max snarled at him. "You usually get called a cheeky bint?"

"I get called a great many things," Draco drawled. "Now, can I help you?"

"What, you're not even talking to me anymore?" Max snapped at Hermione dangerously. "Found yourself an old man to take care o' you?"

"Mate, do us a favour and bugger off," Draco tipped his chin at him dismissively. "She hasn't got use for you anymore."

"Whatever," Max scoffed and took a step back, arms raised. "She's not worth a scuffle. Besides, you'll be back." He tilted to one side so he could catch Hermione's eye, a malicious smirk on his lips. "They always come back."

"Well, he was pleasant," Draco quipped once Max was gone.

Hermione made a sound somewhere between a bark of laughter and a whimper, her entire body still
clenched in fear.

"Come on," Draco's hand slid up her back, draping his arm over her shoulders. "Let's go."

Tucking her securely into his side, he began leading her back to her flat.

"I have to say," he commented after walking a block in silence. "As dealers go, he was one of the easier ones I've had to scare off."

Another moment of silence passed, and then Hermione began to howl with laughter. The sheer absurdity of the statement bringing tears to her eyes, and forcing her to grip Draco's waist to hold herself upright.

"I mean, he wasn't even keen to have a go," Draco continued flatly. "He could have at least put a little effort into it."

"Stop," Hermione gasped. "Stop it, I can't breathe!"

"I don't know why you're laughing," he scoffed, maintaining an indignant tone despite the smirk on his face. "I'm feeling rather insulted here."

Hermione turned her face into his shoulder to try and smother her laughter, stumbling over her own feet as they carried on.

"He was right, you are cheeky," Draco glared at her.

She only continued to laugh, which turned into a case of hysterical hiccups, making it even more difficult for her to compose herself. When she let out a particularly adorable snort, Draco finally cracked, chuckling right along with her. By the time they reached her building, they were both stumbling, completely hysterical, as though they'd been dosed with an extra strength laughing potion.

Once inside, the humour of the situation wore off and Hermione's mind began to spin once more.

"How did you find me?" she asked Draco, suddenly realizing that he must have been looking for her- why else would he be wandering around Tower Hamlets?

"Locator spell," he was quick to admit. "You ran out of McGonagall's office like it was on fire, and when I followed you here, the door was wide open."

Well, that's brilliant, Hermione scolded herself. Just let the whole building in, why don't you.

"What were you doing?" Draco asked. Good question.

"I don't really know," she shrugged. "I suppose I was just walking."

To the closest dealer, the voice in her mind jeered. I fucking walked you straight into his arms, you could be flying right now, you stupid bint!

Hermione winced, willing the voice to quiet. She wasn't doing that anymore, she wasn't hiding from her life.

"Granger," Draco's voice snapped her back to attention, her eyes lifting to meet his. "Talk to me."

She took a deep breath and leaned back against the kitchen counter, her hands coming up to tug at
her hair. What was she supposed to say?

"Why did you run out of the office so fast?" he offered her a prompt. "What happened?"

"You realized that you really are the manipulative little cunt your father said you were, the voice chuckled cruelly. Not that that's a surprise, of course. You've never exactly been a peach."

"Hermione." Draco interrupted the voice once again, suddenly standing directly in front of her, his hands cupping her face. "Don't listen to your head, talk to me. What happened?"

"They were right," she told him, her voice barely audible.

"Who were right?"

"My parents," Hermione sniffled. "They were right."

Draco frowned, obviously trying to figure out what it was exactly she thought they were right about.

"I- I played with their minds my whole life," she muttered in explanation. "Just like they said."

Draco immediately started to argue with her, but Hermione pushed him away, slipping out from between him and the counter and heading for her bedroom. She just wanted to be alone.

Unfortunately, Draco was having none of that, and was hot on her heels. She'd barely even put a hand to the door to close it, when his palm landed on the middle of the wood and pushed it wide open.

"Draco, please, I just want to be alone," she sighed.

"No you don't," he said firmly. "You very much don't want to be alone right now, which is why you subconsciously took off to find somewhere to not be alone the minute you came across this thought."

"He's not wrong," the kinder of the two voices in her head spoke up, the voice that belonged to the old her. Hermione closed her eyes in exasperation, damning him for being so bloody persistent, then summoned a packet of smokes and climbed into the window.

She was halfway through her second smoke when Draco spoke again, sitting on the edge of the bed with his elbows on his knees, watching her seriously.

"You didn't do what you think you did," he told her. "You didn't mess with their heads."

Hermione sniffed derisively and continued to stare at the docks her flat overlooked. They were dreary and dirty, straight out of a scene from Les Miserables or Oliver Twist, abandoned years previously for the nicer Canary Wharf. They were probably so full of sludge and trash the boats couldn't even get close enough to lay anchor anymore, if the smell was anything to go by. It was desolate and decrepit, and the very last place Harry Potter would have ever looked for her, which was why she had bought a flat there in the first place.

"You weren't playing games with their minds, or meddling in their heads," Draco carried on speaking, pulling her attention back. "You were eleven, you didn't know what you were doing. You just did what any child would do, you made a wish."

"That came true," she argued. "Despite my parents wanting nothing to do with it."

"That wasn't your fault," Draco insisted.
"Then whose fault was it?" Hermione demanded, finally looking over at him.

"It wasn't anyone's fault," he reasoned. "It was just…"

"Magic," she said sarcastically. "Yes, my magic."

"It was protecting you," Draco argued. "That's what it's supposed to do."

"It's not supposed to do anything!" Hermione cried. "It's not sentient! I control it, it's part of me."

"You know that's not true," Draco shook his head. "I mean, it is, but not when you're a child. Before you have a wand, it might as well be sentient. You can't control it, that's why we go to school."

"How do you know that I didn't do it when I was in control?" Hermione demanded. "How can you say that in all the missing parts of my life, I didn't will them to do things they didn't want with my magic?"

"Because that's not how it works once you're in control," he replied. "You can't just change someone's mind by wishing it once you have a wand, you have to Imperius them, or somehow learn to control them through Legilimence."

"And who's to say I didn't?!" she cried, becoming more and more angry.

"Hermione, the ministry would have been on you in a second if that had happened," Draco immediately picked out the ridiculous argument. "You know that."

"I don't know what I know anymore!" she snapped. "Fuck, Draco, I feel like I don't know anything!"

The tension that had been coiled in her shoulders and neck snapped, her entire body slumping dejectedly against the window frame, as she admitted what was truly bothering her.

Draco sighed heavily, rubbing his face with his hands and getting to his feet.

"I don't know what I do or don't remember," Hermione continued sadly, her head tipped back against the frame. "I don't know what I've done or haven't done. Every time I feel like I've got a grasp on everything, something else comes to light and I'm right back at the beginning. My entire life has been built around my knowledge. I was the best in school, I always knew the answers. And when we left, I was the one who made the decisions and did the research and found the answers in that tent. I was the one who figured out how to destroy the horcruxes, I was the one to work out what Harry would have to do, I was the one he turned to when he didn't know what came next. I have always known the answers, and now…" She trailed off, waving her hand dismissively and shaking her head.

Now, she had nothing.

Suddenly, her anxious habit of reciting facts made total sense. In the absence of knowledge in her own life, she had tried to find the answer to everyone else's in a grasp for control and normality. The enormity of how much not knowing must have affected her all this time came crashing down on Draco, and he felt almost sick. She was absolutely terrified.

"How many staircases are there in Hogwarts?"

The sudden question startled Hermione, and she turned to look at him with a frown. "What?"
"How many staircases in Hogwarts?" he repeated.

"142"

"How many paintings?"

"940,387" she answered without hesitation.

Draco made a mental note to find out of she had counted them all herself some other time. "How many towers?"

"24"

"How many headmasters have there been?"

"37. I know what you're doing."

"What?"

"Just because I can list all sorts of facts doesn't mean I'm wrong about this," she carried on without answering him. "Trust me, I've tried."

"I know you have," Draco said solemnly. "It's why you recite them when you're upset. It makes you feel like you're in control when you have the answers."

Hermione gave a small nod of agreement.

"Not knowing scares you," he continued. "It makes you feel out of control."

"I'm a fucking picture book to you, aren't I?" she sneered a little.

"A chapter book," Draco smiled warmly, perching on the window beside her. "You don't always have to know the answers, Hermione. That's not how life works."

"I should have these ones," she insisted brokenly. "I should know the details of my own life."

"You will," he promised. "It's just going to take time."

Hermione let out a long, slow breath, her lips pressed together in a tight line. "Time can go fuck itself." She swung herself back into the room and headed for the kitchen, diving headfirst into the pensieve.
"I'm sorry, but this is no longer your decision," the head of the Australian DMLE shook his head. "I cannot allow the Granger's to endanger our society, and that is exactly what I would be doing if I allowed them to retain their memories."

"It's not Wizardkind they hate, it's me!" Hermione insisted.

"Hermione, Brand is right," Pamela spoke up. "They're just too unpredictable. And really, do you want them to have to live with those feelings? That kind of anger, it can be damaging."

She was right, of course. The kind of anger that she'd just witnessed her parents exhibiting would have made Tom Riddle feel inadequate, allowing them to carry such a burden might very well hurt them even more than she already had. On the other hand, though, how could she take their lives away again? That was the reason they were so angry, after all, if she allowed the DMLE to take their memories once again they would never forgive her.

"I know this is a horrible position to be in, but I'm afraid there's nothing to do for it," Auror Brand said firmly. "I've had an Incident team called, they should be here any minute, they're going to reverse your reversal and give your parents back the identities you made them."

He left the room before she could argue anymore, his decision made and already put in motion, and Hermione slumped into a chair.

"I know it seems wrong, but it's for the best," Pamela tried to comfort her. "Really."

"I can't just ignore them," Hermione shook her head. "I can't pretend that I didn't hear what they said, that I don't know how much they despise me. Turning them back into Wendell and Monica Wilkins isn't going to change any of that."

"No, but it will keep everyone safe," Pam reasoned. "If you allow them to keep their memories, they'll carry this burden with them every day, this spite that they have for you. They're unpredictable, they could try and retaliate against you or the ministry and end up getting hurt. It's better to let them live in blissful ignorance."

"It's scapegoating," Hermione argued. "It's ignoring their wishes and using my powers as a witch to do what I please, just like they said."

"They're wrong, Hermione," Pamela insisted. "I'm so sorry that they seem to feel the way they do, but some people are just too bigoted to see the good thing in front of them. Anyone would be lucky to call you their daughter, and the fact that your parents can't see that is their loss."

Hermione didn't have a chance to respond, as the Obliviators arrived at that moment to get the information they needed from her. She gave it to them, despite protesting the sentence. At least she could try and give them the life they'd always wanted— a life without her.

"I'd like to be there," she said when she'd finished. "I need to be there."

"Hermione-" Pam started to shake her head, but Hermione didn't care.

"I'm going to be there," she said with finality. "If you're going to do this without my true consent, then I'm going to be there to witness it. That's the deal."
Nobody in the room seemed too thrilled with this, but they eventually nodded in agreement, allowing her to follow them back to the interview room.

Hermione woke with a frustrated growl. She'd had the same dream every night this week, and every night she had woken up as she stepped into the interview room, unable to push any further. She'd thought that things would get better now that she was remembering her dreams- most of them, at least- but there were still so many holes she couldn't seem to fill.

Draco kept insisting that it would take time, that you couldn't rush mental process, but she didn't care. She was tired of living in the dark, of questioning every minute detail of her life. The uncertainty that she was living with was overwhelming, and the longer it went on, the worse it got. There was something important about those final moments that her parents had had their memories, she knew it with every cell in her body, but she simply couldn't remember. Pulling her pillow from under her head and pressing it snugly over her face, she unleashed a scream of frustration. Damn her mind and it's fucking swiss cheese-like landscape. She was supposed to be the Brightest witch of the age, why couldn't she remember a simple exchange of conversation?!

"Does screaming help?" Draco mumbled from where he lay beside her, not bothering to open his eyes.

"Yes," she answered petulantly. "Go back to sleep."

"You first," he challenged.

Hermione ignored him and tossed off her comforter, pulling a hoodie over her head and stepping out into the living room.

She had planned on reading one of her many untouched books, but when she caught sight of the pensieve she couldn't help herself. With a simple spell, she plucked a silvery memory from her mind, dropped it into the milky liquid and plunged inside, watching her dream again and waiting for the real memory to surface. Just like every other night, though, the only thing she remembered afterwards was a blurry haze and unintelligible angry voices.

The exchange had been brutal and harsh, and had pushed her over an edge she hadn't realized she was on, that she knew, but exactly how it had done so was as much a mystery now as ever. She granted herself no reprieve, though, watching the memory over and over again, pushing herself to her limits and beyond, until Draco appeared beside her.

"That's enough," he said sternly, his ghostly figure glowering at her. "You need to take a break."

"I'm fine," she growled.

"You've been in here for four hours, you're done." Without waiting, he took her arm and pulled her up with him, ignoring her angry protests.

"What the fuck?!" she shoved him as soon as they were out of the basin.

"Four hours," he repeated. "You're just making yourself more frustrated."

"I don't remember asking for your thoughts on the matter," Hermione snapped. "You're not the boss
"No, I'm not," Draco agreed. "But sometimes you need someone else to say no, and that's what I'm doing. You can't keep pushing yourself like this, it's not going to help."

"You don't know that," she argued.

"Hermione, you're pushing yourself too hard," he insisted. "You can't force yourself to remember, it doesn't work like that. It will come when it comes, you need to let it happen in its own time."

"What are you, the Dali-fucking-Lama?" Hermione snarked. "I'll do what I bloody please, it's my brain, my memories!"

"I know that," Draco nodded. "But that doesn't change the fact that it's been protecting you from these things for a long time, it's not all going to come back at once, and the more pressure you put on it, the harder it's going to be."

She wanted to argue, to tell him that he was an idiot and of course she could force herself to remember, it was her mind after all. Unfortunately, she knew that he was right. As much as she wished it otherwise, the harder she tried to remember, the fuzzier the images became. Still, she wasn't willing to admit he was right out loud.

"Potter sent this over after you went to sleep last night," Draco interrupted her thoughts, setting a pamphlet in front of her. "He thought you might be interested."

Looking down at the paper, Hermione saw that it was an informational brochure on Mind Healing from St. Mungo's. Listed on the cover were the various types of treatment covered in the new ward, including Legilimens Therapy.

"It's something to think about," Draco shrugged. "I mean, you've mentioned it before, so…"

He shrugged again, letting the sentiment hang between them as she thought about it. She had mentioned it, well actually he had, but she'd thought it might work. But that had been when he was doing it, not some stranger that she didn't know. It had taken long enough to allow Draco in, and even then she had to fight the urge to push him out every day, would she really be able to allow a glorified stranger access to her mind?

"Just think about it," Draco encouraged once more, and Hermione nodded tersely.

He let the subject drop for a while, leaving Hermione to mull the options over by herself, but when she hadn't mentioned anything two weeks later he decided to bring it up again.

"Have you given it any thought?" he asked, nodding to the pamphlets that still sat on the counter.

"A bit," Hermione shrugged sullenly.

"And?" Draco hedged. "What kind of thoughts have you had?"

"You're very nosy," she glared at him over her plate.

"You already knew that," he shook his head. "We're discussing fresh thoughts."
Hermione pursed her lips in annoyance, and he gave her his most charming smile. When the corners of her eyes began to narrow, he knew he'd won.

"I don't know," she huffed. "I mean, I suppose it's a valid idea, but…"

"But," Draco encouraged.

"But the thought of baring my mind to a complete stranger is horrifying," she finished. "I don't know if I could. I mean, I barely trust you and Harry!"

"You say the sweetest things, Hermione Granger," he joked.

"Shove off, you know what I mean," she rolled her eyes. "I had a hard enough time letting you in, I still have a hard time with it, how can I do that?"
Her shoulders slumped in defeat and she went back to picking at her plate, shoving the contents around more than actually lifting them to her mouth.

"You don't have to dive in head first," Draco reasoned. "I mean, you could just check it out to start. See if you get a good feeling off of the facility, maybe meet with one of the healers and get a more first hand explanation of how it works?"

"I suppose," she hummed.

"It's just a suggestion," he shrugged easily. "It's completely your call, but maybe just give it another look. You never know, maybe you'll meet someone and just click- like when you met me."

She let out a sharp burst of laughter at that, finally looking at him again. "If that's what you think it is to click with someone, we are in serious trouble."

"What are you talking about?" Draco scoffed. "You were smitten the moment you saw me in that doorway."

"I'm sorry, I thought I was the one who suffered from drug fueled delusions," Hermione frowned at him. "Who was smitten?"

"It was a thoroughly mutual experience," he assured her, earning another bout of laughter.

"You're lucky I didn't turn you into a guinea pig," she scoffed. "Or better, a ferret."

"Low blow, Granger," Draco glared at her. "Low blow."

Hermione responded by blowing him a kiss, a thoroughly pleased smirk on her lips.

When Harry stopped by the next day for tea, Hermione allowed him to broach the subject of St. Mungo's and agreed to go see the facilities, so he booked them a consultation and the following Monday the three of them stood outside the abandoned muggle storefront that masked the hospital.

"It's like going shopping," Draco was trying to convince Hermione.

She stood with her back pressed to a lamp post, staring at the doors in trepidation and barely restraining herself from running full speed in the opposite direction.
"It is nothing like that," she hissed.

"Sure it is," Draco insisted. "You go, you look, you nod politely at the employees and then if nothing strikes your fancy, you leave."

"Or they disarm you and stick you in a padded room."

Harry winced at the statement, abundantly aware that she was referring to the 24 hours he'd made her spend in a muggle psychiatric ward. They had made their peace with the affair, but he knew that it still bothered her that he had done it, even if she didn't hold it against him.

"They're not going to do that," Draco promised. "They don't have that kind of facility, it's just offices."

"It's a hospital, I'm sure they could find a place if they wanted," Hermione argued.

"Okay, how about this," he changed tactics. "I swore I wouldn't let a healer sedate you again, didn't I?"

