Counting the Stars

by honeysweetcutie

Summary

Harry is dead. Voldemort is king. Narcissa is dying, and Hermione is the only one who can help. Even with Draco's protection, Hermione still finds herself at the mercy of the Dark Lord's wrath. But she won't stop fighting until she runs out of stars to count. [dark Voldemort Wins AU]

Part One of the Scattered Starlight series. COMPLETE.

Notes

This story has an overall trigger warning. THIS IS A VOLDEMORT WINS AU

My rockstar of an Alpha is mayghaen17. She has helped shape this story into the epic that has now become.

THIS STORY HAS A SEQUEL CALLED CAPTURE THE STARS.
Chapter One

Chapter Summary

Welcome to Part One of the Scattered Starlight series
This is called Counting the Stars
The sequel is titled Capture the Stars
It can be found on my Author profile under my Works!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Counting the Stars

Chapter One

Fuel to Fire - Agnes Obel

February 2004
The night painted the sky with trillions of years of silence.

The silence that came from the universal cycle of birth and death made it easier for Hermione Granger to attain acceptance. The stars provided a heavy anchor to hold her down, something to keep her from floating off into the nothingness. Something to help her wake up in the morning. No matter how many times the sun rose, its curtain of light would always fall to reveal the silent, never ending flame of starlight.

That was something she could hold onto, even though everything around her remained steeped in the Dark Lord's darkness.

Hermione held the grey mushroom up to the twilight, checking for the telltale spots on its stalk. She counted two-and-a-half small, brown splotches towards the base. It wouldn't be as potent as what the particular potion she was brewing needed, but it would be enough to get it to a passable state. The last thing Narcissa Malfoy needed in her condition was a half-potent brew, but the Malfoy Manor gardens weren't as lush this month as they were last month.

She opened the front pocket of her apron and dropped the fungus into it to join the dead grubs and rose petals that she'd already collected. With what she'd found, she was fairly certain that Draco would be able to help her use substitutes to get the potion to the proper potency.

Glancing out at the grounds, at the rolling green hills and the thick copse of trees in the distance, she wondered if it was even worth it to bring this mushroom inside. She wouldn't be surprised if she got snark and a scolding for her being upset about not finding one with three full spots. They'd spent the majority of the week arguing over the usefulness of the rare fungi, with Hermione being more interested in deeper foraging and Draco leaning towards synthetic substitution. Today had been no different.

She took a second to inhale the faintly familiar scent of the grass. She had never quite been able to place why she felt like the Manor grass scent was so prominent in her memory. It felt like it should be associated with her nightmares, as it was the place where she had been tortured long ago. But instead, it filled her with a strange feeling of warmth. The warmth that lies within nostalgia and memory.

"Granger."

At the sound of the familiar tenor of Draco Malfoy's voice, Hermione cast a look over her shoulder.

*Speak of Lucifer incarnate,* she thought with a slight shifting upward of her eyebrows.

He stood in the doorway to the Manor's greenhouse, arms crossed over his chest. The expression on his pale, angular face appeared drawn and his brows always seemed to be pulled together in permanent irritation. He wore a pair of black trouser slacks, a white collared button-up, and no shoes or socks. His platinum blond hair hung shaggy around his head, the ends brushing his chin.

"Malfoy," she replied, her voice strained in anticipation of argument continuance.

He leaned his shoulder against the doorframe. "Have you finished pouting out here? It's been thirty minutes."

She stood up, leaning down to brush stray blades of grass off of the hem of her green knee-length skirt. "It doesn't matter how long I'm out here, as far as your mother's medicine is concerned. You know that foraging is the most important aspect of the brew."

He said nothing, moving aside as she walked into the house. She felt like his tall figure crowded
the doorway, but she wasn't going to show him any form of weakness. She'd been here for two
weeks and while he'd been as kind as he could deign to be, he seemed to find much humor in riling
her up. She was starting to wonder if he started arguments for the sake of starting them, or if he just
liked to impose himself on her personal space.

"Did you prepare the foundational brew like you said you could do?" she asked as she made her
way down the hallway.

She didn't have to look to know he had followed her.

"No, Granger," he said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "I just stood in the lab and breathed
through my mouth."

As she turned the corner to enter the potions laboratory, her slippers padding against the stone
floor of the lab, Hermione shot him a scathing look.

"I wouldn't be surprised if you had. You seem like the type," she said.

"Do you want to spend all evening bickering, or do you want to keep doing what I brought you
here to do?"

Pressing her lips together in a firm line, she leveled an accusatory glare in his direction.

"You could always send me back to the streets," she said in a frosty voice, moving to stand by one
of the cauldron tables near the far wall. "Either that, or I'm sure the Dark Lord would be ecstatic to
have me in his clutches."

"Tch."

Hermione took the ingredients that she had gathered from the garden and set them out on the table.
Without a word, she gestured to the dandelions. Draco took them and placed them on a board.
Then, he reached for a knife. While he cut and chopped, she set about dicing the mushroom into
miniscule pieces. They worked in silence.

Hermione threw herself into the task of potion preparation, pushing away the memories that her
mention of the word "streets" had conjured up. Memories of nights spent in the freezing cold,
never able to stop for longer than a few hours at a time lest she be caught. Dueling until her wand
splintered her fingers, until dehydration caused her spells to catch in her throat. Walking for so long
that her feet had transcended agony and moved into numbness, and her thighs trembled from the
effort of keeping herself going. Running.

Always running.

She would rather go to the Dark Lord than go back to that life.

"Can you stir that?" she asked, gesturing to Draco's wand.

"Can you?"

Hermione gave him a scowl and a roll of her eyes. "You know I'm not allowed to touch your wand.
You're the one who set the rules."

His face relaxed into a familiar smirk. "I know. I just like to see how dismayed you look when I
remind you of them."
She sighed. She'd grown used to his jibes, but sometimes, they cut a little close to home. The last
time she'd seen her wand was two years ago, on the train to Wiltshire. She'd barely managed to get
off the train alive. Her wand hadn't come with her.

She'd long forgotten what it felt like to miss it.

When the ingredients were inside the cauldron, Hermione walked to the ingredients cupboard on
the other side of the small room. She pushed herself up onto the tips of her toes, reaching for the
jar of beetle wings. She'd only struggled for a moment before the jar floated downward.

"I didn't need your help," she said aloud, glowering at the glass jar. She snatched it out of midair
and looked at Draco sidelong.

"Sort-of looked like you did," he said. He placed one hand on the table and one on his hip. "What
do you need those for? The medicine doesn't call for it."

"It's for -" She cut herself off with a grunt as she wrenched the lid off of the jar. Draco always
twisted them on too tight, and he knew it. "- for Dreamless Sleep. I want to make myself a dose,
and I already set most of the ingredients out before I went to the garden. I just forgot to grab these."

He watched her as she wandered to another table. Finding the empty cauldron she'd selected earlier,
she sat down on the wooden stool that was nearby. A few short minutes later, she was preparing
the aforementioned ingredients for the draught.

"Stop eyeing me," she said. "If you don't like me moving about the potions lab freely, you
shouldn't have told me I had free reign of the room."

"I'm just contemplating changing the rules," he said, sauntering over to lean over the table on his
elbows. "I haven't decided if I prefer you in other areas of the house. I don't like the sight of you
touching my things."

Hermione continued to work, slicing with deft fingers and a sharp knife. "If you want me to keep
my muddy fingers off of them, you simply have to order it."

"If I were to order you to do anything, that would make you my slave. Unfortunately, you're only
here to keep my mother alive."

A bitter taste rose to the back of Hermione's mouth. "I haven't forgotten. Sanctuary in return for my
potions skills. No doubt because you couldn't brew it yourself."

There was a delay in his response. In the suspended moment, she felt the tension pulling the air in
the room taut enough to suffocate. She knew he liked to poke fun, but sometimes, it really seemed
like he was being cruel for cruelty's sake. Hermione wished starvation and terror hadn't made her
decision for her when he'd offered her the deal.

"I can brew potions just fine," he said, and he did not sound pleased. "I received an O in Potions
every year. And I think you know exactly why I have the freedom to offer you sanctuary from the
Dark Lord in the first place, Granger. Or do I need to remind you who I am?"

She did not pause in her preparations, however her heart did skip a beat. She didn't need a
reminder, nor did she need to glance up. There was an entire shelf to the right of them on the wall
full of potions that could kill her with one whiff. She knew exactly who Draco Malfoy was, and she
knew exactly what the Dark Lord employed him to do. And no matter how much they bickered,
they both knew there was an uncrossable line - one that Hermione knew better than to toe. Draco
Malfoy was dangerous, and she knew better than to forget that.
He had offered her a place to live, but this was not her home.

"I don't need a reminder, thank you," she said, concealing the quivering of her hand by passing the back of it across the underside of her nose. "I'm sure you'll remind me how many O's you earned, how many professors fancied you, how great you were at Quidditch . . . Did I miss anything?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw him standing straight. He folded his arms over his narrow chest again. His eyes bored into the side of her face as he let out a mirthless, incredulous laugh.

"Your cheekiness never ceases to amaze me, Granger," he said. "You do realize that for all intents and purposes, you belong to me? If you step outside the wards, outside the gates or the boundaries of our property, the first thing you'll see is the end of a Death Eater's wand. All you need to do is make my mother's medicine, stay out of trouble, and keep from getting on my nerves. You're failing at one. Care to guess which it is?"

Hermione gritted her teeth. He was annoyed with her for moving around his potions lab like it belonged to her, yet he never told her explicitly not to. It seemed as though he let her think it was allowed, just so he could complain about it later.

"Well, blimey," she said, trying to replicate his trademark sarcasm. "You might as well just make me your Muggle-born slave. At least then, you can keep me from irritating you."

"Maybe I should." He stepped closer, until her shoulder brushed against his abdomen in her seated position on the stool. "After all, I saved you from a much, much worse fate. One that awaits you in Buckingham Palace with the Dark Lord. He looked for you for five years, you know."

She raised her eyebrows, but did not look up from her task. "Then perhaps you should get me a collar."

There was a second - just a second - where she honestly thought he was going to grab her. He'd never done any such thing, but she wasn't naive. She knew what her place was. If she wasn't as skilled in brewing as she was, Draco would have turned her in the moment he spotted her in Paris. The fact that the Malfoy family was essentially protecting her from their king was proof enough that she owed them her life. It was proof that she had no power or say in anything regarding her life anymore.

She wasn't sure she ever did.

"Don't tempt me," he hissed into her ear.

She barely glanced his way when he moved back to the other table, to stir his mother's potion again.

Suddenly, he let out a grunt. One that Hermione recognized as pain.

He was being called.

"Administer her potion as normal," he said, striding towards the door. "Afterward, you can take supper in your room if you wish. And Granger?"

She looked up. He was standing right beside her, between her body and the doorway.

"The Floo is unlocked, but don't think for a second about stepping into it. It leads directly to my room at Buckingham Palace and that's the least safe place for you to be."
She gave him a curt jerk of her head. He inhaled deeply, as if steeling himself for something, and then returned the nod. Carding his fingers through his hair and scraping it away from his face, he gave her a once-over.

"If anyone enters the Manor that isn't me or my father while we're both gone, the windows will turn black. If that happens, run to your room and lock the door to activate the wards. You'll be hidden."

At this, she did look at him.

With a *crack*, he was gone.

Hermione jolted awake.

She'd dozed off in one of the many black suede armchairs in the Malfoy family library, reading a book. Its subject was spell theory, and she'd already read it in her Third Year. She'd been trying to keep her mind off of her earlier arguments with Draco, but it seemed that the only thing her mind wanted to do was sleep.

Having rows with Draco was common, just like the one they'd had before she went out to forage. He'd been irritated that she wasn't there on time; she'd been frustrated that he wouldn't stop hovering over her cauldron and questioning all of her choices. Naturally, it had devolved into an argument over the effectiveness of her potion's main ingredient.

What wasn't common, however, was the type of argument they'd had before he left. He sometimes gave her a bit of trouble over her status at the Manor, but he rarely ever told her she belonged to him.

She didn't like that. Voldemort's world or not, there wasn't a planet that would see Hermione Granger as a Death Eater's willing slave.

"You follow a pattern, Miss Granger, that much is certain."

Hermione nearly screamed, sitting up straight. Lucius Malfoy stood before her, dressed head to toe in black. He held his mask in one hand and his silver-white hair was loose about his shoulders. He gazed down his long, slender nose at her. She'd thought he had gone to Buckingham, too.

How long had she dozed off for?

"Sorry - I mean, I apologize, Mr. Malfoy," she said, scrambling to her feet with the book hugged to her chest.

"My son may choose to let his plaything roam the corridors of my home, but when he's not at home, you are to stay *in* your quarters. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir," she said, her voice hardly louder than a whisper.