She chewed her lip anxiously at the memory, the way she'd stormed off looking for a fix after he'd brought up the subject of seeing a Healer.

"How about an extended warranty that I never let them disarm, immobilize, or hold you against your will," he carried on. "Act now and I'll throw in a stuffed niffler, free of charge."

She smiled slightly, albeit still nervous, and Draco offered a smile of his own.

"I swear, if you don't like it or don't want to carry on past the front doors, we're out of there," he said. "Right, Potter?"

"Absolutely," Harry agreed immediately. "I'll put my hand on Hogwarts a History and swear, if you like."

This extended promise brought out a true smile from Hermione, and ever so minutely, she inched away from the lamppost. Draco held out his hand, and after only a few more seconds of hesitation, she laced her fingers through his and nodded.

"Okay," she took a deep breath.

"Excellent," Draco grinned.

"I'll expect my niffler at the end of the tour," Hermione added as he opened the door. "And it had better be worth it."

"We'll swing through the gift shop on our way out," Draco chuckled. "I'll even let you pick it yourself."

There really didn't need to be three of them to look at the offices in St. Mungo's newly renovated wing, but Hermione had decided there was safety in numbers. The more people she had to hide behind, or to keep her from picking the lock on the nearest drug cabinet, the better. Neither Harry or Draco minded, as long as it got her through the door, they were pretty willing to do anything.
While Harry spoke with a receptionist, Hermione and Draco mulled by the door, the former shuffling anxiously from foot to foot.

"Learning a new dance?" Draco joked. "Or did you need directions to the loo?"

"Fuck off," she hissed under her breath.

"It's just a consultation," he reminded her soothingly. "You shake hands, snark at someone new for a few minutes, and then we leave."

"I do not snark," Hermione glared at him.

"You most certainly do," he scoffed. "You are, by far, the snarkiest person I know."

"Well, that's a lie," she accused. "For one thing, both your parents are far snarkier-"

"They are not!" Draco argued. "Snarky and snooty are two different things, Granger. My parents are entirely the latter."

"Be that as it may, I am not snarky," Hermione pursed her lips.

"I think the drugs really did a number on you," he chuckled disbelievingly. "What was it you said the other week about drug fueled delusions?"

He gasped painfully as her elbow jabbed into his ribs, earning a confused look from Harry and the Healer he was approaching with. Hermione, on the other hand, was smiling serenely, the picture of grace and ease.

"Hermione, this is Healer Bellson." Harry introduced her to the witch at his side. She was rather tall, probably around 5'11", and had chestnut brown hair, which was pulled back into a severe ponytail. She seemed personable though, her eyes soft despite the professional smile plastered on her face as she held her hand out to shake Hermione's.

"It's nice to meet you, Miss Granger."

Hermione's smile wavered ever so slightly as the woman spoke, suddenly remembering that she was in a hospital and not just joking around with Draco in the safety of her flat.

"Draco Malfoy," her blond companion filled the silence with ease, offering his own hand. "A pleasure."

"Why don't I show you around a little, and then we can speak in my office," Healer Bellson turned her attention back to Hermione. "I can answer any questions you might have."

Hermione's hand tightened around Draco's to the point of ceasing blood flow, but she nodded for the other woman to lead the way and only required a little push to follow, aided by Harry's hand on her back.

"All of our offices are private," Healer Bellson droned as they walked through the ward. "Although we do have a few common spaces where we hold group sessions."

She paused so they could look in on a large room with carpeted floors and a small kitchenette at one end, a collection of easy chairs and sofas held within, positioned to create a semi-circle.

"What are the group sessions for?" Draco asked.
"We have a few for help with PTSD, one for witches who have suffered domestic abuse, we're also in the works of putting together a support group for muggle parents," Bellson shared. "Somewhere they can share experiences dealing with accidental magic, learn more about our society, find others who have been through the same situations."

"That's wonderful," Hermione surprised everyone by speaking up. "It's so important that muggleborn children have a way for their parents to be involved. The separation up to now is such a wedge between them, it's difficult to overcome."

"Our thoughts exactly," Bellson smiled. "And this is my office."

She pressed her wand to the door and gestured for the group to enter as it swung open. When only Harry entered, a small frown of confusion passed across her face, but she quickly seemed to realize that Hermione was waiting for her to enter first. With the practiced ease of someone who dealt with sufferers of PTSD on a daily basis, she slipped her wand into a pocket of her robes and made her way into the office as though nothing had happened, taking a seat behind her desk as Draco and Hermione filed in.

"Would you prefer the door open or closed?" she asked easily.

Draco didn't miss the way Hermione tensed at the question before replying that it should be left open. Healer Bellson simply smiled agreeably and settled back in her chair, waiting for the others to do the same. "Well, I suppose the first thing we should ascertain is which services you're interested in."

"I'm curious about Legilimens Therapy," Hermione replied vaguely.

"Excellent," the healer nodded and summoned a file. "We currently have three Healers who specialize in Legilimens. They are all fully qualified MediWizards and Witches, as well. Have you done any research on the subject?"

"I understand the basics," Hermione nodded. "You use Legilimens to draw out hidden, distorted or painful memories in order to analyze and work through them."

"Exactly," Bellson agreed. "I find it's like guided meditation in a way. Ultimately, you are the one drawing the memories, you're just receiving a helping hand on the way."

Draco nodded appreciatively at the explanation, having spent a substantial amount of time learning the art of meditation and studying its many uses during his time in Asia.

"And who are the healers?" Harry asked. "Their names?"

"Healer Dawlish, Healer Paquin and Healer Lovegood."

While Hermione's spine had tingled fearfully at the name Dawlish, her ears pricked in interest at Lovegood. "Luna Lovegood?" she asked.

"Yes, that's the one," Bellson nodded. "She's rather young to be a Healer, but she was top of her class. Sped through training in no time, and immediately focussed on Mind Healing. She's actually one of the foremost experts on Legilimens therapy, we're incredibly lucky to have her."

Hermione didn't listen to anything after her question was confirmed though, her eyes fixed firmly on Harry.
"Did you know?" she demanded, her tone far colder than she had meant it to be, though she wasn't sure if he didn't deserve it. "Is that why you gave me the pamphlet? Was it all just some ploy to get me in here and then ambush me?"

"No!" Harry's eyes widened in fear, his face paling. "No, Hermione, I swear. I didn't even realize Luna had finished her schooling."

"What about you?!" Hermione wheeled on Draco, her voice getting more shrill by the second.

"Take a breath," he answered calmly.

"Did you know!?"

"I had no idea," he shook his head. "I wouldn't do that and neither would Potter. You know that, Granger."

"The hell you wouldn't!" Hermione scoffed. "It sounds exactly like something Harry would do."

"But I didn't," her best friend insisted. "I swear."

"Take a breath," Draco instructed once more, his thumb rubbing circles on the back of her hand. "Granger, look at me."

She did, her eyes still rimmed with fear.

"Nothing about this is a trick," he promised. "It is quite literally, a fluke that Lovegood works here and happens to specialize in the exact therapy you're interested in. Albeit a suspicious fluke, but still. Not that I'm surprised, she was always a bit of an oddball, I bet she's a natural Legilimens."

"She's not an oddball," Hermione snapped instinctively. "Don't call her that. Luna is a lovely person."

"Who wears radishes in her ears," Draco pointed out. "Just saying."

He held a hand up to signify he meant no offense, a smirk pulling at his lips when Hermione glared at him. When he raised an eyebrow in question, she sighed and allowed herself to relax a little before looking over at Harry contritely.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "I shouldn't have jumped at you."

"It's alright," he forgave her immediately. "I can't exactly blame you, it does sound like something I would do. Honestly, I might have if I'd known."

Hermione decided to ignore this confession. The important thing was that he hadn't, and this wasn't a trap.

"Would you like me to see if Healer Lovegood has a moment?" Healer Bellson spoke up hesitantly.

Hermione started to shake her head, not wanting anyone to know that she had been there, but she was stopped by that damned voice in her head.

Maybe it's fate, her old self mused. If anyone isn't going to judge you, it's Luna. And if you speak with her, it won't be a stranger poking around in your head.

She didn't want anyone poking around in her head, but maybe…

Before she could talk herself out of it, she gave Healer Bellson a sharp nod, and watched as the
witch retreated to find her former schoolmate.

They waited in silence, both Draco and Harry afraid to say something that might change Hermione's mind, and Hermione trying not to listen to that vicious voice in her head that was reminding her fate had never been kind to them.

"Hermione!" Luna's airy voice floated into the room a moment before the woman herself, carrying the same lilt and hint of distraction as it always had. The familiarity of it almost made Hermione smile.

"It's so nice to see you," Luna continued, closing the door behind her and leaving Healer Bellson on the other side. "And you've brought Draco and Harry with you, how lovely. Hello."

Both men nodded in greeting, biting back entertained smiles.

"Healer Bellson says you're interested in Legilimens Therapy," she jumped right in. "I think that's wonderful. I have to warn you though, you can't do it while under the influence of hallucinogens. It makes everything very twisty. Of course it can be fun to simply practice legilimens in that state, but to do so from a healing perspective isn't very helpful. You end up thinking you have a fear of butterflies with thestral wings, when you really have a fear of birds defecating on your head, or banshees popping out of your refrigerator."

The trio stared in confusion at the woman as she babbled on, not even taking a breath between words. She really hadn't changed a bit.

"What are you hoping to accomplish?" she asked Hermione then, who paled at the question.

"Oh, I- uh," she stammered nervously, her gaze falling to her hands. "Well, I seem to have… repressed some things."

"Interesting," Luna hummed appreciatively. "Is that what muggles call it? It's like you've removed something to put in a pensieve and lost it?"

"That's exactly it," Hermione admitted in surprise.

Luna nodded, completely in tune with the other witch. "Have you had any success on your own?"

"Some," Hermione shared hesitantly.

"Do you know what it is that you've… repressed?" Luna asked, grasping momentarily for the new term. "Is there a common theme, perhaps?"

"Yes." Hermione didn't expand, but Luna didn't seem to mind at all, smiling kindly.

"Well, I would be more than happy to work with you if you'd like," she assured her. "I know that it's a difficult decision to make, letting someone into your head, so take all the time you need. Whenever and whatever you decide, I'll be here, just send me an owl."

She reached out and placed her hand on Hermione's knee, covering her shaking hand, and gave it a warm squeeze.

"It truly has been lovely seeing you all," she spoke to the group at large. "I hope we can all see each other again soon."

Without waiting for them to answer, she threw the door open and glided back out, humming to
"Sickle for your thoughts," Harry hazarded as they left the building, watching Hermione from the corner of his eye.

She didn't answer at first, too busy digging around in her bag for something. He wasn't surprised when she emerged with a pack of cigarettes. He watched as she took one out, stuck it between her lips and lit it with a small wave of her hand, obviously not caring that they were in the middle of muggle London in broad daylight.

"You have a lighter." Draco reprimanded her exasperatedly, as though he'd done it many times before.

Hermione ignored him and took a deep drag, closing her eyes and soaking in the feeling of smoke filling her lungs, before exhaling it back into the air.

"I don't know." She finally said, then turned and began walking purposefully up the street.

Draco and Harry exchanged confused looks and hurried after her, wondering what exactly was going through the witch's mind.

She was surprisingly calm given how she'd reacted in the meeting, but she also might have been dumbfounded- Luna Lovegood could have that effect. Only time and patience would tell, but Harry had never exactly been a patient man.

"Are you violently opposed to speaking with Luna?" he asked as he caught up to her.

Hermione thought about this for a moment, taking another drag. "No," she exhaled.

"Are you getting paid by the word?" Harry prodded.

Hermione rolled her eyes and ignored him.

"Where are we going, Granger?" Draco asked, dragging behind a few steps. "I didn't wear the right shoes for this."

"Then don't come," she responded shortly- though not unkindly.

"Maybe I want to," he said petulantly. "I won't know unless you tell me where we're headed."

Hermione ignored him, carrying on her way without another word to either of them.

Twenty minutes later they came to a stop in front of The Leaky Cauldron, Draco complaining bitterly that they could have just apparated, and Harry thoroughly confused as to why they hadn't. Hermione ignored them both as she stepped inside, not bothering to acknowledge Tom's greeting as she made her way straight to the back.

"I've got to get to work," Harry finally admitted once they were in Diagon Alley. "But I'll be around if you want to talk, just swing by my office."

Hermione nodded, thanked him for going with her to the consult, and headed off in the direction of
her shop without another word.

"This is odd, yeah?" Harry turned to Draco. "I mean, she doesn't normally do this."

"She's thinking," Draco shook his head. "It'll pass."

"It's unsettling," Harry frowned after his best friend. "The quiet."

"Yeah," Draco sighed. "It'll pass, though, like I said."

Harry didn't look very placated by this, but he nodded and said his goodbyes, before apparating to the Ministry.

When Draco caught up to her, Hermione was already in the middle of brewing, a notebook in front of her and a pencil in her hair, her wand held between her teeth. Knowing better than to disturb the creative process, Draco pulled out a cauldron for himself and set to work brewing a batch of Pepper-Up to keep himself occupied.

Hermione ignored him almost completely, except to steal ingredients off his counter when she needed them, her entire focus on whatever it was she was brewing. He'd tried to steal a glance at the notebook when she was busy, but every time he came close she snatched it away.

She had just added an ounce of stinging nettles when it blew, shattering the cauldron and splattering blood red potion absolutely everywhere.

"FUCK!" Hermione screamed angrily, slamming her pencil down on the counter.

"Are you okay?" Draco asked, hurrying over and using his sleeve to wipe the potion from her face.

"I'm fine," she shoved him away. "Fuck!"

"You said that already," Draco frowned.

When she glared at him like she might just strangle him with her own hair, he smiled charmingly and went back to cleaning the sticky concoction she'd been working on from her face.

This time she didn't push him away, but she didn't exactly cooperate either, too busy trying to figure out what she'd done wrong.

"I don't understand," she snarled at her notebook. "What the hell happened?"

"What were you trying to do?" Draco asked, grabbing her chin and turning her to face him so he could clean off the corner of her eye.

"It was supposed to be a memory potion," she grumbled.

Draco raised an eyebrow in question and her eyes fell to her hands.

"It was supposed to help," She used her nails to scrape at the potion on her arm.

"Instead of seeing a healer," Draco guessed.

She nodded, still not looking at him. "I don't want people in my head," she mumbled. "There's enough going on up there as is."

"What do you mean?" Draco asked, pulling over a stool so he could sit in front of her.
"I just-" she started to speak, then stopped, shaking her head. "I don't need another voice in my head."

"How many voices are there now?" he asked, his tone light, but his question serious.

"You make it sound like I'm suffering some sort of delusion," Hermione winced, knowing that she made it sound that way too. "It's not like I'm hearing voices like a schizophrenic, or something."

"I didn't say it was," Draco shook his head. "We all have voices in our head."

"Don't patronize me," she snarled. "We don't. I didn't, before…"

She shook her head again, not willing to finish the thought. She wasn't even sure how she would—before what? Before the war? Before Australia? She didn't even know anymore.

"It's a constant battle now," she admitted quietly.

"A constant battle between who?" Draco pried softly. "Or what?"

"Both," Hermione shrugged. "I'm constantly fighting with that girl that wants to drown her sorrows in drugs and booze, and the girl who wants to move forward and do better."

"That's normal," Draco assured her. "Everyone has that voice in their heads, the one that tells them they're not good enough, or that they can't do something. Having a voice that fights back against that, that means you're getting better."

Hermione shrugged indifferently.

"What are the voices telling you about this morning?"

"That fate has never been kind to me," she answered quickly. "That its done nothing but drop me on my arse, over and over again."

"Maybe it's not fate, then," Draco reasoned. "I mean, personally, I don't put much stock in fate. It's a soft magic."

This brought a small smile to Hermione's lips. "You don't believe in fate?" she asked.

"Nah," he wrinkled his nose dismissively. "I think it's a lot of muggle gibberish. Destiny has its appeal, I suppose, but fate? I don't like to give it much thought."

"They're the same thing," she frowned. "Fate, from the Latin *fatum*, meaning destiny."

"Well sure, they may derive from the same word, but that doesn't make them the same," Draco reasoned. "Fate is futileistic, it takes any chance of change or control out of our hands and gives it to some sort of all-powerful being. Destiny, though, that's all us. A meaningful end, an end we're meant to reach, but one that we control."

"You sound like the Dali Lama again," Hermione frowned. "Have you been reading the Sutras a lot, lately?"

"I'm just a very wise man," he shook his head.

Hermione let out a snort of laughter at this, and he smiled, not bothered by her mocking.

"So, you think Luna being a Legilimens specialist is fate?" he returned to the point.
"I don't know," Hermione shook her head, obviously unsure of herself. "Maybe. Or maybe this is just another thing that's going to come back to bite me."

"How would it do that?" Draco asked.

"I'm not exactly the girl she remembers, Draco!" Hermione scoffed. "I mean, fuck, you know what a shit show I was- am."

"Were," he corrected her. "And you weren't a shit show, you were just a little… lost."

"I was a fucking mess, and we both know it," she snapped. "Don't lie to make me feel better, it doesn't work."

"Fine, you were a Grade A trainwreck," Draco allowed. "But you've been doing so well, lately. I mean, you went to a Mind Healer's office today. You wouldn't have even considered doing that a few months ago."

"That doesn't change the past, Draco," she shook her head. "It doesn't erase the things I did to myself."

"No, but it proves that you're stronger than you thought you were," he reasoned. "How brave you are."

"I'm not brave. If I was brave, I would have faced all this years ago instead of burying it as deep as I could and making sure it stayed there by never letting my mind work properly again."

"That is absolutely not true," Draco argued. "You're brave because you buried it for so long, and could keep burying it if you really wanted. The fact that you wake up everyday feeling the way you do, and don't take anything to bury it, that's what makes you brave."

"That's setting the bar rather low," Hermione grumbled.

"No, it's not," Draco replied sternly. "And one day you're going to understand that, but until then, you're going to trust me when I tell you that it is incredibly brave and strong of you to do it. And if you decide to work with Luna, or someone else, that will only make you stronger."