When he said nothing more, Hermione spurred into action. She closed the book, clutched it tight, and then hurried out of the library. She felt his eyes on her back as she left the room.

She didn't like being around Lucius, and not just because he was terrifying. He hadn't been outright cruel to her in the two weeks that she'd been living in the Manor, but he had made it clear that he'd much rather she *not* live in the Manor. If it weren't for Hermione's innovative brew keeping Narcissa breathing, Hermione knew that Lucius would see her thrown at the Dark Lord's feet.
Still, dealing with Lucius Malfoy was preferable to the life she'd had on the run.

Hermione rounded the corner that led to the bedrooms, nearly running face first into someone's chest as she did so. She yelped, feeling the person's hands circling her upper arms and holding her upright.

"Watch it, Granger."

Hermione glared at Draco, twisting out of his grasp. "You're back."

He sneered. "Did you think I was moving out?"

"I'd hoped . . ."

"And if I moved out, then you'd be going straight to Buckingham," he snapped, "so curb your tongue and count your blessings."

Hermione stood there, blinking in shock as Draco shoved his way past her. She bit her lower lip, turning to watch as he entered the large double doors of the library. It was obvious that he was there to meet with his father.

No matter his snark, the only time Draco ever had a true temper was when he returned from being called. She had no specific idea of what he did with those poisons for the Dark Lord, but she was certain that it wasn't good.

She wasn't so sure that she wanted to know.

Whereas the days she spent on the run were long, the ones at the Manor felt long and hazy.

Every morning, Hermione brewed and administered Narcissa's first dose of the medicinal potion. She always had something nice to say. Though, she was delirious most of the time, so Hermione had no idea what she would say if she were lucid.

At breakfast, Hermione ate large plates and drank tea that was half-full of honey. Even if she really loved the flavor of the tea, she always had to pile on the honey. She adored sweets. She wasn't sure if it was because her parents hadn't allowed them often in preservation of her teeth, but she knew for sure that as long as the Manor had honey, she wasn't going to complain.

Hermione's afternoons were spent wandering the library or sitting in the tearoom to gaze out the window at the grounds. Sometimes, it felt nice to just be able to sit and let her mind traverse dreamy planes. She liked to reminisce to herself about school, about the way things were before. Five years ago, thinking about that would have been too difficult for her. Now, things like Hogwarts and people like Harry Potter were a distant, aching memory. Alone in the tearoom, she could allow herself to think about them without sorrow.

In the evenings, she issued Narcissa's second dose. Draco returned before twilight and spent most of his time fencing in a room that looked similar to a Muggle gymnasium. Hermione sometimes sat and watched, but he didn't seem to like it when she did that, so she only did it when she was going mad with boredom. Meals were sporadic and delivered by House Elves. Usually, Hermione could have whatever she wanted.

She just wished she didn't feel so guilty eating them.

One night around midnight, when Hermione's appetite had been rather low all day, she found
herself awake and ravenous.

The crescent moon hung in the sky, its silvery glow filling her room to the brim with comforting light. It was surrounded by stars—the same stars that had followed her all across Scotland for months after the final battle. This sight provided perhaps the only comfort she had from her past.

She clambered out of bed and put her slippers on, then headed down to the kitchens to sneak a snack.

This was not a new venture for Hermione. She never would have done such a thing before the war, but five years of struggle had brought her to appreciate the importance of filling her stomach when the time called for it. Even though the Manor’s kitchen was technically closed once Lucius’ head hit his pillows, Hermione often found that if she went when the moon was high, the House Elves were so deep in slumber that they didn’t notice her presence. Another added bonus was that the portraits seemed to sleep on Lucius’s schedule, too, so she could walk by them unscathed by verbal assaults.

She crept down the grand staircase, her gaze dancing about to ensure that she was alone. The Manor looked eerie at night, like a dead mansion in the depths of a dark world. The only indication she had that it was not in existence beyond the veil was in the way the crystal chandeliers reflected the moonlight in stationary flecks of faint light. They peppered the walls and floors, effectively providing Hermione with just enough light to find her way to the kitchen.

The hallway that led to the kitchen was the same as the hallway that led to the potions lab. The lab and the small back door to the Manor were down to the left; the kitchen and House Elves’ quarters were to the right. Hermione had just started tip-toeing to the right when the creak of the door’s hinges and the rustle of fabric alerted her. She whirled around.

Draco stood there, lit up by moonlight from the open door. His expression, though cast in shadows, was one of surprise, and his hair seemed to glow in an unearthly manner. He looked like a ghost. And she supposed he was a ghost, one from her past and a reminder of a long-lost lifetime.

"What are you doing down here?" he hissed, walking toward her.

She thought, panic blooming like a flower in her chest. On instinct, Hermione backed up, her heart pounding.

She did not fear him, but the sheer spike in shock at being caught downstairs after hours for the first time had her head spinning. There had never been an explicit rule for her to stay in her room after Lucius was asleep, only to stay there if the windows turned black. However, that knowledge did nothing to quell the fear she felt from not knowing what Draco would do.

She tried to turn and dash back towards the stairs. On accident, she shifted the velvet carpet against the stone as she did so. Her foot tripped over it and she was too slow to stop him from grabbing her wrist and twisting her around. Her back slammed against the wall and she winced, grateful for the darkness that hid her involuntary facial reaction.

He let go of her wrist, but remained close enough to her to keep her from running.

"What the Hell are you doing out of bed?"

Hermione glared up at him. "I'm hungry."

"Then eat at dinnertime, like a normal person."
"There's nothing normal about the fact that you're angry with me for getting out of bed in the place that I live!" she whisper-shouted back at him.

"This is not your home, Granger! I invited you here to care for my mother; not sneak about like a thief in the night, stealing our food!"

"I was under the impression that when you move into a room in a house and live there, then that becomes your home!"

His eyes pierced through the shadows. "You seem to be mistaken about your place then, don't you?"

Hermione pressed her lips together in a firm line as she tried to ease her storm. She didn't understand what the terms of the agreement were when she agreed to help his mother, apparently.

She desperately wished that she'd been in a better, safer position when she'd agreed to come to the Manor. Then, perhaps she would have been able to negotiate the terms beforehand. That would have been preferable to Draco acting like she was tracking her muddy blood all over the square footage of the estate.

She glanced down the hall, to the open back door.

"And what were you up to, then?" She raised her eyebrows. "Sneaking out of the house in the middle of the night?"

He narrowed his eyes. "Never you mind what I do, witch. It's my home. Next to my father, I'm the one in control of this house. I can leave whenever I wish."

Hermione let out a short laugh. It echoed slightly in the small hallway. She didn't care.

"You? In control of this house? Don't make me laugh. The only thing you're in control of is your potions labs and your poisons. Veritable toys in a little boy's toy chest."

She placed her hand on his shoulder and shoved him back, out of her space. He looked down at where her hand had just been. It was his turn to breathe a laugh, but there was no mirth to it. When he lifted his gaze to her, Hermione felt her stomach twist at the sight of the fury she saw there.

If it weren't for the wall at her back, she might have taken a step away.

"And that right there is why you're alone, Granger. That's why all your friends are dead." He took a step closer to her, his whispers harsh and biting in the cold, dark air. "Because you thought the halls of the castle belonged to the three of you. Now, they belong to no one. And you?"

Hermione forced herself not to shrink away from him when his face loomed closer, his breath hot against the shell of her ear.

"You belong to me."

Before she had even blinked, he turned and walked out the back door. He didn't look back to see if she was going back to her room. He didn't need to.

The moment the back door swung shut, Hermione let out all of her breath in a heavy rush. She had never felt so scared in her entire life. She'd ridden on the back of a dragon for miles, hidden from Snatchers in hovels, and faced down Death Eaters in the Department of Mysteries, but nothing terrified her more than Draco Malfoy believing that he owned her.
She wasn't hungry anymore.

Hermione turned tail and fled back to her room as though the ghost of Malfoy-past was on her heels. When she got to her room, she threw the latch for the comfort a locked door gave, even in a house where he could open the door with a wave of his hand.

She dashed to her window, which overlooked the garden, panting for breath as she skidded to a halt before it. There he was, walking at a leisurely pace across the grass. From this distance, he looked like a dark splotch with a flash of white atop it. Faint, but no less dangerous.

Hermione regretted coming to the Manor.

As she watched him steal across the grass towards the forest, she wondered. What was he hiding?

It took her a little extra time to get to sleep that night.

November 1998

They hadn't eaten in two days.

Hermione wasn't sure when she'd last felt a full stomach, and she wasn't sure when she would again. She and Luna Lovegood had been in Scotland for six months. Six long months of hiding, running, ducking, and dueling. Voldemort was looking for them, according to the Undesirable posters that were scattered all throughout every wizarding village they encountered.

"Perhaps we should cross over into a Muggle town?" Luna said, her voice seeming muted in the confines of the dead tree log they were currently stuffed into.

"We don't have any Muggle money," Hermione said. "I had some pounds in my purse, but it's gone now."

Luna said nothing, which was surprising. Usually, she had some sort of quip or moniker that made everything seem a lot less worse than it was. Hearing nothing but quiet acquiescence as to their dire state sobered Hermione. She missed the carefree lifestyle that had awarded Luna the privilege to be lofty.

"I need to use the loo." Luna's wistful tone drifted through the log.

"You'll have to go in your trousers, Luna," Hermione whispered, her cheeks burning with the shame of the knowledge that they'd both already done just that. "It's not safe to leave the log."

"Okay."

Hermione tried not to think about the dirt etched into her skin, and the fullness of her bladder. The Snatchers were still traipsing about. They couldn't risk leaving the log until they were certain to be gone.

Memories of the final battle flashed across her mind's eye. Memories of curses flying by, blood pooling on the stone, and howls of anguish. Memories of their plan falling apart as Voldemort tore it all asunder, as he accioed the philosopher's stone out of Harry's pocket and cast the killing curse in front of everyone. The horror had been palpable in the split seconds before chaos ensued.

Hermione couldn't remember ever feeling so gutted.
She would never forget the sight of Molly's face as she dragged Hermione into the castle and all the way to the Great Hall. The Hall had been a flurry of activity, children wailing and Order members trying to usher them into groups. Everyone knew the end had come.

"This is the only extra Portkey I have, and I have to get my children!" Molly had yelled, eyes as wild as her spiraled hair. She was holding out a cloth bag, shaking it in her frenzy. "I have to get my children!"

Hermione had taken the cloth in a state of complete shock, staring down at it as Molly dashed off out of the Hall. Using it would mean admitting that Harry Potter was dead. That the Order of the Phoenix had lost.

That Hell had come.

And then came the legions, demons bursting into the Great Hall to make their fiery presence known. Curses jettisoned this way and that. Hermione had the memory of eleven-year-old girls and thirteen-year-old boys falling to their deaths on the floor. She'd turned in time to see a Death Eater standing behind her, his wicked skull-like mask peering down at her with death on its breath.

"The Dark Lord wants you, Miss Granger," the Death Eater had said, "to come with me."

Hermione, still in a stupor, could only stare as the man lifted his wand over his head.

"Stupefy!"

He went careening backward, slamming into the Slytherin table and toppling tail over head onto the ground. Hermione had turned, seeing a very dirty, very disheveled Luna Lovegood standing there. Beside her was Neville Longbottom with the sword of Godric Gryffindor in his hand. There were a few splotches of dark red blood on one of the sharp edges of the blade.

"I couldn't get the snake," he'd said, tears streaking through the grime on his face. "I had to get Luna out."

Hermione, still attempting to catch her breath, had raised the cloth bag. "Molly Weasley gave me a Portkey."

Neville jumped to action, snatching the bag out of her hand. Just as he did, the wall surrounding the doorway to the Great Hall began to crumble. The entire room shook from the force of the stones crashing to the ground. The screams of the children began anew. Hermione squeezed her eyes shut.

"Hold onto me!" Neville had screamed as he frantically yanked the bag open. "Hold onto me now!"

Hermione and Luna had barely managed to get their hands on his sleeves before the Portkey activated. The magic pulled at their navel and they were gone.

They'd traveled for days after that, through the trees and across the plains. Luna's wand had been broken and left behind during the battle, so the only two with wands were Neville and Hermione. Neville had refused to let go of Luna's hand the entire way. The sight of them curled up together in the tent at night made Hermione's heart ache for what would never be with Ron.

She'd wanted to cry more times than she could count, but she wanted to stay strong for her friends.

For herself.
It hadn't been a struggle until they'd come to a river that was the only way to keep going. They hadn't known where they were going, only that they needed to keep moving forward and keep the Death Eaters at their backs.

And so they'd crossed.