"And if I don't?" Hermione asked, looking at him seriously. "If that's not something I can do, what then?"

"Then we'll find another way," he promised. "But don't write this off because you're scared of letting someone else in. I know that's hard for you, I know that it's something you struggle with every day, but I also know that if it's something you want to do that you can."

"But what if I can't?" she insisted. "What if I can't let someone else in? What then?"

"Then we'll keep trying," Draco repeated. "Whatever it takes."
Chapter 34

Blaise had insisted they come over for dinner, 'like old times, but without the drugs', and so they were all gathered in his dining room when it came up. Astoria and Daphne were arguing over whether or not it was tacky to have circling h'or d'ouerve platters at black tie events while Goyle and Padme told Hermione about their recent engagement when Blaise spoke up, wondering if the food at the ball would be any good.

"Last year was rubbish," he bemoaned. "Pretty sure they cooked one of George Weasley's rubber chicken things for dinner."

"Don't be ridiculous," Daphne rolled her eyes at him. "Last year was perfectly nice. You're just a snob- and I'm rather certain you were high as a kite."

"That's how bad it was," Blaise reasoned. "Even high, I thought it was awful."

"That does indicate a rather poor state of affairs," Draco nodded. "Blaise'll eat anything when he's high."

"See?" The Italian gestured thankfully to his friend. "My point exactly."

"Well my food was perfectly fine," Daphne shook her head. "Yours must have been special."

As the conversation continued to center around the upcoming Memorial, Hermione remained silent, pushing her food around her plate, refusing to look at anyone.

She remembered the first Memorial vividly. She had stood between Harry and Ron on the stage erected on the grounds outside Hogwarts, a fake smile plastered on her face as she listened to the Minister laud them as the heroes of the day, and when asked to say a few words, she had held Harry's hand as he spoke for all of them, insisting that the true heroes were those that could not be with them. She had smiled proudly then, admiring her best friend for his strength and courage on a day that held so much pain. Then they unveiled the Memorial wall and held a moment of silence for all those that had fallen one year before.

When the ceremony was complete they had been expected to celebrate, one hour of somber contemplation deemed more than enough to remember the fallen. They had enjoyed an entire year of peace and freedom, that was apparently worth far more thought than the lives that had been lost.

It had made her sick, the way everyone had laughed and danced, truly acting as though they had something to celebrate. Maybe they did, maybe they hadn't lost anything the year before, but she had. They all expected her to be just as happy as they were though, constantly wanting to chat and hug and take pictures.

They would ask about her time on the run with Harry, whether she had been scared, whether she had slept with him or Ron. She'd tried to smile and brush them off, telling them all that mattered was that they had been successful, but she could only lie so much before it grated on her nerves. When that line had been crossed, she turned to a bottle of Firewhiskey for help.

When everyone was distracted, too busy dancing and chatting and enjoying themselves to pay her any attention, she had taken her bottle and gone to sit by the Memorial wall. She'd stood and traced each and every name, all 152, silently begging for their forgiveness.

That was where Ron had found her, his own bottle of Firewhiskey in hand. He was drunker than she
was, but in just as sentimental a mood, a far cry from his usual abrasiveness.

"We failed them," she'd said, her voice barely audible over the distant sounds of celebration.

Her hand had been hovering over Fred's name, the last on the wall thanks to his last name, and Ron lifted his own to cover it.

"We did everything we could," he said, sounding as though he were trying to convince himself.

His hand had closed around hers, large and warm, carefully removing it from the cold stone and threading their fingers together, and for a moment she'd thought they might have a chance. Maybe he was better, not as angry, maybe they could finally be together. Letting her hope get the best of her, she hadn't fought him when he pulled her back into his chest, hadn't pulled away when his lips trailed from her shoulder to her cheek. Instead, she'd allowed herself to take comfort in the warm familiarity of him and when he'd continued, stripping her bare and shagging her violently on the grass, she'd thought maybe things would be better. Maybe he'd forgiven her, decided that he was wrong and that he would help her find her parents, would take care of her.

All those thoughts had been shattered though, when he finished pounding into her and left. He hadn't even bothered to pass her dress to her from where he'd chucked it, just slipped himself back into his trousers, took a swig of whiskey and walked off without another word.

For just a moment, she'd forgotten where she was and what she had been doing, getting lost in the hope of a future, and upon realizing this she'd been wracked with guilt. Berating herself mercilessly for having a shag when she should have been remembering, that had been the moment she'd swore never to forget again and the next morning she'd gone to a tattoo shop to ensure it. She'd carried the names of her failures in her skin ever since, knew each and every one of the 152, it was the least she could do for them now.

"Hermione?" Daphne called her name, a questioning frown on her face.

"Sorry," she shook herself out of the memory and forced a smile. "What?"

"I was just asking how the shop's been doing," Daphne repeated her question. "Have you been working on anything new?"

"Oh, it's good," Hermione nodded quickly. "You know, the usual. I've been toying around a bit with memory enhancing potions, but nothing worth talking about yet."

"That's interesting," Daphne encouraged. "What kind of memory enhancement?"

"I'm not really sure yet," she lied. "It's in the very early stages, I haven't worked out any specifics. What about you, though? How are things going in the Ministry?"

While Daphne launched into a heated story about a case she'd just resolved between the DMLE and a Centaur sanctuary, Hermione nodded along, then excused herself to use the washroom.

Outside the dining room, she leaned against the wall and released a deep breath, pulling her hair back from her face.

She'd let her mind wander too far and allowed Ron back in, and now she couldn't help but hear his voice. All the nights she'd laid in bed with him, crying and shaking from nightmares while he grudgingly held her and told her to go back to sleep. The angry way he would try to coax her into being more adventurous in bed, scoffing at her inexperience and proclaiming her about as fun as a cold, dead fish.
And she'd listened. She'd let him convince her that he was right, even when she'd tried to give him what he wanted. She'd listened to him when he said she had to stay put and help his family, when he'd demanded that she listen to his problems and not be so self-centred. She'd allowed him to shout and sneer when she tried to comfort him, agreeing that she was stupid and didn't know what she was talking about, didn't have any clue how he felt. She'd apologized and pleaded with him to forgive her, promising that she would be better, that she would try harder for him. She'd given him everything she had, over and over and over, and in the end he had left her naked and alone. A perfect ending, if she was honest, as metaphorically beautiful as could be.

She'd learned her lesson though, and from then on she had been the one to leave.

Until Draco had refused to be left.

*Strikingly similar, isn't it?* her mind snarled prettily. *Neither one is willing to let you leave.*

*Hush!* she immediately refuted. *This is completely different.*

*Is it? Or is it exactly the same?*

And so the thoughts began to swirl, twisting and turning around each other, tangling themselves into knots that even the best of sailors wouldn't be able to undo as they compared each and every moment of her relationship with Ron to her time with Draco.

"It's different," she muttered to herself, pushing away from the wall and walking off down the hall. "It's completely different. They are nothing like each other."

*Or maybe they are, and you're just blind. It's not like it hasn't happened before.*

That was true… but no! No, this was completely different. Draco was good and kind, and he wasn't holding her captive, he was staying by her side. Besides, Draco hated Ron, he thought he was an absolute arse- which he was. And Draco had never used her.

Ah, that was enough to shut down the needling voice. Draco had never used her the way Ron had, she had practically jumped him at least three times, probably more, and he'd never taken advantage. In fact, if anyone was like Ron, it was her.

*Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding!* that wretched voice popped back in excitedly, and so the cycle began again.

The prognosis: she was a monster. A horrid bitch that had taken advantage of Draco, and continued to do so.

Fear gripped her at the idea, her throat seeming to tighten, constricting until she couldn't breathe, her mind shouting bitterly that she was a self-involved cunt who used people as she pleased and tossed them aside when she was done.

It was too much. Too much happening in her head, too much shouting and screaming and sniping, too many reminders of the crimes she had committed, the unforgivable things she had done.

She pulled at the fabric of her jumper, suddenly feeling as though it was strangling her, wrenching it over her head and tossing it aside, scratching at her throat in an attempt to create space for her breath to travel.

When that didn't work, she moved on to clawing the rest of her skin, desperate to find some sort of release to the panic that had suddenly gripped her.
What have I done? she asked, the question playing on a loop in her mind, feeling like a slap across the face each time.

"Oh gods," she gasped raggedly and stumbled down the hall. She needed to get out of here, needed to leave- no, leaving was the problem. Leaving was what Ron did, and she couldn't be like Ron, she just couldn't.

But you are, that vapid girl in her head reminded her gleefully.

No!

She burst through the kitchen door with a loud crash, completely oblivious to anything but the emotions that had taken over her mind. She was driven only by fear and a desperate need to get that voice out of her head.

Her eyes landed on the cookie jar, and the voice paused, seeming to lift an eyebrow at her. Well, that will certainly help, she mused.

Anything, Hermione pleaded, she'd do anything if it meant quiet.

The joint was in her hands before she could even recognize what it was, already on its way to her lips, the spell to light it hanging from the tip of her tongue, ready to be put to use.

What are you doing? Draco spoke in her mind, in that same casual tone that was always accompanied by a look of sincere interest and concern.

I just need it to stop, she tried to apologize. I can't do this anymore! I need it to stop!

And then there was another voice. What goes up must come down...

But it will be quiet, the previously vapid voice reasoned, now sounding as soothing as a calming draught.

Yes, quiet was good. Quiet was very good. Once again, she lifted the joint to her lips, ready to make it all disappear.

What are you doing? Draco asked again, his face appearing in her mind, murky and faded, but still there.

"Please," she let out a sob.

Fuck him, you've been stringing him along for this long, it's time to break him loose.

What goes up must come down...

What are you doing?

…Must come down…

Hermione let out an almighty scream, her hands clamping over her ears and her legs giving out beneath her, resulting in her falling into a heap on the floor, begging for silence that wouldn't come.
"MIPPY!" Blaise thundered the second they heard the scream.

Draco was already on his feet, trying to pinpoint the location the noise had come from, cursing under his breath.

"Miss is being in the kitchen!" The elf called out, her tiny voice magically carrying through the house.

Draco took off at a run, knowing that scream all too well. He slowed just in time to keep from crashing into the room, knowing that it wouldn't help to startle her.

The scene he walked in on made his throat constrict. Hermione lay in a heap on the floor, her hands clamped over her ears and her eyes squeezed shut. He could see her lips moving, but he couldn't hear what she was saying. Mippy sat beside her, rubbing her back and trying to comfort her, her big eyes filled with tears.

"It's alright Miss Mione, you is being safe," she was reassuring her. "Master Blaise and Master Draco is coming. You is safe."

"Hermione," Draco crouched beside her and carefully put a hand on her shoulder. "Hermione, look at me."

She didn't even flinch.

"What can Mippy do?" the elf asked him eagerly. "Why is Miss being so upset?"

"I've got her," Draco gave her a half-hearted smile. "Thanks, Mippy."

Mippy didn't seem very keen on this obvious dismissal of her services, but she nodded all the same and moved away.

"What's wrong with her?" Astoria appeared in the doorway, a terrified look on her face. "I thought she was clean!"

"She is," Draco assured her. "She just needs space. I've got it."

Happy to have a task, Mippy immediately began guiding the younger Greengrass out so that Draco and Hermione could be alone, overriding the girl's insistence that she could help.

"C'mere, Granger." Draco hauled her up into a sitting position, then quickly gathered her into his arms and sat down against the counter, with Hermione in his lap.

With no one else around and his face close to hers, he could finally hear what she was muttering.

"Please," she begged. "Please, please, please."

"Hermione, you're okay," he promised, holding her tightly. "Listen to me, you're okay. I've got you."

He carefully took one of her wrists in his hand and slowly began trying to pry her hand from her ears, rubbing soothing circles over it.

"You're okay, I've got you. Everything's okay. Just listen to me," he ordered calmly, his voice smooth and steady. "Hermione, listen to me, okay? My voice, nothing else."

She shivered against him and Draco quickly shrugged off the cardigan he'd been wearing and wrapped it around her, talking all the while.
"You're safe, you're okay. It's just us here," he tried to reassure her. "It's just you and me."

When her arm loosened enough, he pried her hand away from her ear and quickly tucked it against his chest, moving on to the other one, which was trapped between her head and his shoulder.

"I'm right here," he continued trying to soothe her. "I've got you. I'm right here. Everything's okay."

"I'm sorry," she sobbed quietly, and he stilled.

"What for?" he asked, hoping she would answer. "Love, what are you sorry for? What's happened?"

"I'm sorry," she sobbed again, but this time she turned her face into him, her hand falling away from her ear. "I'm so sorry."

"Shh," Draco stroked her hair, pressing his lips against her temple. "Shh, it's okay. You don't need to be sorry."

"I can't," she shook her head vigorously, and clawed at his shirt, seemingly desperate for something to hold onto. "I can't make it stop."

"Make what stop?" Draco asked. "Hermione? What can't you stop?"

She let out another sob, and that was when he saw the unlit joint by his foot.

"Okay," he nodded, understanding at least some of what was happening. "Okay, I know."

He tightened his arm around her waist and used his other hand to cradle her head against his chest.

"Listen to me, okay?" He lowered his voice substantially, knowing that she would be able to hear it echoing in his chest. "You are so good, Hermione. So good, and I am so proud of you. You're doing so well."

Another shaking sob left her.

"Shh, you're okay," he promised. "It's going to be okay. Just focus on my voice. I've got you."

Her hands curled into small fists against his chest and he knew that she was trying to dig her nails into her palms to ground herself.

"I've got you," he repeated firmly. "I need you to open your eyes now, Granger. Okay?"

He pulled back a little and lowered his hand so that it cupped her cheek. "Open your eyes, love," he repeated. "Look at me."

When she finally did, he smiled warmly and leaned down to rest his forehead against hers. "Hi," he whispered.

"I'm sorry," Hermione whimpered, her eyes immediately closing again.

"Hey, none of that," Draco reprimanded her softly. "Come on, look at me."

"Draco-" she tried to shake her head, but he held her firmly in place.

"Look at me," he coaxed, his thumb stroking her cheek. "What's going on?"

"I couldn't- I thought-" she stumbled over the words, unable to put them in the right order. "I'm
"Sorry," she finally repeated. "I'm so sorry."

"For what?" Draco pleaded. "Hermione, what's happened?"

"I- I didn't mean to- I don't want to," she tried once more to explain herself, one of her hands coming up to hold onto his wrist desperately.

"Don't want to what?" Draco asked. "Don't want to get high? You didn't."

Hermione shook her head, her eyes squeezing shut again, this time in frustration. Why couldn't she just put a damn thought together?!

"Ron," she finally blurted, not missing the way he stiffened slightly beneath her. "I don't want to be like Ron."

"Okay," Draco nodded, not quite sure what that meant, but realizing that she wasn't exactly in a state to talk about it.

"I don't want to be like him," she repeated, a hint of desperation in her voice. "I didn't mean to. I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Draco promised. "It's okay. I forgive you."

Even though he wasn't sure there was anything to forgive, he knew that that was what her subconscious needed to here.

"I forgive you," he repeated kindly. "It's okay now."

He repeated the words over and over, until her eyes shut from exhaustion and her body went limp in his arms, her head still cradled against his chest.

"Just stay here," Blaise begged quietly, blocking Draco's path to the fireplace. "Sleep in your room, let her recover."

"She won't like it," Draco shook his head, referring to the witch sleeping in his arms.

"Yeah, well, stuff what she likes," his friend huffed. "She's batty. Please, for my peace of mind, stay the night."

He had been pushing the issue for going on half an hour, insisting that it was best if they took care of Hermione altogether, despite Draco's insistence that she would want to be in her own bed.

"She has a bed here too," Blaise continued. "And up until recently she used it a whole lot more than she used the one in her flat, you can sleep in that one."

"You mean your bed?" Draco scoffed.

"No, she used that way less than you think she did," Blaise waved him off inconsequentially. "And that's not what we're talking about right now. We're talking about you staying here so that I don't go crazy worrying and so that Astoria can see with her own eyes in the morning that she didn't OD. Please, for all our sakes."
He looked imploringly at the blond, his lip quivering ever so slightly in a blatantly put on, but still rather moving display, and Draco finally caved.

"You're a rat," he sneered. "Or, better yet, a fucking badger. Goddamned near Huff."

"I knew you'd see it my way eventually," Blaise grinned. "Off you go, then. You know the way. If you need anything, holler."

He stood in front of the entry room door until Draco was out of sight, then listened for the sound of his door closing. When he heard the lock click as well, he chuckled to himself and went to tell Astoria the good news.

"He broke you," Hermione spoke, her voice muffled by his shoulder.

"You were awake for that, were you?" Draco hummed. "He gave me that look."

"I was fading in and out," she shrugged as he set her down on the bed. "And he's right, I did use his bed pretty infrequently."

"Go back to sleep," Draco chuckled softly.

"I'm just saying," Hermione carried on, slipping off her jeans and crawling under the covers. "You shouldn't worry about it."

"I don't," he assured her. "I already know you far prefer my bum to his."

Hermione laughed brightly and rolled onto her side, watching as he slipped his own jeans off and laid down beside her in his boxers and t-shirt. When he raised a questioning eyebrow at her, she smiled and rolled onto her back, staring listlessly at the ceiling. She carried on that way for a good half hour before sitting up cross-legged.

"I got scared." She spoke quietly, knowing that he was listening without having to look. "I- I thought that I was making a mistake, that I was doing the same things over again. But then I realized, it's me."

"What's you?" Draco asked, his hand slowly trailing up and down her spine as he listened.

Hermione closed her eyes and took a few deep breaths, warring with the instincts that told her to run, to stop talking and get the hell out of there. She trusted Draco, she wanted him, she wanted to stay with him. So, forcing a wall up in her mind before the doubting voices, she pushed her hair back from her face and told him.

"I thought I was letting it happen again, letting someone get close and keep me under their thumb, keep me from leaving. But you're not like that, you're nothing like that. It's me. I'm the one who's using you." Her head bowed shamefully, and her shoulders shook as a few tears escaped. "I'm so sorry, Draco."