The current was too fast and too strong. It had immediately pulled them downstream for miles. They'd barely managed to stay above water the whole way. Hermione could still remember feeling the heavy, leaden weight of her limbs as the cold sapped her strength. It had been all she could do just to keep her grip on her wand, but her bag - the purse that had gotten her, Harry, and Ron through everything together - had been ripped out of her hands with the violence of the Earth's tears. Between the rushing of the water in her ears and the sounds of her own screams, she could make out Neville's yells and Luna's cries.

None of them had noticed the fork.

When the river spit Luna and Hermione onto the bank, Neville was gone.

And now, in the copse of trees that they had barely made it to, they'd been forced to hide in a rotten log while they waited for Snatchers to leave. It had been two days since they found the log, and six months since the day Harry died. Beyond that, Hermione didn't know what day it was.

"Hermione?" Luna's voice was even softer than before, a whisper in a dream.

"Yes, Luna?"

"Do you think Molly Weasley is all right?"

Hermione closed her eyes against the tears that threatened to spill out of her. At the grief that had been hovering in the back of her heart, threatening and ominous for weeks. At the thoughts of the past, of all the Weasleys, of her professors and parents and friends. At the bleak future they were stumbling along the path of. At the memory of Neville's disappearance down the wrong fork in the river, and the keening wail that had left Luna's chest when she realized he was gone.

Hermione took a deep breath.

"I hope they both are, Luna."

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Chapter picture credit: Lorali H. in my FB group!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Counting the Stars

Chapter Two

*The Flickering of the Candle Flame* - Lei Chang & *Oracles* - SYR

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Hermione's eyelids fluttered open.

This was not the first time she'd felt disoriented upon waking to the view of a vaulted ceiling, rather than to the view of the blue morning sky. This was not the first time she'd felt terrified at the softness of a mattress beneath her, instead of hard dirt or frozen grass. As she did every morning, she waited for her spinning mind to ground itself and remind her of the way things were now.

And the way things would never be again.
When she was sufficiently calm, she swung her legs until her feet were flat on the carpet. Carpet more fine than even the carpet in Hogwarts had been. Carpet that she never thought she'd ever touch with the soles of bare feet.

It was hard to reconcile the girl she used to be with the woman she was now, twenty-three years old and living in a room in the Malfoy Manor. She felt like she was living in a strange dreamland, in a place alternate to reality. A reality where Harry was alive, Voldemort was dead, and everyone was happy.

She felt five years of grief bubbling up in her throat, threatening to send her back to bed. Five years of a life that felt like it didn't belong to her. Meeting people she never would have met had the plan with the philosopher's stone succeeded. Living in places she never would have seen. Watching people die who should have lived.

The plan had been nigh foolproof. All that had remained was Nagini.

Where had they gone wrong?

Hermione closed her eyes and inhaled her emotional turmoil through her nose. She let it seethe inside of her lungs, roiling and churning for a few moments before she let it all escape through her lips. As it dissipated in the air, so did her anxiety.

There was no point in lamenting a time long past. The Malfoy Manor was her new normal. Working with Draco in the potions laboratory, administering Narcissa's medicine every morning, and spending her time wandering the halls in a veritable echo chamber without knowledge of the world outside. It was a quiet life, but it was hers now. She had to accept that.

Hermione cast a few glances about her room. It was much more extravagant than any room she'd ever had, and it made her think fondly of the simplicity of the room she'd had at home with her parents. Her room at the Manor was all black and mahogany, satins and velvets, maroon and gold. Her room at home was whites and browns, books and posters. The sound of her father's laughter while watching telly; her mother's sporadic "I love you, Hermione," every time she walked past Hermione's bedroom's open door.

Subdued, she walked over to the chiffarobe and opened it. Draco had stocked it full of clothing that Hermione would never have worn before the war. Expensive dress robes and designer Muggle clothing that showed that while he had good taste, he knew absolutely nothing about who Hermione Granger was.

She supposed she couldn't remember who she was. She didn't have the slightest clue who she was meant to be, either.

Hermione dressed in a periwinkle gown with a knee-length chiffon skirt and an off-shoulder embroidered bodice, tying her daily apron on over it. She stared at herself in the mirror for a long time, as she did every morning, and tried to figure out who was looking back at her. She peered at her deep-set hazel eyes and oval face, her high cheekbones and dark brows, and wondered if the haunted look she saw flickering there was permanent. Her curly brown hair, which had grown to brush her elbows, was the only part about her body that remained entirely her; the only reminder she had that, yes, she was Hermione Granger.

Twisting her curls up into an unruly chignon at the top of her head, she tucked the tail in and it held. The last thing she wanted to deal with today was her hair falling into the potion and changing its entire consistency. The ingredients they had were limited until she or Draco could figure out a substitute for the mushrooms.
Hermione left her room, unsurprised to see a pair of slippers waiting there for her. She knew they had been left by a House Elf, so she spoke her thanks aloud and slipped her feet into them.

She got no response. Not that she expected one, of course. House Elves hated being thanked.

After a quick breakfast in the tearoom, Hermione went to the lab. She made her way through the house, down the stairs, and down the corridor that led to the potions lab and the back door. She went into the lab, seeing that Draco was already there. He was dressed in his black robes today, so Hermione knew exactly what he planned on doing.

Every three days, without fail, Draco went to see the Dark Lord and give him a special potion. Hermione didn't know what it constituted of, what its properties were, or what effects it had. Draco didn't like to talk about it. All she knew was that aside from being the Dark Lord's right-hand wizard, he was administering something directly to Voldemort that he needed to survive. The potion was one that Draco worked on constantly, adjusting elements until they were to his liking. Hermione didn't ask about it.

"You're late," Draco said, not looking up from the notes he was scrawling down on a parchment with an expensive quill. He alternated between writing and peering into a bubbling cauldron.

Hermione rolled her eyes. "I wasn't aware I was your employee. Is there a specific time I need to report to work?"

"Don't be a smart-arse," he said, and then he said nothing more.

Hermione shot him a nasty, mocking look behind his back as she headed to her preferred table. She looked over the ingredients jars that she'd left out, pleased to see that apart from the mushrooms, they had plenty for at least the next week of brews. They only had one mushroom, however, so she was going to have to forage for more in the garden.

"We need to figure out what to do about a substitute for that mushroom," Draco said over his shoulder from where he sat.

Hermione perched on her own stool, her table perpendicular to his. She started preparations.

"I'm aware," she said. "You're sure you can't find an apothecary that sells them?"