Draco sat up immediately, his arm coming around her shoulders despite her attempts to shrug him off. She didn't deserve his comfort.

"Okay, first of all, you are not using me," he said sternly. "And even if you are, I can't say that I
mind very much. In fact, I am offering myself to you- that sounds wrong, but you know what I mean."

Despite herself, Hermione giggled, though it didn't last very long. He didn't understand- she was a monster.

"Can we talk about this so I can convince you?" he asked hopefully. "Can you explain what brought on this sudden fear?"

Hermione bit her lip nervously, that had been the idea, it was what she'd wanted to do, but... No, she needed to tell him. She needed to tell him all of it.

"Ron," she stumbled, the name bringing a bitter taste to her tongue. "I stayed with Ron for a long time. I knew that he was different, that things had changed between us, but I held on. I thought if I just stuck it out, if I stayed with him and tried to help, eventually things would go back to how they were. I thought he would eventually stop being so angry, when the grief had passed and he'd had time to heal, you know?"

She glanced over at Draco hopefully and he offered a nod. Of course he understood, he'd had the same hopes and dreams when it came to his father.

"But it didn't, of course," Hermione continued. She didn't go into the specifics, they both knew what had happened. "I kept holding on, though. Even after we broke up, a part of me hoped that he would go back to being the man I knew, the man I loved."

She sighed heavily, recalling how naïve and wistful she had been, and felt Draco's hand rub her back softly reminding her that he was there.

"The first anniversary, the one when we were still in school," she carried on finally. "It was... it was horrible. The way they held us up and showed us off, it made us all sick. They were treating us like we had single-handedly save the entire world, when the truth was that we were just a small part of things. We might have done important things, but we're no more important that anyone else who fought, and no matter how many times we tried to tell them, they just pushed harder."

She felt herself growing angry once again, recalling the cheers and congratulations and accolades they'd been assaulted with that day. It had been repulsive, and they'd been powerless to stop it.

"All anyone cared about was the fact that we had won, that the dark had been defeated. They just wanted to celebrate, and all we wanted was to mourn the people we had lost," Hermione shook her head sadly. "They gave us a moment. 60 seconds of silence to commemorate the loss of 152 people, and then it was like they had never existed. They passed us around like trophies, made us talk about it all over and over again like it was all just a good story, like it hadn't been our lives."

Draco remembered vividly. He remembered the dirty looks he'd received for being in attendance, the nasty comments that had been muttered by passersby, and he remembered watching as Hermione was moved from group to group. It had been obvious that she didn't want to be there, didn't want to answer their questions or tell them the stories they asked to hear. Potter had looked the same, though he tried harder to hide it. Even Weasley had seemed reticent to be in the spotlight, despite usually being unable to keep his mouth shut when there was a camera and reporter around.

He'd left early, not wanting to disturb everyone's celebrations with the reminder that he had been on the wrong side, now he wondered if he should have stayed.

"I couldn't take it," Hermione continued, drawing his attention back. "I couldn't keep pretending that
everything was fine, that we were all great and wonderful and happy to be free. I finally had a chance to slip away, so I took a bottle of Firewhiskey and went to sit by the Memorial wall. That was why I had shown up- to remember them, to tell them I was sorry- but everyone had twisted it up so badly. They'd forgotten what the day was truly about. I couldn't forget, though. I stood in front of the wall and poured a bit of whiskey for each and every name, toasted the ones I knew personally and told each and every one of them how sorry I truly was. It was less than they deserved, but at least it was something."

She paused there, the list of names automatically repeating itself in her mind. Remus, Tonks, Sirius, Dumbledore, Fred, Ted, Lavender…

Draco’s hand squeezed her hip, pulling her back to the present. She shook her head sadly, trying to push the scroll out of her mind, though her fingers trailed over ink beneath her shirt.

"That was where he found me," her throat caught. "It was the first time I had seen him since Christmas and he seemed so sad. I thought maybe things had changed, that he was better. He said we'd done the best we could, that was what mattered. He'd never told me that before. He'd always been so angry, convinced that we could have done better, that I could have done better. When he didn’t… I thought we might be okay. I thought he cared. So when he hugged me… when he kissed me… I didn't stop him. I thought I could make him feel better, that we could make each other feel better…"

She felt Draco's arm pull her closer, felt the solid warmth of his chest against her shoulder, but it didn't permeate her skin. It was like a thin screen had been put up between them, keeping his warmth just out of reach, leaving her to feel that same cold, empty feeling she'd had lying in the grass as Ron walked away.

"He didn't even say anything," she said, her voice as empty as the void in her chest. "He'd thrown my dress somewhere, but he didn't even hand it back. He just fixed his trousers and left. And I promised myself that I would never let that happen again. That I would never let someone leave me so alone. But that's what I've been doing to you."

Draco was silent for a solid minute, completely at a loss for what to say. She was wrong, so incredibly wrong, but how could he get her to understand that? She seemed so convinced, so sure that she had wronged him the same way Weasley had her, how was he supposed to get through to her?

"Hermione," he finally found his voice, thankful that it didn't catch in his throat. "Hermione, no. Just, no."

He shook his head, reaching out to turn her face towards his, needing her to see in his eyes how wrong she was.

"You are nothing like him," he insisted. "Not even close, not remotely. You are so, so different from him. Fuck, you're in two different universes. You..." He fumbled for the proper words, willing his mind to provide them before she tried to run again. He could tell that she wanted to, that she thought she would be doing the right thing by him, and he had to make sure that didn't happen.

"There is a very big difference between Weasley leaving you the way he did, and what you think you are doing to me- which you aren't, I cannot make that clearer," he repeated seriously. "Not in any way, shape, or form. You are so far out in left field with that theory, you're in the wrong damn stadium."

"I'm not," Hermione shook her head, her eyes refusing to meet his. "I throw myself at you, even
though you don't want it, and then I run. I leave you. Just like I left Harry, just like Ron left me."

"No," Draco shook his head adamantly. "You're not leaving me, Hermione. If you were, you wouldn't be talking to me, you wouldn't be sharing this with me, you wouldn't let me stay in your flat with you, you wouldn't have come home with me. Hermione, you have never left me."

"I fucking have!" she insisted, her tone edged with anger. "I left you all over the fucking world!"

"No, you ran away to try to protect yourself," he argued. "They are not the same thing. What Weasley did to you, Hermione, what made it so despicable and painful was that he didn't care. He walked away and didn't look back, because he's a heartless bastard. You are exceedingly not that. You promised yourself that you would never let someone treat you the way he did again, and you kept that promise. You kept yourself safe, and no one can blame you for doing that. No one can hold it against you, and I certainly don't. I have nothing but respect for the lengths you've gone to try and keep yourself safe, and the fact that you've allowed me to step within that boundary you've kept for so long, that makes me feel so incredibly honoured."

He took her face in his hands, forcing her to meet his eyes, and willing her to believe him.

"You have not left me, and I am not going to leave you," he promised. "Not for as long as you're willing to keep me around. And even when you do try and get rid of me, I very well may stick around still, because I'm rather attached to you Hermione Granger."

Hermione stared at him in total awe, her mouth opening and closing more than once, her eyes full of guilt and confusion.

"Have I ever lied to you?" Draco asked her, his thumb stroking her cheek softly.

"N-no," she shook her head, brow furrowed in thought.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Yes, but-"

"Then trust me now," he cut her off. "Trust me when I tell you that you are nothing like him, that you could never be like him. Trust me when I tell you don't ever need to apologize for protecting yourself, and trust me when I tell you that you will never have to protect yourself like that from me."

His eyes never left hers as he spoke, his voice low and firm, sending tremors up and down her spine as she warred with herself. She wanted nothing more than to believe him, but what if he was wrong? What if he was just as blind as she had been?

What if he's not? her old self spoke up, slipping past the barrier she'd erected in her mind. What if you're just scared to admit it?

And then she heard Draco, standing in front of her mirror and telling her, it's okay to be scared.

"Trust me," he urged her again, quiet and heartfelt. "You are not a monster, Hermione. You are a woman who has been through hell and clawed her way back. You are a fucking inspiration, and I know that you can't always see that, so I need you to trust me."

"Okay," she agreed, barely able to get the word out.

Her heart was pounding a million beats a second and her hands were shaking, but despite the fear, she did trust him.
It's okay to be scared, he repeated in her head.

I don't want to be, she responded firmly, not of you.

And with that thought, she tilted her head and pressed her lips to his, her hand coming up to stroke his cheek tentatively. It lasted a few seconds, tops, and it was exceedingly chaste, but when she pulled away and rested her forehead against his they were both smiling.

"I trust you," she whispered firmly. "I trust you."
Friday morning Hermione stood in front of her wardrobe staring at a closed black garment bag. She'd dug the bag out in the early hours of the morning and had been staring at it intermittently ever since. It was coming down to the wire now though, and she needed to make her decision.

"See, these are the kinds of habits that worry me." Draco drawled behind her, strolling into the room and sitting down on the edge of the bed. "What's going on, Granger?"

"The Memorial," she sighed heavily. "It's tonight."

"It is," he agreed.

"I-I haven't been to one since-" she stopped, chewing her lip and crossing her arms tightly.

She didn't need to finish though, Draco knew what she meant.

"I couldn't," she carried on after a minute. "I couldn't go to things like that in the state I was in. It was the only standard I upheld- I couldn't disrespect them like that." Her arms relaxed slightly around herself, her fingers brushing the ink on her ribs subconsciously.

"And now?" Draco asked, catching onto what might be circling in her mind.

"I won't let another year go by where I don't acknowledge them," she said firmly. "I can't- I don't even know where I was last year." She began to pace again, her fingers still covering the spot where her tattoo was, and as she did Draco watched her curiously, trying to figure out where she was going with this.

"D-do you want to go to the ball?" He asked suddenly, surprised, but not exactly against the idea.

"I don't know." Hermione admitted nervously. "It's probably a really awful idea. No, it definitely is. It's a horrid idea, the worst I've ever had-"

"I wouldn't go that far," Draco interjected. "You've had some pretty awful ideas in your time."

She turned and glared at him, but he only smiled. When she started to pace again, he sobered.

"Remembering the people we lost is important," he told her seriously. "And I know that you feel that more than most people. The grief and anger and guilt that you carry, you need to pay respect to that if you're going to move past it."

"Move past it?" Hermione wheeled on him, the nervousness gone, replaced with fire in her eyes. "Move past it?!"

"Hermione-" Draco put his hands up to placate her, but it was too late.

"How dare you?!" she snarled. "How can you even suggest something like that?!"

"Hermione, you know that's not-"

"Move past it?!" she repeated. "There is no moving past something like this! You think I can just move on with my life? What about their lives? I could have saved them!"

"No, you couldn't." Draco stood and grabbed her shoulders, keeping her still. "Hermione, you could
not have saved them. You couldn't save everyone. I'm sorry, I know you don't want to hear it, I know that you think I'm wrong, but I'm not. You were seventeen years old. You shouldn't have even been a part of it- none of us should have."

"God, I'm so tired of hearing that bullshit excuse!" Hermione pulled away from him angrily. "We were adults. Seventeen is an adult, and if we hadn't fought, then who the fuck would have?!"

"I don't know," Draco admitted. "But I know that you can't keep carrying the weight of a hundred and fifty two dead bodies on your shoulders. They don't belong to you!"

"The Brightest witch of our age, brains of the Golden Trio, who the fuck else is there to blame?!"

"Voldemort!" Draco shouted vehemently. "Voldemort is who we blame, because he was the one who raised his wand to the rest of the world. He is the one that killed those people, and you are the woman that figured out how to kill him!"

"Not in time," Hermione said, the anger gone from her voice, replaced by grief. "Not before he claimed the life of just about every person I ever cared about in the world!"

"Hermione, listen to yourself!" He pleaded with her, taking her by the shoulders again. "You can't take the blame for not being able to figure out things that no one else in the entire world could possibly have known. You can't blame yourself for not achieving the impossible fast enough!"

"I can do whatever I fucking please," she snarled, anger returning as she pulled away from him again.

"Is that what you tell Potter?"

Hermione froze in the doorway to the bathroom, her back to him.

"Don't tell me he doesn't hold onto the same guilt that you do," Draco continued quickly. "The man's a martyr, always has been. When he talked to you about that guilt, did you tell him he was right?"

"Of course not," she muttered, refusing to turn around.

"He's the Chosen One," Draco reasoned. "He's the one who was destined to kill Voldemort. By your logic, shouldn't it be his fault those people died?"

"Stop it!" Hermione snapped, her hands curling into fists.

"If he'd done it sooner, wouldn't those people still be alive?" Draco advanced on her, his voice laced with malice that he knew was hurting her, but also knew was needed if she was going to believe him. "They would, wouldn't they? Some of them, at least. So why aren't you blaming him? What makes him exempt?"

"HE DIED!" She screamed, turning and shoving him hard enough that he stumbled. "He fucking died, because I couldn't figure out a way to stop it!"

"There wasn't a way!" Draco shouted right back at her. "There was absolutely no other way for it to happen, there was nothing else for you to do!"

"I SHOULD HAVE BEEN THERE! I SHOULD HAVE STOOD BESIDE HIM AND HELD HIS HAND! I SHOULD NEVER HAVE LET HIM OUT OF MY SIGHT!"

"Hermione, you know there was nothing that would have stopped him from walking into the forest
that night," Draco tried to reason with her. "The minute he realized what he was, he made his mind up. It's what saved him in the end."

"He died," she repeated darkly. "He wasn't saved. I didn't save him. He died."

"He came back," Draco countered. "He lived."

"He almost didn't."

"That's not your fault," he insisted once again. "There was nothing you could have done to change that."

"I should have tried," her voice began to crack. "I suspected, long before that night, I wondered. But I kept my mouth shut, I ignored the possibility. I was an idiot."

"You were scared," Draco retorted. "You were scared of losing your best friend. There's nothing wrong with that."

"I should have tried harder," she shook her head angrily.

"There was nothing you could do!" he pleaded with her. "Hermione, you did the impossible, you figured out how to defeat Voldemort. I don't know how many other ways I can say it before you understand! You did everything. We live in the world that we do because of you, not Potter or Weasley or Dumbledore or Sev, you."

Hermione continued shaking her head, refusing to look at him as he spoke, but Draco wasn't willing to give up this time. She needed to hear this.

"You carry around that number like it means so much," he gestured towards her ribs. "It's nothing compared to the lives you saved. The world we live in has you to thank, the children in Hogwarts right now have you to thank, the children who don't know what they are, but will one day, have you to thank, Hermione!"

"That's not the point, Draco!" she let out a choked sob.

"It's exactly the point!" He closed the space between them and took her face in his hands, refusing to let her pull away. "The lives that were lost are important, yes, but the only way that we will ever be able to live with ourselves is if we focus on the ones we saved. Please Hermione, for me, for Potter, for yourself, please! Just for one second, think about the lives you saved."

He was close to tears himself when he finished, desperate for her to hear him. If she didn't let go of this guilt it would kill her, and now more than ever, he knew that he couldn't let that happen.

"Let's go tonight," he finally suggested, his tone hopeful. "Let me show you what it is everyone is celebrating."

Hermione didn't answer at first, and he knew it was because her mind was spinning. That voice that she feared so much was most definitely wreaking havoc in her head, and he knew that she needed a moment to quiet it.

When she finally agreed, it was with more than a little trepidation, and Draco recognized what a huge risk she was taking.

"I promise, it won't be anything like before," he stroked her cheek softly. "It'll be good. It'll be good for you."
She didn't seem at all convinced, but she nodded once again and Draco took that as a good sign.

"You can't wear that dress, though." He nodded to the garment bag that had started them on this topic, and Hermione frowned at him.

"I don't have anything else," she said. "And I'll wear whatever I please."

"If you wear that, you'll spend the whole night remembering the last time you wore it," Draco shook his head. "I want this to be a positive experience for you. Something to make you see that there are good things about this day."

"What do you propose I wear, then?" Hermione asked, her annoyance at his order ebbing slightly now that he'd explained.

"Let me handle that," he smirked.

"Daph!" Draco called out as Daphne Greengrass stepped into the store, raising his hand to flag her down.

"Hey!" She smiled brightly as she made her way over to him, weaving her way around the racks of clothes. "So I'm here, what the hell are we doing?"

"Granger wants to go to the memorial tonight," Draco explained quickly. "And I need a hand getting her a dress."

"Sorry, walk me through that again?" Daphne shook her head. "Hermione wants to go to the Memorial Ball?"

Draco gave her an exaggerated nod and Daphne's eyes narrowed.

"Do not give me that look, Draco Malfoy," she scolded. "This is not a normal situation. Now, why isn't Mi picking out her own dress or wearing one she already has? Better yet, why didn't she go shopping for one before now?"

"The only dress she has for this kind of thing was the one she wore to the first gala," Draco explained evasively. "It holds some rather... unpleasant memories for her, and she only decided to go an hour ago."

"Right," Daphne nodded, letting the subject drop. "Well, we'd best be quick. The gala is in a few hours."

"I'm well aware. I was thinking something in emerald," Draco shared.

"Of course you were," she rolled her eyes. "Feeling a little possessive, are we?"

Her face broke into a bright smile as his cheeks coloured slightly and his eyes fell to his shoes.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he mumbled. "I just think it's a nice colour on her."

"Of course you do," Daphne nodded. "Well, let's see what we can do."
An hour later, Draco stepped back into Hermione's flat to find her pacing yet again, her hair piled into an elegant, yet simple bun on top of her head.

"Hermione?" he frowned cautiously.

"Oh, you're back!" she startled at the sound of his voice.

"I am," Draco agreed. "You look lovely."

Her hands immediately flew to her head, carefully trying to tuck away stray hairs that weren't there.

"I- I wasn't sure how…" she shook her head instead of finishing the thought and turned her attention to the garment bag he held over his shoulder.

"How about you get changed into this, and I'll slip over to Blaise's to grab my own dress robes?" Draco suggested kindly, hanging the bag over a chair. "Then I won't be in your way."

"You're not in the way," Hermione argued quickly. "B-but of course, you should get your robes."

"You could come to Blaise's with me," Draco offered. "I'm sure the girls would love for you to get ready with them."

"Oh, well, um," Hermione hemmed and hawed nervously, her hands fidgeting.

"You don't have to," he assured her. "It was just an offer."

"No, no I know," she nodded quickly. "I just, well, I don't know what, really. I'm just nervous, I suppose. Well, more like terrified."

"I'll be there with you the whole time," Draco took her hand and gave it a comforting squeeze. "And so will Potter."

"And everyone else in the wizarding world," Hermione squeaked. "Gods, Draco, this is a mistake!"

"It's not," he shook his head. "Hermione, this is important to you."

"What if I mess it up?" she chewed her lip nervously. "The last time I was at something like this… I don't know if I'm ready."

"You'll never know if you don't try," Draco offered kindly. "But I think you can do it, I believe in you. If it gets to be too much, you just say the word and we'll go, but you should try. I truly think it will be good for you."

Hermione didn't look at all convinced, her hands wringing the hem of her shirt until it was close to ripping and her teeth almost biting straight through her lip, but she nodded ll the same.

"I think I'll stay here," she finally decided. "To get ready, I mean."

"Okay," Draco smiled warmly. "I'll be back in a few minutes then."

He gave her arm an encouraging squeeze as he stepped towards the fireplace.
When she unzipped the garment bag, Hermione couldn't help but laugh. Of course he had gotten her a green dress! Not that it wasn't a lovely colour, it was, but the irony was still very much present.

*Well, there's one thing about it, it certainly won't make you think of Ron.*

As usual, the mere thought of his name made her heart cringe, the thought of how he would feel seeing her in such a dress was a small comfort though.

She unzipped the bag the rest of the way and removed the dress, carrying it into her bedroom and hanging it from the top of the door so she could get a good look at it. It was a lovely, deep forest green colour, made of what she could only assume was the finest silk- as if Draco would choose anything else. It was floor-length, with thin halter straps and a v-shaped neckline that, while sexy, was not plunging or overly revealing. At the waist, there was an intricate black lace belt, the only adornment on the whole dress. Most people would probably have said it was simple, Hermione thought it was the most beautiful dress she’d seen in her life.

As she slipped it off the hanger and stepped into it, she couldn't help but feel beautiful- something she hadn't felt in a very long time.

*This isn't about you,* a voice in her head reminded her. *This is about the people you lost.*

The thought sobered her, but didn't stop her from noticing how lovely the dress felt against her skin. It was as though the fabric were made of water, the way it flowed over her breasts and the curves of her hips.

"Wow," Draco breathed heavily, leaning against the doorway and looking her up and down. "I knew you'd look good, but this… breathtaking, Granger."

Despite her self-reprimand only moments before, Hermione felt herself smiling, her cheeks growing warm.

"It's beautiful, Draco," she met his eyes nervously. "Thank you."

"It is well and truly, my pleasure," he smirked.

She quickly turned the attention from herself, smiling appraisingly at her companion. "You look pretty good yourself."

"Well I had to be sure I was worthy of escorting the loveliest witch in England," Draco flirted unabashedly.

Hermione's cheeks heated even more at the compliment, and her lower lip slipped between her teeth.

"Are you ready?" Draco asked, easing off his advances for a moment.

"I think so," she nodded. "I just need to find my shoes…"

She took out her wand and cast a quick summoning charm, catching the plain black pumps as they flew from her wardrobe. Once they were on, she took the arm Draco offered her and nodded.

"It's going to be alright," he promised, covering her hand with his. "I promise."
Hermione gave him a determined nod, unwilling to back out despite the nerves playing rugby in her chest and stomach. Draco squeezed her hand once more, then wrapped his arm firmly around her and apparated them away.

The road leading up to the castle was lined with lanterns floating in the breeze, which carried the buzz of music and voices towards them. For all the beauty of it, though, Hermione was terrified.

"It's okay." Draco's arm stayed firmly around her waist once they landed, his thumb rubbing her hip softly.

"I know," she nodded. "It's just… surreal isn't the right word, but it's in that direction."

"I feel it too," he offered. "Being back here is always an odd feeling."

"We were just here, though," Hermione argued.

"We stepped right into McGonagall's office," Draco shrugged. "It's different coming through the gates."

Hermione nodded and grasped blindly for his hand, threading their fingers together when she found it.

"Your move, Granger," he squeezed.

She nodded again, but didn't move. Draco wasn't surprised or bothered though, he simply waited for her.

"I don't know if I can do this," she finally whispered.

"Why don't we go to the Memorial wall?" Draco offered. "You want to remember them, let's go give our respects."

Without waiting for her answer, he took a small step forward, turning back to look at her with an easy, encouraging smile.

It was slow going, but eventually they made it up the road to stand before the wall. When she finally let go of his hand, Draco had to stop himself from shaking it out as he felt the blood rush back in. Hermione wasn't paying attention though, too consumed by the rush of emotions bowling through her. She'd stood in this exact spot three years earlier, tracing the exact same names and wishing with all her heart that someone in the world felt the same way she did, that they would understand. It seemed too much to think that she might have found it...

"I remember the day the Weasley twins left Hogwarts," Draco spoke up behind her, and she could hear the smile in his voice. "I don't think there has ever been anything as satisfying as watching that bitch get chased through the castle by a firecracker dragon."

Hermione smiled softly at the memory, thinking about all the wonderful things Fred and George had invented and the joy that they had brought into the world. Her smile fell when her finger began to trace his name in the stone, though. Yet another life ended too soon, and his more painful than most, as it left behind half a soul.
"Tell me about them," Draco prompted, coming to stand beside her.

When she didn’t answer, he stepped closer and placed a hand on the small of her back, his thumb stroking the silk of her dress softly.

"There's a reason that they called this a Memorial, Granger," he explained quietly. "It's so that we can look at the names of those we lost and make sure that they aren't forgotten, that their sacrifice is honoured. The best way we can do that is by talking about them."

"I can't," Hermione breathed heavily. "I can't even bear to say their names. I don't deserve to-"

"No." Draco cut her off, his tone firm but not unkind. "I won't let you keep doing this to yourself. You are not personally to blame for any of these people's deaths. You did absolutely everything you could to save them. Do you think for one minute, that Fred Weasley would blame you? Would Lupin, or Tonks? I may not have known her in life, but I’ve made up with Aunt Dromeda, and I feel rather confidently that she would be absolutely horrified at the idea that you blame yourself for her death. The only thing that you can be guilty of in regards to these people is letting them be forgotten because you're too afraid to remember."

He knew his words sounded harsh, that they were cutting her, but he also knew that they needed to be said. The time for coddling had gone in this area of her life, someone needed to strip the truth bare and slap her across the face with it. She was an innocent in all this, and someone needed to tell her.

"They need you to remember them," he continued. "They need you, Hermione."

Hermione felt her breath catch in her throat and tears sting her eyes. He was right, she should remember them. She should tell anyone and everyone who would listen about the greatness that they had possessed, the love that they’d given and the sacrifices they had made. She should have stood on top of the castle turrets and screamed their accomplishments for all to hear. She owed them at least that much- but that voice in her head continued to sneer, reminding her that those people had been counting on her to save them.

_They knew what they were doing_, a whisper slipped through her mind, barely more than a breath.

_They knew exactly what they were doing, and they knew what might happen_, it spoke again. _You weren't the only one willing to die that night._

_I'm the one that should have_, she countered icily. _If there was any sort of justice in the world, I would have died and the others would have lived. Tonks and Fred would have lived._

_You know that's not how it works_, the voice chided her. _The world isn't black and white, good and bad, and justice isn't always what we think it should be. What's done is done. They died and you lived, and you're wasting it._

The thought struck her like a knife to the heart, making her stagger back from the wall and sending her to her knees.

"Hermione!" Draco dropped to the ground beside her, his voice thick with worry. "Hermione, what's wrong?"

She couldn't tell him, though. It was all she could do to breathe at the moment, and words were not an option. Instead, she allowed herself to succumb to the violent sobs that had begun forcing themselves from her body, leaning heavily against Draco when he pulled her to his chest.
"He would sit with the younger kids after they had detention with Umbridge until they weren't so upset," Hermione related to Draco.

They were sitting on the ground in front of the Memorial, Draco's back against the wall and Hermione seated between his legs, leaning against his chest as she told him about each and every one of the people listed behind him. Some she hadn't known, but she'd made sure to learn who they were in the aftermath - they had deserved at least that much.

"He and George had invented a fast-acting healing ointment, and he would put it on their hands and then sit with them until they laughed at his ridiculous jokes. He was fiercely protective of Ginny and Harry and I, and Merlin help anyone that tried to pick on Ron other than him and George. He might have taken the piss quite often, but he would have walked through fire for any of us... he did, I suppose. He died saving Percy."

Her voice caught as the night played in her head, remembering it with all too much detail. The way he had rushed forward to shove Percy out of the way, the deafening bang that had come seconds later, and then the screams that had left Percy's lips when the dust cleared.

"Come back to me," Draco spoke in her ear, his arm tightening around her waist. "It's over, Granger. Come back."

Hermione nodded and tried to do as he said, focussing on the feeling of his chest against her back, the way it lifted her body slightly with each breath, and the way his fingers splayed across her ribs as he held her.

"Tell me about your godfather," she asked suddenly, turning to see his face. "Tell me about the man you knew."

For a moment she thought he was going to say no, his face had twisted into a look so close to anger, but then the lines had softened and morphed into a look of questioning.

"Are you sure?" he asked nervously. "I know you don't have the best memories of him."

"Give me some," Hermione insisted. "Please, I'd like to know about him... if you'd like to tell me, that is." She looked away then, worried that he would deny her, that he really was angry with her for asking.

Draco wasn't angry though, he was simply in awe, wondering how he had ended up with such an amazing witch in his arms. She was falling apart at the seams, but still insisted on trying to help him.

"He was everything my father wasn't," he spoke softly. "I know you wouldn't think it, the way he acted in class and how he treated Potter, but he was. He loved me like his own, and I knew it." He sat me on the worktop and let me crush his ingredients and stir the cauldron. When I was accepted to Hogwarts, he flooed over for the night and brought me all the
books on my list. He told me how proud of me he was."

Hermione stroked his arm absentmindedly as he spoke, smiling at the fondness he held in his voice.

"My first night at Hogwarts, he knew I was nervous, so he let me call my mum from his fireplace so she could say goodnight," Draco continued. "He gave me the password to his office and rooms so that I could always get in to see him. After... after He came back, I had nightmares most nights, I was terrified of what was to come. Sev knew, and he made me promise to come to him when I needed to, no matter how embarrassed I might be about it- and I was, painfully embarrassed. I felt like a child whimpering for his mother, but Sev never made it seem like that. He comforted me without making me feel worse about the situation."

"He made an unbreakable vow for you," Hermione recalled, finally understanding why.

"He did everything for me," Draco shook his head sadly. "He gave me everything he had."

"He loved you," Hermione echoed his previous statement.

"Yeah," Draco sighed. "And I love him. I will always think of him as my father."

They sat quietly then, both reflecting on the feelings churning within them, the longing and sadness, mixed with the happy memories. They'd been quiet for so long, Hermione actually jumped when he spoke again, though his voice wasn't loud at all.

"I promised to show you what you had to be proud of after all this," he reminded her.

"You did," Hermione agreed uncertainly.

"Just a few minutes," Draco coaxed. "Please."

It was the pleading tone in his voice that had her nodding in agreement and getting to her feet. This was important to him, and she couldn't bear to withhold it.

They slipped into the Great Hall through one of the side doors, hoping to avoid making an entrance, but it took less than a minute for their arrival to circulate through the room. Hermione held Draco's hand so tightly her nails had left permanent scars in his hand, but he wasn't complaining. He located Blaise in the crowd and swiftly began making his way to him, pulling Hermione along.

"Wow! You clean up good, Mi!" Blaise whistled appreciatively when he caught sight of her. "And green is most definitely your colour."

Hermione only smiled meekly in response, her eyes focussed on the floor.

"So, can I get you a drink?" Blaise offered, obviously trying to make her feel better. "Butterbeer? Pumpkin juice? Vodka tonic?"

To her credit, Hermione turned down the offer, despite how desperately she wanted to down an entire bottle of vodka- to hell with the tonic.

When Harry and Ginny appeared, she almost lost her nerve and bolted, but Draco held her tightly. Harry appeared to be doing the same with Ginny, who was obviously chomping at the bit to get to
"It's so good to see you," she gushed emotionally. "Really, Hermione, when Harry said you'd been by to see him, I was so happy! I've missed you so much!"

Hermione only nodded tightly and kept her eyes on the floor. This was all too much, too fast. It had been a mistake coming here, a horrible, horrible mistake.

"There." Draco suddenly spoke in her ear, his hand turning her face to look at a couple across the hall. "That is what you did." He smiled warmly as Bill and Fleur entered the room, cooing over their daughter Victoire.

"She's one today," Ginny offered brightly, following their gaze. "Merlin, she's brilliant. And as beautiful as her mum. Honestly, Bill's going to be happy he's got wereblood in him when she starts dating."

"That little girl is the daughter of a werewolf and a veela," Draco spoke to Hermione quietly as the redhead babbled on. "They live in their own home, and have jobs and lives, and she is going to grow up without a care in the world. She is alive, because you fought for her."

He turned her body to face the other way, this time guiding her attention to a group of girls standing by the bar. "Those girls just started a clothing line. Three Slytherins and a Hufflepuff, and two of them are muggleborns. They became friends and get to live their dream because He lost."

Draco continued in this pattern for close to twenty minutes, turning her attention to people and relating what they had accomplished since the war.

Hermione nodded along as he spoke, allowing him to carry on in trying to convince her, but her focus wasn't on the people in front of her. She was only focussed on the Wizard at her side, a man she never would have known had Voldemort not been defeated.

As Draco carried on trying to convince her of what a positive effect she'd had on the world, all she wanted was to take him back to her flat and thank him for the positive effect he'd had on her. If anyone had saved lives, it was him, and for the first time in a very long time, Hermione was grateful for it.

"You had something to do with all of this, Hermione," Draco insisted drawing her attention back to him. "These people have something to celebrate today, because you fought for them. We all lost people that day, but we gained so much more. You have to see that."

"I do," she nodded slowly, stepping into him and reaching a hand out to stroke his cheek. "But it's not because of all these people, Draco. It's because of you. Because if we hadn't fought that night, you and I never would have been friends, and I never would have been able to do this."

And then her lips were on his, and her hands were threading into his hair, and his hands were on her waist, and the rest of the room fell away.

The cameras that flashed were invisible to them, the murmurs and whispers around them like nothing more than wind through some trees. None of it mattered at all, because she was kissing him, and he was kissing her, and there was nothing but attraction behind it.

When they separated, Hermione felt like her entire body was tingling in the most delightful way, and she couldn't help but smile.

"I'm rather thankful for you too," Draco grinned down at her.
Before she could say anything else, a disturbance on the other end of the hall drew Hermione's attention. Turning to see what was causing the murmurs and nervous shuffling around them, she immediately felt the tingling stop and all the warmth leave her body.

This had been a terrible idea. A terrible, horrible, truly awful idea. She shouldn't be here. She shouldn't be anywhere near here, and the fact that she hadn't thought about this made her ashamed.

_I fucking told you so_, the voice in her mind snarled. _But you just had to listen to Malfoy. You really can be a stupid chit sometimes, you know that? Honestly, what did you think was going to happen? Did you think he'd died?!_

Hermione's logical voice didn't have a chance to answer the accusations this time, too busy cowering in the deepest recesses of her memory as she watched the man who had almost been her undoing step into the hall.

He was immediately engulfed by the various members of the press in attendance, smiling and laughing with them as they pressed him with questions. He answered them all with a proud elegance that Hermione didn't recognize, so far from the bumbling, awkward days of his youth that she almost wondered if it wasn't him.

There was no chance of mistaking him when his eyes fell on them, though. She knew that look only too well, despite the way he tried to remain calm in front of the reporters. She watched with trepidation as his eyebrows rose higher and higher on his forehead and his cheeks grew nearly as red as his hair.

When the cameras and crowds had dispersed enough she saw the way his eyes narrowed dangerously, their usual bright blue replaced by dangerous black pupils and as he started towards her, all the nerves in her body began to tingle.

_Run_, they told her. _Run as far and as fast as you can, and don't stop until you forget him again._

"Harry!" As he greeted their mutual friend, Ron's face broke into the same boyish grin that she had always loved, but while it used to light up an entire room, now it seemed forced and staged. "Good to see you!"

Harry responded with a simple nod, the smile plastered on his face more of a grimace than anything.

"Gin," he greeted his sister. "How's it going? Haven't seen you in ages."

"I've been busy with practice, I'm first string now," Ginny frowned at him.

"Playing with the big boys now, eh?" Ron smirked. "Yeah, it's a hard thing juggling it all. Luckily I've got such a supportive fanbase, or I'd never be able to do it. We're gonna make the finals this year, you know."

As he carried on with bragging about how big a star he'd become, Hermione slowly tried to inch away, hoping that if she got far enough he wouldn't bother speaking to her. This plan was ruined when she hit the brick wall that was Draco Malfoy.

"Don't let him ruin this," he murmured in her ear.

She wanted to tell him that it was much too late for that, what little confidence she'd had had gone the moment he walked into the room, but it was at that moment that Ron decided to acknowledge her.
"What's this?" he asked, sounding genuine, but looking furious. "It's been quite a long time, hasn't it Mione?"

The old nickname made her cringe, bringing back memories of harsh, demeaning words followed by a chuckle and 'oh, take a joke Mione!'

"Well, aren't you going to say something?" he demanded. "Or are you too big to say hello to an old friend now? Oh, do you not remember me? Ron Weasley, we used to be mates." He held his hand out, smiling menacingly as she blushed.

"Of course I remember you, Ronald," Hermione tried to sound angry.

"Ah, wasn't sure," he shrugged. "Thought maybe the drugs had done you in. Although it might not have been the worst thing, your not being an insufferable know-it-all anymore, eh Mione?"