"No," he said in a flat tone. "I can't enter any apothecaries without the Dark Lord finding out. And as you know, that particular fungi is rare and only used in medicinal brews. So if I go into an apothecary, he's going to wonder why I didn't go through him to get that sort of medicine. And if he starts asking questions, then it's only a short fall to discovering you."

He said nothing more. Hermione knew he didn't like discussing this, nor did he like discussing anything in regards to the Dark Lord. From what Hermione could deduce, either Draco didn't want the Dark Lord's help, or the Dark Lord didn't want Narcissa to live.

She didn't know which one sounded the most concerning.

They worked in silence for the better part of an hour, Hermione periodically checking the grandfather clock for the time. The fungi sprouted at 10:00AM every day and again at twilight, and now, it was about time to go hunt for a mushroom. Draco did not look up from his work as she walked past him.

It took some hands-and-knees crawling in the grass to locate one, but to her good fortune, she managed it fairly quickly. When she found one with exactly three spots on the stalk, she went back
inside to finish. Narcissa required her first dosage of the potion before noon every day, so she needed to hurry.

When she neared the door, she could hear voices in the hall outside the lab.

It was Lucius Malfoy and Draco.

Something about their tones rang a warning bell in Hermione's mind, and she froze. Whatever they were discussing, they were doing it because Hermione was expected to be outside for a while longer. She tucked herself against the wall to the side of the door to wait or to eavesdrop. Or both.

"... not exactly the picture of good health, himself," Draco was saying.

"It doesn't matter, son," Lucius replied. "It's only a matter of time before he sends someone to check on us, and sees the healthy state of your mother. Your mother, who he expected to be dead over a month ago. And when he sees that her color is improving, then he will wonder how we've managed to treat a virtually incurable dark curse."

Draco let out a scowl. "And who's he gonna send, then?"

"His executioner, son." Lucius' voice was wound tight with bridled anger. "Amycus Carrow."

"Why would he send his executioner to check on mother? If her death was that important to the Dark Lord, then he would have *avadaed* her at court."

"Son." This was now the third time he'd said the word; he was livid. "The fact that he did not kill her quickly *is* the sign that he has something he hopes to gain from her death. The curse was a punishment of the utmost cruelty. Make no mistake: he will send Carrow here to see why we have not announced her death. And when that happens, what do you think he will say when Undesirable Number One is wandering our halls in silk finery and slippers?"

There was silence, during which Hermione allowed herself to think.

Lucius was right. What *would* happen if she was caught here?

Draco spoke again, sounding bored. "He's not going to find out. Stop fear-mongering, old man."

"It's dangerous to keep her here," Lucius snapped. "The longer she haunts these halls, the closer we walk to the edge."

"Then tell me to turn her over."

The challenge hung in the air, heavy with unspoken bravado. Draco, Hermione, Lucius, the House Elves... Everyone at Malfoy Manor knew they needed Hermione to brew that potion. Draco had tried multiple times to use her recipe, but he was too-heavy handed to make a potent enough brew. Only Hermione had the skill set necessary. Turning Hermione over to Voldemort would be a virtual death sentence for Narcissa.

Lucius had made it clear to her since Day One that he didn't enjoy having her in his home, and that was evidenced by the fact that Draco and he had engaged in a silent battle over the family portraits in the East Wing hallway for days. Every time Draco covered them, Lucius removed the coverings, and half of Hermione's days were spent being insulted with slurs.

Lucius sighed. "That's not..."
"No, you want her to be gone so badly," Draco cut in, his tone dark and threatening. "So, tell me to turn her in to the Dark Lord. Tell me to turn her over, and you won't have a damn thing to worry about."

Hermione held her breath.

Lucius finally said, "It's your head if he discovers her presence. I promise you, Draco. If the moment ever arises, I will choose your mother over you."

There was a flurry of fabric. Hermione peeked around the edge of the door frame, watching as Lucius's back receded down the hall. Once he was gone, she waited a minute or so before going back into the room.

Draco was standing beside his stool, his hands curved around the edge of the table. He leaned over it, his head hung as his silence and tension reverberated around the room. When she walked in, he stood up straight, as though a lightning bolt had struck him through the spine. He combed his hair back and looked down at her with an unreadable look in his eyes.

"I found one," she said, attempting to level the quiver in her voice.

Nothing rattled her much anymore, but hearing the dissension between Lucius and Draco about her being here made her feel a bit nervous. She could accept her new life in the Manor. She would not be able to accept a life that ended in Voldemort's clutches.

"Found one what?" Draco said.

She held up the mushroom.

He nodded. "Were you able to get a few extra?"

She shook her head. "They should bloom again at twilight, and then I can go look for more."

"All right."

There was another awkward silence, and then Hermione broke eye contact. She walked to her stool and sat down. He retook his seat. They went back to work.

Hermione knew when Draco rescued her from the Dark Lord's werewolves in Paris that what he was doing was risky. He'd killed two of his king's army just to get her alone and ask her for her help. Voldemort had been looking for her for five years.

Now, Draco was hiding her at his home so that she could reverse a judgment that the Dark Lord had passed against Narcissa. As important a role as Draco had with his potions and poisons, how important was he to the Dark Lord that he'd let this go? Lucius seemed certain that they'd be punished and was willing to throw his own son off a cliff to protect himself and Narcissa.

As she ladled out the correct dosage amount, Hermione couldn't help but wonder.

What would they do with her when Narcissa was cured?

"I'm off to tend to your mother," Hermione said, clutching the small potion bottle in her hand. "What will you do today?"

"I've got to go to Buckingham," he said, sighing as he stood and turned to face her. "The Dark Lord needs his potion, too."
They paused in the doorway, staring at one another for a second. Hermione wondered what he was thinking, and what his true opinion of her was. Lucius had been right about the dangers of keeping Hermione here. Narcissa was in danger without Hermione's brew. But was that all there was to it?

"Steer clear of my father today," Draco eventually said. "He's in a mood."

Hermione nodded.

*Crack.* He was gone.

Hermione had no other reason to stay, so she closed the door.

Later, in Narcissa's room, Hermione was unsurprised to see that Lucius had been there. There was a chair positioned beside the bed with a discarded book resting in the center of the cushion. He often came to read to her and tell her things, even though Narcissa's mental state was incoherent. There was one time where Hermione had found herself leaning against the wall outside the open door, listening to the soothing sound of him reading passages of *Wuthering Heights* aloud.