He laughed deeply, as though they'd just shared the greatest of jokes, and Hermione felt herself shrink. This was what he did, what he'd always done, he made her small.

With every word that left his mouth, she shrank just a little bit more and by the time he was finished, she felt like she was no more than a few inches tall.

"I think it's time I was going," she muttered. "It was nice seeing you."

She tried to step around him, but he blocked her way with a quick step. "Come on, Mione, the fun hasn't even started yet. I have so many questions!" he gushed fakely. "I mean, you're like a real celebrity these days, showing up in magazines. Tell me, has it helped your popularity having your cunt plastered all over the world, or does it just make blokes less interested? I mean, once you've seen it, there isn't much else worthwhile is there?"

"I'd stop if I were you," Draco growled dangerously behind her.

"So, she really has hit rock bottom," Ron chuckled jovially. "I mean, if a Death Eater is jumping to her aid."

"Draco is not a Death Eater!" Hermione snapped, confidence surging through her momentarily.

"The drugs really have gotten to you, haven't they? You must have forgotten the time he stood by and watched while you were being tortured."

"That's enough!" Harry stepped in, putting himself between Ron and Hermione.

"Are you defending him?!" Ron demanded, turning his anger on the other man. "You? The person who spent a year proving that Malfoy had the mark? Are you fucking joking?!"

"Don't make a scene Ron," Harry ignored the question.

"I'm just having a chat with an old friend." Ron wrapped an arm around Hermione's shoulders, smiling brightly at the nearest camera.

Hermione, did not smile. She didn't do anything, too frozen by fear to even flinch.

"What do you say we uphold tradition and get out of here, hm Mione?" He spoke directly in her ear, his breath rustling her hair and heating the bare skin of her neck.

"Weasley, remove your hand before I remove it for you." Draco snarled, enunciating each word dangerously. Hermione desperately wanted to let him comfort her, wanted to let herself think she
was safe as long as he was there, but then Ron squeezed tighter and the fear came rushing back.

"Bugger off, Malfoy." He waved Draco away as though he were a bothersome fly.

"Ron, please." Hermione tried not to whimper as his fingers dug into her shoulder possessively, keeping her by his side.

"Hmm, now that sounds rather familiar…” he leered. "Perhaps if you say it once more, I'll oblige."

"Stop," she pleaded shakily.

"You've got three seconds," Draco stepped in closer. "And then I'm going to remove your arm, not only from Granger, but from your entire body. One… two…"

Before he got to three, Ron rolled his eyes and shoved Hermione away, sending her staggering into Draco's arms.

"I don't know what you're so worried about Malfoy," he hummed lazily. "It's not like she hasn't been everywhere before. I doubt she's any good anymore anyways, with all that wear and tear she wouldn't even be worth it. Not that she was in the first place, but at least she was ti-"

The fist came out of nowhere, slamming into Ron's jaw with the force of a train and sending him flying backwards onto his arse.

"Fuck," Harry shook his hand out. "That hurts."
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

A/N: Hey guys! Sorry for the delay on this chapter, I had it all ready to go and then as I was giving it a final read through realized that is was ALL wrong. Hopefully you like it (well, I feel like you all might be a little upset with me, but emotion is emotion, so...) Anyways, as always thank you all for your lovely comments and favourites and such. I love hearing from you, and I so appreciate your thoughts on the story. I've also found some new inspiration, you might say, and as I just got a comment this week remarking on how much they enjoyed the music I mentioned I thought I would share some more with you. I'm actually considering going old school 2000s and putting together a moodboard playlist on Tumblr or something, feel free to let me know if you'd be interested in that. Anyways, I've recently discovered a group called Alexander Jean and I am fully obsessed. Whiskey and Morphine has been providing me with all kinds of inspiration, as has Waiting For You, so I fully recommend giving them a listen because they're amazing. Anyways, enough of my babbling, on with the story :) Love you guys!

Draco tossed the morning edition of the Daily Prophet onto the counter, emblazoned across the front page of which was a full colour, moving picture of Harry Potter punching his best friend in the jaw, while the fallen golden girl watched, clinging to Draco Malfoy.

"You really did a number on her, you know that?" He muttered, glaring down at it.

He wasn't sure who he was talking to, be it the Weasel, Merlin, Salazar Slytherin or whatever muggle God Hermione tended to curse, all he knew was that he wanted to find that mythical figure that was pulling the strings and wring them by the neck. Draco leaned back against the counter and closed his eyes, tilting his head up to the ceiling and sighing deeply.

The night before had turned into a disaster. He'd thought that it would be good for her, showing her all the people that she had saved instead of letting her ruminate on the ones that had been lost. He should have known Weasley would be there and that he would make a scene. Hermione had said it, she'd tried to tell him, but he hadn't listened.

He'd known the moment Weasley walked in, not because of the flurry of activity around him, but because of the way Hermione had tensed in his arms. Only seconds before she'd been kissing him, telling him that he was the reason she was starting to believe that something good might have come from her sacrifices, and then he walked in and she'd turned back into the scared junkie he'd found six months before. He'd tried to reassure her, told her to stand tall and not let Weasley get the better of her, she was stronger than that. He still believed that, the only problem was that she didn't.

Looking at her ex, she'd convinced herself that she was still the war torn girl she was the last time he'd tried to break her. She didn't realize how strong she had become since then and her instincts had told her to run.

Just this once, Draco wished he'd listened. He'd known that the redhead twit wouldn't be able to stay away, wouldn't be able to stop himself from coming over and pressing her buttons, but he hadn't expected him to go straight for the kill.
When Hermione had stood up for him, he'd thought for a moment that she might be realizing that she could fight back, that she was bigger than the tiny excuse of a man in front of her. When Weasley had bit back and attacked her though, she had fallen silent and he knew that she was listening to that voice in her head that told her he was right. For once, though, that didn't matter to him. What did matter, were the vile atrocities Weasley was hurling at her. It took all the self-control he'd ever possessed not to murder the man right there, but he'd held it together. He'd done it for Hermione, knowing that if he threw the first punch she would pull back into her tiny, single person bubble of safety, and it would take him months to get back in. So instead, he'd pulled her close and ordered Weasley to be quiet... until he'd grabbed her.

Draco had seen red in that moment, unable to speak for fear that an Unforgivable might pass through his lips and he'd lose her forever to a life in Azkaban. The fear in her eyes had been enough to still his anger, bringing an eerie calm over him as he stepped into Weasley and made it perfectly clear what would happen if he didn't get his hands off of her.

And then she'd fallen into his arms, and Harry Potter had sprung out of nowhere and knocked his best friend square in the jaw.

The press were having a field day, snapping pictures and screaming questions, crowding around the group to create an impenetrable wall of lights and sound. Hermione clung to his arm in shock and fear, babbling incoherently about Harry hitting someone and the flashing bulbs being too bright.

When the Headmistress had swept into view, smacking the reporters back authoritatively and taking control of the situation, Draco couldn't help but fall in love with her the tiniest bit. She was like a Patronus shining through the fogs of Azkaban, a beacon of safety and light.

"Mr. Potter!" she'd shouted. "What are you doing, and why is Mr. Weasley on the ground?"

"He went after Hermione!" Harry defended himself as his girlfriend studied the damage he'd done to his hand.

"I see," McGonagall pursed her lips at the prostrate Weasley. "Well, you both need to go and see Madam Pomfrey immediately. I trust you remember the way?"

"Perfectly," Harry sighed. "But I don't think Ron's going to be walking anytime soon."

"No," she hummed blandly, studying her former student. "I suppose not- ah Mr. Weasley!" she smiled warmly at an approaching redhead, this one with a number of scars across his face. "Would you be so kind as to escort your brother to the hospital wing? He seems to have had a bit of an accident."

"Well, he can be rather clumsy," the new Weasley shrugged. "You alright, Pot- Hermione?"

He'd turned and caught sight of the witch huddled beside Draco, still talking a mile a minute about absolutely nothing, his eyes widening in surprise.

"What are you doing here? Where the hell have you been?! Are you alright?" He took a step towards her, hand outstretched, but Hermione yelped in fear and cowered further into Draco's side, using his body as a shield.

"The hospital wing, Mr. Weasley," McGonagall reminded him curtly. "There will be time for socializing later. Come along."

She shot a worried look towards Draco, one eyebrow raised in question, then before her could answer turned on her heel and began leading the processional of wounded back through the reporters
and cameras.

While they were distracted, Blaise had slipped his way through with a large cloak and flung it over Hermione, effectively hiding her face until they were able to get across the ballroom and to the closest fireplace connected to the floo network.

Back at her flat, Hermione had fallen silent. She slowly and methodically undressed and took down her hair, then sat in front of her mirror and removed her make-up the muggle way, scrubbing her face until it was raw. When she'd finished that, she'd crawled into bed and promptly fallen asleep.

Draco had not slept, sitting up most of the night watching her, waiting for the nightmares to come or the memories to resurface. Neither of those things occurred, however, and now here they were the next morning. Hermione hadn't said a word about it, refused to even acknowledge what had happened, locked in her bedroom…. Yeah, going to the Memorial was probably a pretty bad idea.

For the thousandth time in the last 12 hours, Hermione cursed herself. How could she have been so stupid as to believe that going to the Memorial Ball would be good?! Of all the stupid things she had done since the war, this was most definitely the worst. She’d known that before it happened, but she’d let Draco convince her.

_He was trying to help_, the kinder of the voices in her head spoke up. _And he did. Remember?_

It was true, for just a minute, she had seen things the way he did- seen _herself_ the way he did. For a minute, she hadn't been a recovering addict with a billion and one emotional problems, she'd just been a girl who liked a boy and really wanted to kiss him- and she had. She had told him exactly what she meant and what she wanted, and then she'd kissed him and he'ld kissed her back. She might have even kissed him again… but then Ron showed up and everything had gone wrong.

She didn't care what he said about her, not really, it wasn't the first time she'd heard any of it. What mattered was when he'd started going after Draco. The man who had done so much for her- the man who'd saved her- she couldn't let Ron talk about him like that. She'd had to say something, it had been burning in her chest, but then she'd let it out and made everything a thousand times worse.

And then he'd put his arm around her and she'd frozen. It had all come rushing back in that moment- the fights, the snarky insults, the snide remarks, the constant putting him first without a thought for herself. And when he'd whispered in her ear about getting out of there, she'd almost agreed. She'd almost let him win, again.

_Uphold tradition_, he'd whispered.

_Tradition_, the voice in her head sneered. _You want tradition, you should have done a few hits before you left._

Thinking about the kinds of traditions he'd wanted, she felt bile rise in her throat. He'd used her, over and over and over, used her mind, her emotions, her body. She'd done everything for him, and he'd left her with nothing, and now that she was finally on her way to being okay, he was there to take it all away- and she'd almost let him. Despite how far she'd come, that voice in her head still told her to him take it. _It's not like you haven't done it before, just give him what he wants and be done with it._

And she almost had… but Draco. For the thousandth time, Draco had come to her rescue, pulling her
out of the mess she'd gotten herself into yet again.

*You're fucking lost without him,* the voice mocked her. *Honestly, all that bullshit about taking care of yourself and being better off on your own? You're pathetic.*

*Yes, I am well-fucking-aware,* Hermione snarled back. *Would you please just shut up!??*  

*You should have just left with Ron and been done with it,* it carried on. *That would've gotten rid of him in a hurry.*

*It would have killed him,* she countered.

*All the better, he wouldn't come back.*

"GODDAMMIT!" Hermione roared, picking up the closest item and chucking it at the wall. Unfortunately the closest thing was a sweater, so it wasn't nearly as cathartic as she'd hoped. Instead, it only managed to make her more angry and restless. She was tired of feeling like this, tired of feeling like her entire body was crumbling from the inside out. Without taking another second to think about it, she grabbed her jumper and yanked it over her head, before snatching her bag off the floor and storming past him.

"Hermione?" Draco frowned as she threw the door open and stormed out, making her first appearance all day.

"I'm going out!" She snapped, not bothering to look at him as she wrenched the door open.

"You're not wearing shoes!"

Hermione screeched in exasperation and violently summoned a pair of trainers, yanking them on her feet as she stormed through the door, ignoring Draco's request to know where she was going. She couldn't have answered him anyways, too angry to even think about a destination. All she knew was that if she stayed in that flat any longer, she was going to implode and so she walked.

She walked out the door, down the stairs and out onto the street, each step angrier than the last, leading her in no particular direction besides 'Away'.

It went against every single one of his instincts, but Draco let her leave. He didn't even cast a tracking spell on her, though he wished that he had, and when Potter showed up and asked where she was, he didn't panic when answering that he didn't know. She needed space, that much was obvious, and so he was giving it to her. He was trusting her, just as she did him.

"Are you insane?!" Harry demanded angrily. "What the hell are you thinking letting her wander off after something like that?! You know what she's going to do!"

"No I don't," Draco responded calmly. "And neither do you, and we never will if we follow her everywhere. We have to trust her."

"Fuck that!" Harry scoffed. "We have to *find* her before she gets herself murdered in an alley!"

"She's not going to get herself murdered," Draco ground his teeth in annoyance. "She's upset, she's not an idiot."
"You have lost your fucking mind, Malfoy!" Harry continued to rant. "She's a danger to herself, we both know it! What the hell has you suddenly convinced that she's cured?!"

"Potter, I'm not arguing with you about this," Draco seethed. "I'm giving her space, and you better fucking do the same. And speaking of people losing their minds, what the fuck were you thinking last night?!"

"I was thinking that I wasn't going to let Ron slag her off like that again," Harry defended himself angrily. "What the fuck were you doing?!"

"Being the bigger fucking person!" Draco shouted back, stepping into Potter and shoving him angrily. "You think hitting him was the answer?! She was fucking terrified, and all you did was make it worse!"

"At least I shut him up!" Harry shoved back. "What the fuck were you doing?! You didn't say a fucking word!"

"Because I wasn't about to get into a fight with someone who has fewer braincells than a Flobberworm!" Draco scoffed. "He wouldn't have listened anyways. The only thing I was doing was getting her the hell away from that bastard. If you'd kept your fucking temper in line for once, everything would have been fine!"

"He was calling her a slag!"

"I KNOW!" Draco roared. "Don't you think I heard him?! I heard every fucking word, and I saw the look in Hermione's eyes when she started to believe him!"

"That's my point," Harry argued. "She believes him when he says that awful shit about her, so why were you letting him say it?!"

"Because I'm not his fucking puppet-master!" Draco shot back. "And I knew that hitting him wouldn't help things!"

"It shut him up!"

"And what do you think it did to Hermione?!" he roared. "Do you think for a second that she's thankful you did it?!"

"I don't give a damn if she is," Harry cried. "What I care is that he might actually think twice before going after her again."

"Oh sure, that's going to happen," Draco agreed sarcastically. "Because your dunderhead of a best friend has never acted petty and angry before, never run his mouth off even though he knew it would get him a knock to the teeth."

"He is not my best friend," Harry snarled back. "He hasn't been my best friend since the first time he threatened to lay a hand on her."

"Well at least you did one thing right," Draco rolled his eyes.

"Hey, you don't get to judge me!" Harry snapped. "You just got here, you don't get to tell me how this works, I've been here for all of it, I know!"

"You haven't been here in a long time, Potter!" Draco retorted. "And that's not your fault, you tried, but the fuck you know! You don't know a damn thing!"
As their tempers continued to rise, Draco stopped listening to what Potter was saying and simply shouted over him, repeating over and over how stupid he was for hitting the Weasel in front of Hermione. He just couldn't understand why Potter wasn't getting it—she had just learned that her parents abused her, he couldn't even think about how many men must have put their hands on her when she was high, and aside from all that, there was the fact that Weasley had tried to more than once. She flinched at loud doors on a good day, what made Potter think that watching him punch her ex out would leave her completely unaffected?

"I couldn't just let him go after her like that!" Harry continued insisting. "He needed to be put in his place!"

"She needed you to be on her side!"

"Where the hell do you think I was?!" Harry roared. "Do you think I was punching Ron out for him?!

"I think you were thinking about yourself, instead of thinking about your friend," Draco snapped. "She needed you not to make a scene, she needed you to be calm, and you didn't do that! You thought about yourself and how you felt, and you acted on that instead of thinking about her!"

Hermione made it twelve blocks before she ran out of breath, nearly crashing into a bus shelter wall when she didn't put her hands up fast enough. Breathing heavily, she let her head drop between her shoulders as she tried to slow her heart rate. Unfortunately, her heart rate had very little to do with physical exertion, and quite a lot to do with the fact that her mind was running a million miles a minute.

She just needed it to slow down, she needed everything to slow down, just for a second—just long enough to organize a coherent train of thought.

"You alright there, luv?" A man spoke up beside her, making Hermione flinch. Noting her reaction, he took a step back and offered an apology, removing his hat so that she could see his face. "Didn't mean to startle you. Are you alright?"

"Fine," Hermione nodded sharply, forcing a smile onto her face. "Fine, thank you."

The man nodded warmly, replacing his hat and taking a seat in the shelter, though she could tell that he was peeking at her from the corner of his eye.

*Move,* the voice in her head urged her, the feeling of the man's eyes on her making her uneasy. Turning away from him, she scanned the street for somewhere to go—anywhere. When her eyes fell upon the pub sign, it was like lightning had struck her, fizzling her spine and jolting her feet into moving.

She was seated at the bar before she even realized it, her arm going up to flag the bartender of its own volition.

"Whiskey." She answered his question without hearing it, her hand reaching for the shot glass that he set in front of her and lifting it to her lips without question. As the alcohol slid down her throat, she prayed for the release that it had always promised her, prayed for the thoughts to slow to a drunken place.
She didn't know how many times the glass was emptied and filled again before things started to slow, but it had to be a significant amount judging by the way the room seemed to be spinning.

"Can I get you some food to go with that?" the bartender asked, filling her glass again.

"I'm fine," Hermione answered flatly.

"You seem like you're drinking for a reason," he continued. "Wanna talk about it?"

"No."

"Alright," he shrugged. "I'll be around though, if you change your mind."