Narcissa laid in the bed, a faint smile on her face even as sweat poured from her brow. Her blonde-and-black hair fanned out around her on the satin pillows. The coverlet had been pulled up to her chest. Her hands were clasped on her stomach.

If it weren't for the wheezing, rattling breaths and half-open glassy eyes, she could be mistaken for dead.

Hermione sat down on the edge of the bed, unstopped the cork from the bottle, and administered it to Narcissa's parted lips. She pulled it away so Narcissa could swallow. Hermione gazed into her eyes, which crinkled at the edges as her smile widened.

"An angel," Narcissa murmured. "You are an angel."

Hermione paused, holding the lip of the bottle away from her pale, chapped lips. She allowed her gaze to scan Narcissa's face, taking in the sight of feverish skin and the delirium in her black eyes. She wondered if Narcissa even knew it was her.

She wondered if Narcissa remembered her.

As she fed her the rest of the dose, Hermione hoped Narcissa got better so she could tell her that there were no angels. Only people who wanted to do good things.

After lunch, Hermione decided to go back into the lab to prepare ingredients to make some more Dreamless Sleep.

Draco still wasn't home, so he wouldn't be able to snark at her about touching his things. That was a blessing in disguise. When he returned, she could ask him to use his wand to stir the brew and heat the cauldron for her.

Hermione had never enjoyed potion making. It was her least favorite class due to Professor Snape being a royal nightmare. In her First Year, she'd found the art of taking multiple ingredients and blending them together to create something new quite fascinating. Snape quickly turned that fascination into a chore, even as she excelled in it throughout the years. The only other person who seemed to have a knack for it was Draco, so it came as no shock to her that he had his own lab in the Manor.
She paused in her preparations, staring at the empty cauldron until it blurred. Did Professor Snape know that they had failed? Did he know that his death was in vain? That everything he'd sacrificed to help them win in the name of Dumbledore and Lily Potter had been a fool's errand?

A sound came from behind her, like the cracking of thunder in the clouds above. She turned.

Draco stood by his table, shrugging out of his robes. The exhaustion was apparent in the depths of his hollow grey eyes. They pierced into her across the room, slicing through the slivers of sunlight that filtered in through the windows.

His sigh was weighted. "Do I have to tell you ten times over not to touch my things?"

Hermione turned back to face her potion. He always complained, and he never did anything to stop her. She was certain he just liked to complain.

"I guess you'll have to try for an eleventh," she said. "And it's a good thing you're back. I need your wand."

"No, you don't," he said. "I charmed the cauldron to self-heat from now on. You shouldn't need my wand anymore, just something to stir with."

Hermione pulled a confused facial expression. "You couldn't have done that weeks ago? Merlin, I could have been brewing in the lab without having to hear you enjoying the sound of your own voice."

He said nothing, the only sound in the room coming from the gentle chop of the knife against the violet petals on the cutting board.

Suddenly, Hermione let out a cry as she felt a hand closing around her wrist, wrenching it away from the board. It squeezed hard enough to hurt, forcing her fingers to unfurl. The knife fell to the floor, bouncing off of the edge of the table along the way. Draco's face twisted with rage, the normally aristocratic features marred by ire and the soul of a man who had reached his limit.

"Don't forget the reason why you're here," he snarled down into her face. "You're not here to make yourself at home. You're here to save my mother's life."

Hermione narrowed her eyes, her confusion making way for the familiar irritation she felt around him. "You recall what I told you yesterday, don't you? Snap a collar around my throat, and I'll follow your orders. Until that day, I'm going to make myself a Sleeping Draught if I want to."

He bared his teeth as though he possessed fangs and loomed over her. "Do as I say."

She almost laughed. After what happened that morning, she now saw how similar he and his father were. They were too cowardly to call bluffs.

Hermione tried to take her arm back, but he tightened his hold on her wrist. She forced herself to hide the pain, refusing to allow so much as a wince of her eye.

"Make me."

Something that had been floating, simmering in the air between them burst into flames. Hermione wasn't sure if it was because they hated each other now, or hated each other before the war, but it exploded. They fought against one another, Hermione struggling in his grip and him using his free hand to try and stop her from hitting his face with her fist.
It was easy for her mind to jump right back into the desperate, feral state it had been when she was on the run with Luna. She fought like a wild witch, even as he gripped her waist and used his hold on it and her wrist to pull her up into the air. She kicked her legs violently, forcing him to turn and set her down hard on the table. Her cauldron toppled over, spilling the cold contents of her Sleeping Draught onto the floor.

When his hand hovered over her throat and one of hers was tangled in his hair, they hit a stand-off. Her skirt was rucked up to her hips, his body standing between her open thighs. One of her slippers had fallen off and her hair had come loose from its bun. He was still snarling at her, trying to pull his hair out of her grasp without letting go of her wrist. Hermione's chest heaved for breath.

Seething, they glowered at one another.

"I've had it with you, Granger."

"Why? Because I take too many liberties that remind you that I'm human?" she slung back, her words a vicious volley from her tongue. "Fancy that. Your personal Muggle-born Healer for your mum likes to make potions. Who would have thought she likes to do things?"

His eyes blazed through her. "Watch your tongue, you filthy little Mudblood."

Hermione's eyebrows shot up and she burst out laughing. "Filthy little Mudblood? Really? That's all you can think to say? You've got me pinned, and that's your best shot?"

He watched her, watched the smile of mirthless amusement fading on her face, and then she saw something shift in his eyes. Something that she didn't quite grasp, and wasn't sure she wanted to. Something that told her exactly why he was Voldemort's trusted assassin, and that it had absolutely nothing to do with his skills at making poisonous potions.

"No," he said, his tone icy. The hand that was not holding her wrist finally closed around her throat, tight enough to stifle her air flow. "It's not."

Panic bloomed in her chest. Was this it? Was Draco letting his temper overcome the need to save his mother?

Was she about to die?

She supposed she couldn't be too surprised. Her desperate need for some sort of help, for sanctuary, had caused her to put herself directly in the den of a family of snakes.

She kicked her leg out, her hips squirming against his. She tried to take a breath, but nothing came. Her lungs swelled, burned, and convulsed in the cavern of her chest. Her captive hand clenched into an involuntary fist; her free hand pushed weakly at his shoulder. She could feel a faint pain against her throat as he strangled her, and she knew if she survived this, it would bruise.

Her lungs continued to try to suck in air, until she felt like they were going to burst. She looked into his eyes. There was nothing there but rage.