"Wonderful," Hermione snarled. "I'll keep that in mind in case of an aneurysm."

The bartender took no note of her tone, simply refilled her glass and gave her another smile.

"Don't wander off with that," Hermione nodded to the bottle in his hand.

"Like me to leave the bottle, would ya?" he smirked. "If you've got cash, it's yours."

She didn't think twice before fishing out her credit card and slapping it down on the counter, reaching out to take the bottle in exchange.

*What the hell are you doing?* Her mind wandered as she poured herself another drink, finally running at a pace that she could handle.

Running, she answered herself. *It's what we know how to do.*

"I don't want to run from him," she muttered quietly. "I don't want to run anymore."

*So what the hell are you doing here?*

She'd barely had the time to think the question before it was voiced behind her by a gravelly blonde.

"It must be my lucky day," Pansy continued cheekily. "Hermione Granger in the flesh, and off the wagon once again."

Hermione didn't bother to answer, hoping that if she ignored her long enough she might disappear. *Maybe she's not even here...* she mused happily. *A drunken illusion...*

*I think we can come up with better illusions than that,* her mind scoffed.

"Give me that." Pansy snatched the glass from her hand as she went to take another sip, swallowing it herself. "You're drunk."

"And you're a bitch," Hermione deadpanned, snatching the glass back. "Get your own drink."

"I thought you were sober," Pansy ignored her, taking a seat on the next stool.

"What are you doing here?" Hermione ignored her right back.

"This is where I go for lunch when I'm in town. We've been here quite a few times together, I'm so pleased it made an impression." Pansy turned away and flagged down the bartender so she could order, adding an order of chips at the end for Hermione.

"I don't want those," she snapped. "I'm not hungry."
"You're wasted, you're going to be hungry soon enough," Pansy waved her off. "So, are you here to hide from your ex, your current boyfriend, your latest fling, or the hordes of press that are looking for you."

"I'm not hiding," Hermione snarled. "Now would you kindly, bugger the fuck off?"

"I haven't had my food yet," Pansy shook her head. "So, seriously, what are you doing?"

Yes, do tell, her mind taunted her.

"I'm drinking," she answered both.

"I thought you were clean," Pansy said again, obviously not willing to let it go.

"Do you see any pills here?" Hermione snapped.

"I see an empty bottle, I assume the rest will follow," she shrugged.

"Well you know what they say when you assume."

"Yes, but it's never stopped me before," Pansy smiled. "So I'll just keep going, why don't I? You're here drinking because you're hiding from the actual descent guy in your life, after the two losers in your life came to blows because he's trying to tell you that it's not your fault."

"Fuck off Pansy!" Hermione slammed her glass down against the bar so hard that it shattered, shards of it embedding in her hand deep enough to hit nerves.

"Bloody hell, Granger!" Pansy jumped back, shielding her eyes. "What did you do that for?"

Hermione didn't bother to answer, she was too busy trying to get away.

"Hey!" Pansy reached out to grab her before she fell on her face, slipping off her barstool. "Granger, hang on!"

Hermione felt the pressure before Pansy had even touched her- sharp nails puncturing her skin, her fingers tingling from lack of blood flow…

"You think this is funny?!" Jean snarled, dragging the child down the street holding her wrist.

"Her flowers changed colours!" The girl giggled, then frowned slightly. "Mummy you're hurting."

"You're bloody well going to find out what hurting is when you get home, young lady," she snapped. "Now hurry up."

Realizing that perhaps the colour-changing flowers were not as light a matter as she'd thought, the child picked up her pace, jogging to keep up with her mother.

She sank quickly to the ground, pulling her knees to her chest protectively as she huddled under the bar.

It's just a memory, she tried to tell herself, it's not really happening. You're just drunk. It isn't real…

Fuck that! her mind spat back angrily.

Her hands tingled from the rush of blood caused by the adrenalin in her system both from the panic and the open wounds, but she couldn't seem to convince herself that it was that and not the lack of circulation that had caused the same effect so many years before.
"It's not real," she breathed raggedly, one hand rising to tug at her hair. "It's not real. It's not real."

She couldn't keep the refrain up though, as it grew harder and harder to breathe through the panic-inducing memory. As the pain in her wrist grew, so did her resolve to keep it together grow smaller and smaller, until she finally gave herself over to the panic falling headfirst into the scene playing in her mind.

"Mummy what's wrong?" she asked, growing nervous.

"Be quiet," her mother responded tersely. "Not another word until we get home."

The girl nodded stoically and pressed her lips together tightly, determined to not even let her mother hear her breathe until told otherwise.

The second they walked in the door, she was sent to her room and told to stay there until called. Sitting on her bed, her legs crossed and her hands clasped together primly, she listened to her parents arguing below, their angry voices carrying all through the house. As hard as she listened though, she couldn't understand a thing they said.

"Possessed..." her father cried.

"Horrifying, inhuman!" her mother had countered.

She just couldn't understand why they were so upset though. The flowers had been beautiful, they'd shimmered and bloomed right in front of them like something out of a fairytale. The lady her mother had been talking to had said so, she'd said it was the loveliest thing she'd ever seen.

"Mummy doesn't like it," the girl said to herself quietly. "It mustn't be good if Mummy doesn't like it."

She nodded sharply to herself, mind made up. Yes, if Mummy thought it was... horrifying, then that must be what it was.

"Well?" The door to her bedroom swung open forcefully, slamming back against the wall and making her jump.

"Well?!" her father repeated, growing angrier. "What have you got to say for yourself?!"

When she didn't answer, not knowing what he was talking about, he darted forward and latched onto her wrist just as her mother had on the way home.

"Come on!" he tugged her roughly from the bed and out onto the landing, then marched her down the stairs. In the living room, her mother stood glaring crossly, her arms folded over her chest.

"Well?" she echoed her husband's question.

"I- I'm sorry Mummy," the girl stammered. She didn't know why, but it seemed that an apology was what they wanted, so she said it again.

"I'm very sorry, I didn't mean it," she looked down at her feet contritely.

"I bloody well hope so!" Her father snapped, his hand still holding her wrist in a vice-grip "How dare you embarrass your mother like that! Acting like a bloody heathen right out there in the open, it's disgraceful!"

She nodded along as he spoke, trying not to cry as he squeezed her wrist even tighter. As her circulation grew more and more strained, her fingers began to tingle oddly and she couldn't help but
whimper at the strange sensation. Fingers weren't supposed to feel like that.

"What?!" Her father roared at the sound, yanking her arm even harder.

"Y-you're hurting," she whispered tearily. "M-my fingers Daddy."

"You're lucky that's the only thing hurting," he snapped. "I've a right mind to tan your sorry hide."

He didn't though, instead releasing her arm with a look of disgust and sending her to bed without supper or her books.

When the phone began to ring, Draco didn't even realize what it was, figuring it was just his ears ringing. It wasn't until Potter stopped arguing and snapped at him to answer the damn thing that he realized what it was- not that he was very sure what to do with it, which was why it was Potter that stomped over and picked up the receiver.

"What?!" It took less that a minute for his face to change from anger to fear, and in the moment that immediately followed Draco had snatched the receiver from his hand and put it to his own ear.

"Hello?"

"Oh good, someone helpful," Pansy Parkinson's gravelly voice came through the speaker. "Granger's melting down."

"What are you talking about?" Draco demanded, his own anger dissipating into worry. "Where are you?"

Instead of answering him, Pansy presumably held the phone up in Hermione's general direction, because the next thing he heard was her familiar sobs and mutterings.

"Where are you?!" He demanded once more, summoning his wand and preparing to apparate.

"What's she saying?" Potter asked, trying to lean in and hear what was being said. "Malfoy, where is she?"

"Miller's Daughter?" Draco echoed the answer Pansy gave. "What the fuck is that?"

"It's a pub," Harry answered. "I know it. Come on!"

He didn't wait for Draco to drop the phone before disapparating them. It was a miracle that Draco hadn't been splinched in the process, but he would yell at Potter about that later. The only thing that mattered now was Hermione.

When he entered the pub, there was a crowd of onlookers, all of them whispering and muttering to each other as they watched the broken girl on the floor of the bar.

"Oi, get lost!" Draco bellowed, shoving bystanders out of the way as he rushed to her side, sparing a quick glance for Pansy who was standing nearby, glaring at people.

When he finally reached Hermione, the worry he'd been feeling in the last five minutes turned to outright fear. She was bleeding, which was never a good sign, but what worried him most was her
eyes. She was looking right at him, but he knew for a fact that she wasn't seeing him.

"Hermione?" He took another step towards her, crouching down to her level. "Hermione, it's Draco. Can you look at me, love?"

She felt him reach out to her and flinched instinctively, cradling her aching wrist to her chest. When his hand cupped her face instead of incurring further injury though, something sparked in her mind.

"Hermione, look at me," Draco's voice broke through the memory. "You're okay, love. It's just me, it's Draco. You're okay."

She felt his hand brush against her knee and let out a shaky breath, realizing that it was him in front of her. His name fell from her lips in a whimper and she felt him settle beside her.

"I'm here," he promised. "I'm right here, you're okay."

As his arm encircled her shoulders, Hermione leaned against him and tried to even out her breathing. You're okay, she repeated to herself. It was just a memory. They're not here anymore. Draco's here. Draco's here.

"Malfoy, is she okay?" Harry's voice suddenly joined the mix of noise around her and another jolt of fear shook her body.

She didn't mean to, but she flinched away from his voice all the same. He had been defending her, he didn't mean to scare her last night, she knew that. In the logical part of her mind, she knew that, but the other parts of her mind were having a hard time getting on the same page. Those parts of her mind told her to be scared, to run, to hide herself from this man for fear that he might do the same to her as he had to Ron.

No, she snapped at the thoughts. Harry would never hurt me, never. I hurt him, not the other way around.

But he could, the voice taunted back.

He won't!

Or will he?

Her face buried against Draco's chest, Hermione whimpered in frustration. Why couldn't her brain just listen to her?! Why couldn't she just be fucking normal?! Why were there so, so many thoughts that just wouldn't go away?!

"- gonna get out of here, okay?" Draco's voice broke through her thoughts once again, calm and reassuring. "I'll take you home."

Hermione nodded at the idea and allowed him to help her up, his hand cupping her head gently to keep her from hitting it on the bar. She didn't manage more than a single step before her legs gave out, but Draco didn't skip a beat, scooping her up into his arms.

"I've got you," he promised. "You're alright."

Hermione nodded and buried her face in his neck, her hand clutching his shirt tightly. She vaguely registered leaving the pub and stepping into an alley, then felt the tightening and tugging of apparition as Draco took them home.
Safe inside the flat, Draco carried her over to the sofa and sat down, still cradling her in his lap. "What's happened to your hand?" he asked, gently pulling it from her chest so that he could examine it. "You're bleeding."

"I… the glass… I'm sorry," Hermione mumbled. "I didn't… I didn't mean to, I just-

Understanding dawned on Draco and he patiently waited for her to continue, his fingers tracing patterns soothingly across her back. He knew this game well by now, she was drunk and confused. When she only continued to babble, he summoned a sobering potion and coaxed it down her throat, then healed her hand as he waited. The effects were nearly immediate, the fog lifting and shame taking its place.

"I'm sorry," Hermione sobbed, unable to meet his eyes. "I'm sorry, I just-

"It's okay," Draco cut her off. "Just take a breath, love."

As expected though, she didn't do anything of the sort, she only continued to sob out apologies while Draco tried to soothe her. When the sobs turned to whimpers, Draco carried her to the bedroom and settled her in bed, urging her to simply close her eyes and rest.

"Please don't go," she begged, still clutching his shirt. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry!"

"I'm not going anywhere," Draco promised. "I'm right here."

"I didn't mean to, I mean, I didn't go out to drink," Hermione continued trying to explain herself. "I just needed to get out of here. I'm sorry."

"Hermione, I'm not angry with you," Draco insisted. "Truly. I just want you to close your eyes and try to rest."

Rest was the last thing on Hermione's mind, though. She was far too busy berating herself, listening to that voice in her head that told her this had been inevitable, that she was never going to get it together and be good enough for Draco, that she would only ever disappoint him- and the fact that he continued to hold her and tell her it was alright only made her feel worse. She had just betrayed every ounce of trust and faith that he'd put in her over the last months, and he didn't even flinch.

Because he knew you would fuck it all up, her mind taunted. He knew it was only a matter of time before you fell back into the life. He's not stupid.

The thought only made her sob harder, clutching desperately to him for fear that he might disappear before her eyes. She wouldn't blame him if he did, he deserved so much more than her, but she selfishly continued to cling to him.

When her apologies moved on to quiet mutterings, indicating that she had finally succumbed to the effects of the alcohol she'd imbibed, Draco let out a sigh of relief. It always made his heart clench listening to her berate herself like this, convinced that she'd ruined everything and deserved to be burned at a stake. Thinking about the reasons that she felt that way, he cursed her parents for the hundredth time, and threw an extra one in for Weasley. They had convinced her that she was nothing, that she wasn't worth the shit on their shoes, and each time she begged him for forgiveness Draco felt bile rise in his throat. She didn't need forgiveness, she was always forgiven in his eyes- no
matter what she said or did—he only wished that she could believe that forgiveness was deserved. Everyone made mistakes, caved under the pressure of life, fell down occasionally, and he would never hold such things against her, just as she hadn't held them against him. If only he could make her believe that, perhaps she would be able to consider forgiving herself.

Draco let out a heavy sigh, his eyes falling to the shattered witch in his arms, whose eyes had finally closed. She wouldn't sleep for long, he knew that, but it would hopefully be enough to let her see things a little clearer. She would still be horrified with herself when she awoke, still beg for his forgiveness for giving into her vice, but she would be more willing to hear reason and that was something. Before that could happen, however, he would have to finish speaking with Potter. It hadn't escaped Draco's notice the way she'd flinched away from her friend's voice back at the pub, and he knew that it would be counterproductive having the wizard there when she woke. Careful not to wake her, Draco shifted her weight from his chest and onto the mattress, brushing the hair from her face and covering her with a blanket before he slipped out from beneath her.

"How is she?" Harry spoke the second Draco stepped through the door, trying to look around him into the bedroom before the door was shut. "Is she okay? What happened?"

"She's drunk," Draco sighed. "But other than that, she should be fine. She had a memory episode, I think."

"You think?" Harry frowned. "You didn't ask?"

"I tried," Draco responded exasperatedly. "But I was a little busy convincing her that I wasn't going to leave her over one little stress-induced slip up."

"Right," Harry nodded, his accusatory posture falling away. "Right, of course. Sorry, I know how that is. Are… are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Draco snapped, the other wizard's attempt at concern slightly off-putting. "This isn't about me."

"It's a little about you," Harry shrugged tentatively. "It's not easy, taking care of her."

"We take care of each other," Draco said, feeling himself become defensive. "I'm not her keeper, Potter. This isn't you and her."

He hadn't meant for it to come out as an insult, but Draco could immediately tell that he had taken it as such, his shoulders slumping slightly in what might have been embarrassment.

"Look Potter," Draco sighed, trying to ease up. "I know you're worried about her, and you want to be here for her, but I think it would be best if you let her get in touch tomorrow."

"She's scared of me," Harry nodded, his face twisted in pain. "I saw it too."

"She doesn't mean to be," Draco assured him, suddenly feeling that he should comfort the other wizard. "It's just a reaction, she knows you wouldn't hurt her."

"It's fine Malfoy," Harry shook his head, a heavy sigh escaping him. "You were right, I shouldn't have hit Ron in front of her. I'll send her an owl to make sure she's okay."

Draco nodded somberly, following Harry across the flat to the fireplace so he could floo home.

"She'll come back," he tried to reassure him. "She knows you were only trying to protect her, she's not going to push you away."
"I know," Harry sighed again, running a hand through his already chaotic hair. "And I know that you're not going anywhere, even if she doubts it. You're a good guy, Malfoy… If you tell anyone I said that I'll kill you."

"I'm already trying to forget it," Draco's lip curled in disgust. "Get it together, would you Potter?"

The two wizards shared a momentary chuckle, before sobering once again and giving each other a nod.

"I've got her," Draco reassured him once again. "And she'll come around quickly. She's not going to let you go again."

Harry only nodded in response before tossing the floo powder and calling out his destination, leaving Draco and Hermione alone once again.
When Hermione woke up, she was alone. Her head was pounding in an all too familiar way and her chest was heavy with guilt. She had ruined it all- again. She felt a sob build in her throat, the thought of having ruined everything with Draco making her sick. Why couldn't she just get this one thing right?! Why did she always have to fuck everything up?!

All the fear and loathing in her chest turned to rage with her next breath. The kind of rage that was all consuming, brewing and sparking from the top of her head, to the tips of her toes, and she could no longer sit still. Yet, at the same time, she couldn't bring herself to action. Without any regard for what she was doing, she shot up from the bed and proceeded to trash the room.

She didn't know that she'd been screaming, didn't know that Draco had been in the next room and come running when he heard her. She didn't know that he stood in the doorway calling her name, didn't realize that he was trying to disable her with his wand, while she somehow found a way to block his magic. He had been seconds away from petrifying her when she suddenly stilled, the scream on her lips staggering to a gasp as her eyes fell on the piece of fabric in her hand- a worn plaid shirt.

Draco stepped towards her carefully, realizing that she was clueless to his presence, but ready to catch her should she fall, or hold her should she explode once again. Neither of these happened, however. Instead, she dazedly back up to the bed and sat down, her eyes never leaving the plaid shirt.

This shirt had comforted her all her life, it had promised her love and safety, even in the absence of anything that could be construed as such. On their worst nights in the forest, she had slipped this shirt over her head and felt safe, even when the Snatchers were close enough to be heard. She had always been able to rely on that shirt to feel better. Looking at it now though, she did not feel safe. She didn't feel loved or cared for, and she certainly didn't feel like the world would be a little bit better if she just slipped it on. The warmth that the soft, worn out fabric had always provided was nowhere to be found. Instead, she felt as though all the heat in her body had been pulled into the red plaid, and that if she put it on, she might never be warm again.

Now, instead of making her think of her father's arms wrapping around her in a loving embrace, it reminded her of all the other ways he'd wrapped his arms around her. The way he'd bruised her wrist dragging her through the house. The way his arm had wrapped around her waist as he ripped her from the staircase, where she had gripped the bannister for dear life, terrified that if she let go she might never see it again.

She remembered the times he'd lifted his hand as if to hit her, only to stop himself when she flinched. She remembered the time he'd followed through that first Christmas home from Hogwarts, and felt the pain of his beating as though it had been only moments ago.

She remembered the way he'd looked at her when she spoke about school or magic, like she was grotesque, obscene. The times he had called her useless, insane, a drain on the family. The times he had referred to her as, 'that' or 'it', as if she were nothing to him- and the truth of the matter was that she was. She was absolutely nothing to him, and he had done everything possible to make that clear.

He had never wanted to protect her, not from the moment she was born so obviously different, and especially not when he knew what that difference was. He hadn't wanted anything to do with her.
"Hey," Draco's voice interrupted her thoughts as he crouched in front of her, his hands covering hers.

"He didn't care about me at all," Hermione muttered, still staring at the shirt. "He would have watched me die without a hint of guilt or regret. He wouldn't have lost a single wink of sleep."

She looked up from the shirt and her eyes locked with Draco's, burning hazel meeting soothing ice, and a sharp giggle escaped her lips.

"I've spent my whole life wearing this shirt because I thought it would protect me. I put it on to make it feel like my dad was there, holding me, telling me everything was going to be alright." She shook her head, still laughing softly. "I had made up some sort of scenario in my head where that had happened, like I was in an American television show and my dad would give me advice and tell me he'd love me no matter what I chose- but that never happened. Not once did my father hug me or comfort me. I can't even remember him telling me he loved me…" She trailed off, trying with all her might to recall any such instance, but coming up short.

She suddenly remembered the first time she'd met Lucius Malfoy in Diagon Alley, how she'd shivered under his cold glare. At the time, everyone had commented on how awful and cruel he had seemed and she remembered agreeing with them, but there was another part of her that she hadn't remembered until now- the part that had stood proudly before him because she wasn't afraid… she was immune.

"They were so similar," she mused, more to herself than to Draco.

"Who?" He asked, his eyes full of concern.

"Our fathers."

The words sent ice down his spine. It had been years since Draco had truly thought about his father, but hearing Hermione compare him to her own- even knowing what he knew- made him want nothing more than to encircle her in a warm cocoon and lock her away from the world so she could be safe. No one should have a father like Lucius Malfoy, and knowing that Hermione had made him feel sick.

"I think that's why I always had so much grace for you." She carried on thoughtfully, unaware of Draco's nausea at her line of thinking. "Some part of me knew that we had that in common, even when I didn't remember."

"Grace?" He cleared his throat, trying to sound normal. "Is that what we're calling it when you punch people in the nose now?"

The tinkle of laughter that escaped her lightened the weight on his chest ever so slightly.

"Perhaps not in that moment," she allowed. "But there were others… I fought for you, you know. When Harry was following you through the castle, convinced that you were with Him, I told him he was crazy. I told him that if he took more than a second to look at you, he would see that you weren't evil or dangerous, but that you were in pain."

She lifted one of her hands from her lap, releasing the shirt to run her fingers through his hair, smiling when he leaned into her touch.

"I knew," she admitted. "I knew that you were in trouble. I could see it in your eyes every time we passed in a corridor. I watched you whither away like sand blowing across a beach, but no one would listen. They just wanted to see the boy they thought you were, the boy that was just like your
father, but a part of me always knew that you couldn't be. I didn't realize it then, but that's what it was. The thing that made me fight for you when Harry got going, it was knowing that we were the same in some way. I thought it was just because we were both smart and swotty at the time, but it was this."

She gestured to the shirt that still sat between them, now hanging limply from her hand.

"My father never protected me."

She looked up at Draco with her eyes full of tears, but as she said the words, a sense of acceptance seemed to wash over her, lifting an ounce of tension from her shoulders.

"My father never protected me," she said it again, closing her eyes to keep from crying.

"Hermione," Draco spoke softly, cupping her face in his hands. "Hermione, look at me."

He stroked her cheek with his thumb, sitting up on his knees so he could rest his forehead against hers. She took a moment to breathe him in, to let herself feel his hands against her skin and breath against her lips, relishing in the realization that he was still there, before opening her eyes and meeting his gaze.

"They didn't take care of us," Draco agreed plainly. "But we don't need them to. We can take care of each other."

"We'll take care of each other," Hermione repeated, her hands lifting to his neck gently. "We'll take care of each other," Draco echoed again.

The promise made, he carefully took the shirt from Hermione's lap and tossed it away, sending it out the open window where it caught on a gust of wind.

Hermione didn't give a damn, though. She didn't need a stupid shirt made of nothing more that implanted memories and hopes and dreams, not when she had the real deal sitting right in front of her.

"What happened before?" Draco finally asked, moving to sit on the bed beside her. "In the pub, what happened?

"I didn't mean to go to a pub," Hermione immediately started to apologize again. "I just needed to get away from everything, so I ran, and then when I stopped, I saw the pub and I just… I didn't want to fight anymore."

"That's not what I meant," Draco shook his head. "What happened after? What brought on the panic attack?"

"Oh, I remembered," Hermione shrugged, recalling the memory slowly. "She grabbed me and I had to run to keep up because my legs were too short…"

"Your mum?" Draco asked softly.

Hermione nodded, cradling her arm to her chest subconsciously. "I didn't understand."
"Do you remember how old you were?" Draco asked.

"I was little," she shook her head. "Maybe five? I just remember being confused. I didn't know what was wrong or why she was so angry."

"Do you remember what happened?"

"There were flowers," Hermione answered quickly. "They... they changed colours... bloomed when they shouldn't have. She was talking to a woman and it just happened, and she was so angry."

"So she grabbed your wrist?" Draco concluded.

"We went home and I went to my room. I could hear them shouting, but I didn't know what was happening. I didn't understand what they were saying."

"Do you remember now?"

Hermione nodded but didn't expand, her eyes squeezed shut at the memory. She remembered perfectly the things they'd said- the things they'd compared her to- and she wasn't about to repeat them if she didn't have to.

"Then Dad came and he grabbed me," she skipped on. "He was holding me so tight. My fingers started tingling and I was scared because I didn't know what the feeling was, I thought they were falling off. When I told him he sent me to the basement without supper or books... I think the bruise was there for a while."

As she spoke, Draco took her hand in his, twining their fingers together and lifting her wrist to his lips.

"I'm sorry," he shook his head. "I'm sorry you had to go through that."

"It doesn't matter anymore," she shrugged.

"Of course it matters," Draco argued.

"No, it doesn't," Hermione insisted. "It's over, he's gone."

"Is he?" Draco countered. "Because my father's being a lifeless shell in Azkaban hasn't exactly kept me from feeling his influence in my life, and it certainly doesn't seem like your father isn't affecting yours."

"Yeah well," she shrugged uselessly. "There's not a lot to be done for it, is there? We can't exactly keep them out of our heads."

"No, but we can talk to each other about it," Draco reasoned. "I've heard talking about things helps."

"Well, you shouldn't believe everything you hear." Hermione spoke flatly, letting go of his hand and getting to her feet.

"Hermione," Draco called after her, trying to keep the tension out of his voice. "We need to talk about it. You need to talk about it."

"It's fine-"

"It's not fine," he shook his head. "And I'm not talking about today, I'm talking about what led to today. Hermione, we need to talk about it."
"I know." She sighed, her shoulders drooping in defeat. "I know, I just… Not right now Draco, please."

When she walked out of the room without a second glance, Draco dropped his head into his hands and let out a quiet groan. Why did it always have to be like this? Why couldn't things just stay good—just once? Why did there always have to be two steps forward and twelve steps back?

Even as the thoughts crossed his mind, though, he resented them. He knew that she was doing her best, that she was trying harder than he could even imagine. Still, he couldn't help but hate it. Not her—he could never hate her—but he could certainly hate the situation. All he wanted was to be able to love her, and yet here he was, cursing himself for the effort. Why did everything have to be so fucked up?!

Draco stayed in the bedroom for a few more minutes, gathering his thoughts and pulling himself together, not wanting to take his frustrations out on her. When he stepped into the living room again, Hermione was standing by the fireplace, her bag in one hand and the jar of floo powder in the other.

"I'm going to my lab," she told him, looking at the floor.

Draco nodded slowly, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

"I just… I need some space," she carried on. "I'm sorry."

"Take all the time you need." Draco shook his head, doing his best not to let her hear how forced the words were. "I think I'm going to go to Blaise's."

Hermione nodded, still not looking at him. "I-I'll see you later?" she asked nervously.

"You will," Draco said firmly.

She gave another nod, a small sigh of relief leaving her lips. "I'll see you later," she repeated. Then she threw the powder into the grate and stepped through, leaving behind a cloud of green smoke.

"She's gonna come around." Blaise comforted his friend as they sat around his study with glasses of scotch.

"Because that seems right up her alley," Draco scoffed, tipping the contents of his glass back. "She's gonna run."

"No, she already did that," Blaise argued. "She ran, and then she came back."

"No, I came and got her," Draco corrected. "I didn't give her a chance to run."

"Draco, you're ridiculous. If she wanted to run, she would have. She's had millions of chances, and she's consistently come back to you every time. She needs you," Blaise assured him. "She knows she does."
"She doesn’t need me," Draco shook his head. "Hermione Granger doesn't need anyone. And besides, it's not like she has a reason not to run. We're not… whatever."

"You're deluded," Blaise laughed. "You most definitely are 'whatever'. You live together, and the only reason you're not sleeping together is because you're an idiot."

Draco opened his mouth to argue with this, a million arguments in his head, but Blaise held his hand up to cut him off.

"She needs you," Blaise insisted. "It's not a bad thing to need people, mate."

"He's right, you know."

Both men whipped around at the gentle voice, completely surprised by the sudden appearance of the curly-haired witch.

Behind them, Hermione stood with her arms wrapped tightly around herself, eyes full of uncertainty and her lip trapped between her teeth, her glance darting back and forth between Draco and the floor. "It's not bad to need people," she clarified.

"See? The voice of reason," Blaise smiled warmly at the new arrival. "How you doing, Mi?"

"Hey Blaise," she waved shyly.

"How was the shop?" Draco asked, looking her up and down for some sign of what state she was in.

"Fine," she shrugged. "Harmony keeps it running so well, they hardly need me at all."

"Ah, but without you who would try to blow the building up all the time?" Blaise joked easily. "You bring all the excitement to their lives- plus, you write their paycheques."

"I have a goblin at Gringotts that does it, actually."

"Oh, well in that case, I suppose you're right," he shrugged. "Although there's still the almost being blown up thing."

"Blaise, stop talking," Draco rolled his eyes. "You bring down the intelligence of the whole block."

"Well, I never!" Blaise gasped, hand flying to his heart dramatically. "And in my own home, the home that I brought you into with open arms-"

"Right!" Draco interrupted his spiel, slapping his knees and getting to his feet. "I'm hungry. Granger, wanna get some food?"

"Yeah," Hermione let out a small breath, a smile peeking through her lips. "Yeah, that'd be good."

"Oh, I know a great place-" Blaise started to speak again, but Draco silenced him with a quick flick of his wand.

"Bye Blaise," he waved cheekily.

Blaise offered a two-finger salute in response, earning a chuckle from the rest of the room.

"So, food?" Draco asked Hermione as they walked towards the floo.

"I- I was hoping maybe we could talk," she answered uncertainly, wrapping her arms around herself
again. "I- if you want to, that is."

"I love talking," Draco reached out to her carefully. "I would love to talk."

"Okay," Hermione nodded slowly. "Okay."

"Okay," he smiled and offered his hand.

When they got to the flat, Draco followed Hermione's lead, trailing after her to the sofa and waiting for her to make the first move. When she looked up at him pleadingly, however, he spoke up first.

"There's a part of you that believes him," he said matter-of-factly. "Believes that he's right about you."

He wasn't asking, and Hermione didn't bother answering. They both knew he was right.

"He's wrong," Draco continued sternly. "And I know that you think I'm only saying that because it's what I always say, but I'm saying it because it is true. You're brilliant and beautiful and kind, and he is just too thick and too far up his own ass to see any of it. He doesn't even deserve to be able to look at you. He is nothing but a spec of flobberworm dung trying to belittle you, and you can't let him."

"There was a time when he was right," Hermione mumbled. "If this had been a few months ago, he still would have been."

"No," Draco shook his head. "He thinks you're something that he can control, someone who should fall down at his feet and thank him for looking at you, and that is not you."

"But it was," she insisted. "I spent years pining after him-"

"You were pining after an idea," Draco corrected. "When it came down to it, you walked away because you knew he was bad for you. You did what was best for yourself, and that's not the girl he was describing last night. That girl would have trailed along behind him while he dragged her through the depths of hell."

"I didn't need him for that," Hermione scoffed self-deprecatingly. "I did it all on my own."

"And you got yourself out all on your own too," Draco countered.

"You got me out."

"No, I gave you a hand up," he insisted. "You did all the hard work."

Hermione gave a non-committal shrug. "I didn't do it very well."

Draco chose to ignore this self-deprecation. He knew that she would come around to the idea eventually, now wasn't the time to push it.

"There's more to it though," he urged her gently.

Hermione nodded, taking a deep breath and trying to gather her thoughts. As she did, Draco waited patiently, his hand continuing to run up and down her back slowly.
"You can tell me," he assured her. "Whatever it is, you can tell me."

"I know," Hermione sighed. "I know… I just-"

She stopped again, a hand slipping into her hair and tugging harshly at her scalp.

"There's a sentence in Les Misérables that's more than 800 words long, did you know that?"

"No," Draco shook his head, smiling slightly.

"You would think that was the longest sentence in a book, but it's not," Hermione continued. "Donald Barthelme wrote one that was 2,569 words long, all about long sentences, in a story called The Sentence."

"He sounds like an imaginative bloke," Draco mused.

"Faulkner wrote one that was 1,289 words in Absalom, Absalom. Proust wrote a 958 word one in A la Recherche du temps perdu. The current world record is held by Jonathan Coe, though. The Rotter's Club has a sentence in it that's 13, 955 words long."

"That seems rather excessive, you'd think he'd have run out of ideas long before then."

"I don't know," Hermione shook her head. "I sometimes feel like I'm thinking in one single, never-ending sentence. Nothing ever seems to change, so what's the point in putting a period where there should really only be a comma?"

"That's the joy of being the author of your story I suppose," Draco offered. "You get to choose the punctuation you use."

"How very existential of you," Hermione rolled her eyes.

"Hey, you're the one listing overly long sentences," he shrugged. "I'm just trying to level with you. Would you like a different analogy?"

"I almost went with him." She admitted, completely void of feeling. "When he put his arm around me and suggested we leave, there was a part of me that was ready to."

Draco tensed at the confession, a sharp pain settling in his chest at the thought of her willingly going with the Weasel.

"Did-" he started to ask, but found that his throat was constrained. "Did you want to go with him?" he forced out.

"No!" Hermione faced him, finally meeting his eyes, if only for a moment. "I didn't want to, not at all. I just…"

"What?" Draco's tone softened.

"There was just a part of me that thought it would be easier." She shrugged, tucking her feet underneath her. "To just let him do what he wanted. It's what I'm used to doing after all."

"So what stopped you?" Draco asked.

"I didn't want to hurt you. If I had gone with him, it would have been bad for me, but I couldn't even begin to imagine what it would do to you," Hermione reasoned. "You've done so much for me, I couldn't stand hurting you like that."
Draco was silent for a moment as Hermione stared nervously at her hands, taking in the depth of what she was admitting to.

"You did it for me?" He finally questioned. "That's why you didn't go with him?"

"I mean, I didn't want to go with him in the first place, but I can be a lost cause sometimes," she tried to explain. "I do things that aren't good for me, I make awful decisions, but I'm trying really hard not to do that anymore- despite this morning- and a big part of that is because of you. I don't want to hurt you, I don't want to mess you up like I've messed everything else up in my life."

"You are not going to mess me up," Draco took her hands in his. "First of all, I'm pretty messed up as is, so there's not much you can do there-"

"Draco-" Hermione started to argue, but he spoke over her.

"I'm glad you didn't go with him," he assured her. "And I truly appreciate that you thought of me."

"Appreciate," she nodded vaguely. "Well, that's good."

"I more than appreciate it," Draco scooted closer to her. "I think you know that, but I also know that you scare easily."

"I don't want to be scared of this," Hermione pleaded. "I don't want to be scared of you. When Ron touched me last night, I was terrified, but I knew that you wouldn't let him hurt me. I believe it, completely, and that's something that hasn't happened in a long time. I didn't want to go with him, and even though there was that voice in my head telling me to just let him… there was an even louder one telling me to stay with you. So no, right now I don't want you to say the safe thing, I don't want you to try to keep me from being scared. I need to know that I'm not making a mistake here, that I'm not crazy."

"You're not crazy." Draco responded immediately, leaning forward to take her face in his hands. "You are not crazy and you are not making a mistake, and I want you here. I want you, Hermione. All of you. You're right, if you had let that ass leave with you, it would have killed me because I care for you- deeply. I want you."

As his words washed over her, his hands stroking her cheeks and his voice fueled with passion, Hermione couldn't help the tears that gathered in her eyes.

"You're not crazy," Draco said again, pressing his forehead to hers.

She let out a shaky breath, a few tears escaping as her relief took hold. With shaking hands, she reached out for him, one hand reaching his neck while the other found his face.

"I want you too."

Chapter End Notes

Okay, I'm horrible, I know! I'm sorry that these updates are becoming so few and far between. My best friend just got married and it has been taking ALL of my time, and now my other best friend is getting married in a month, so I'm still in wedding frenzy. I
wish I could say that the updates will get better, but that's a lie, so I won't.

I hope you like the new chapter, and I promise to try and get a new one up as soon as I can. Love you guys!

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!