Hermione's back arched and she looked into his eyes with a silent plea. She would not beg aloud, but her innate will to live would not allow her to give up entirely. As much as she lamented the past and how horrid the world was, as much as she struggled with her new normal, she did not want to die. Not yet. Not while there was still something inside of her that was willing to fight for her next breath.

As her vision began to spot black and swim in circles, Hermione reached for his face. She couldn't
speak, so she hoped he would understand her with her touch. *Please*, she said with a brush of her fingertips against his cheekbone. *Please. Not yet.*

She wished the last thing she saw could have been a night sky full of frozen, far-off stars, and not the blazing inferno of the up-close star that was Draco Malfoy.

Her fingers grazed the swell of his lower lip, and he flinched.

The fire in Draco's eyes went out as suddenly as it had flared up, and he let her go. He returned his hands to his sides, panting slightly from exertion as he stumbled backward a step. The expression of fury on his face had fallen, to be replaced with horror.

"Forgive me," he whispered, his eyes now dormant and full of remorse. "Forgive me. I didn't mean to lose control like that. I wasn't -"

"Stop," Hermione whispered, her voice raspy. Still seated on the table, she rubbed her aching throat with both hands. Her heart pounded to the tune of a herd of hoofbeats, striving for peace amidst the anxiety of her near-death experience. "Just stop."

Never once in the five years since the Battle of Hogwarts had Hermione ever wanted to die. No matter how tough things had gotten, how violent the pain of watching her friends fall, she had not contemplated death.

Even now, she still had the will to live.

"Here," he said, turning to walk across to the room to the shelves on the opposite wall. He rummaged through the jars and bottles, the clinking of glass rattling in the quiet room. He selected something and brought it over with a quickness. "For the pain."

Hermione accepted it and took a gulp, averting her eyes downward. They were by no means friends or even friendly, but something between them felt broken and wrong now. Where before, they'd had a tentative nonverbal agreement that she was safe at the Manor, she now felt like she'd made a mistake. As fond as she was of Narcissa, Hermione felt like she needed to decide if she valued preserving her own life more than saving Narcissa's.

But did she even have the agency to make a choice?

His hand twitched at his side, drawing her gaze.

Hermione's brows met as her mind turned, trying to put everything together. The immediate jump to annoyance, the sudden flaring of his temper, the strangling, the frantic apology. When his fingers twitched again, this time on both hands, she realized what had occurred.

"Did he *crucio* you?"

His eyes flashed, the low fire of anger burning within them flickering, and then he lifted her up off of the table. The surprise of the movement caused her to place her hands on his shoulders for balance. He turned and set her down on her feet, putting her back to the door in the process. He frowned down at her.

"It's no business of yours."

"When it causes you to attempt to murder me," she said, crossing her arms over her chest, "then I think it's my business."
His upper lip curled, but he looked away. His fingers reached up to push his hair back and she saw that they were still twitching. Then, she saw him lift his gaze to the singular shelf on the wall above the table he'd been working at. She followed his line of sight, taking in the bottles of potions. Some were dangerous enough to end her life in less than a minute, and they both knew that.

"That's just it, Granger," he murmured, and then he peered down at her again. "Murder is my business."

A troubled expression crossed her face. If he wanted her dead, he could do it. All it would take was one of those potions. All it would take was a slip of his finger or the pop of a cork to give her a whiff, and then she'd be gone. So, why strangle her? Why lose his control that way? Draco may be heavy-handed with his potion making, but that didn't mean it would be impossible for him to learn how to make his mother's medicine. He knew that. Lucius knew that. And now, Hermione had begun to see that as truth.

"Why not just get it over with?"

"Get what over with?" he said.

Hermione turned on her foot and walked over to the other table. She slapped the flat of her open palm against the wood for emphasis.

"Why not just do it, then. Murder's your business, and it's a risk to your family to keep me here. You need me for your mother, yes. But what happens when she's cured?" She arched her eyebrows as she glared up at his furrowed brow. She gestured towards the shelf above with her chin, ignoring the pain in her bruised throat when she did so. "If you have the plans in mind to turn me over to the Dark Lord, I'd rather you just take one of those poisons and do it now."

His mouth remained closed, his facial expression hard. She held his gaze for a moment before she turned and reached for the nearest bottle. It was small, cylindrical, and made of crimson-red glass. The moment she did, he sprang to life and lunged for her. Her hand closed around the bottle and his hand closed around hers.

Yet again, they were at a stand-still.

"Let go of it," he bit out through clenched teeth, eyes bright and angry.

"Why should I? You're going to use it on me anyw -"

"No, I'm fucking not, Granger!" He seemed to tower over her. She'd never seen him look so enraged. "I'm not going to kill you! If I had the intention of doing so, I would have killed you the second I got that recipe from you."

"Then why? Are you that desperate to boss someone around?" She gave him an icy once-over with a cold gaze. "Or is it just me you want to see on her knees?"

He lifted his chin. His voice came out in a threatening tone. "Mind that tongue, Granger."

But she was blinded by her own rage. She didn't understand why he was that desperate to keep her around if it was so easy for him to wrap his fingers around her throat. Why subject her to the extra torment of knowing that her days were numbered?

She tried again to pull the potion bottle down, but he gave her hand a gentle, ominous squeeze. She felt the coolness of the glass against her skin, but it did nothing to quell her rising flames of resentment. She pursed her lips, inhaled through her nose like a dragon, and then hissed her next
"Why are you keeping me here? You and I both know that you can make your mother's potion on your own with some practice. All you seem to want to do is order me around and place rules so you can exert some form of control over me. Is that what this is? Some strange form of calculated revenge you're trying to get against me from school? Some strange . . ." She paused and then spat, "Fetish for you to get me to a point where I'm on my back, and I don't have the will to say no?"

"Mind . . ." He took a deep, shuddering breath. When he spoke again, his words were as soft as ash in the air. ". . . Your tongue, Granger."

Hermione squared her shoulders and prepared to reply, but was not able to. All-of-a-sudden, there came a voice in the open doorway.

"Pardon, Draco. Where's your fath . . . Who is this?"

Hermione had only a moment to process that the voice sounded unfamiliar before Draco's hand shot out. It curved around the base of her skull, fingers threading through her hair as he dragged her forward towards him. She tripped and fell into him, the warmth of his body enveloping her. Before she'd even registered what was happening, he used her hair as a lever and dragged her head backward. Her eyes widened as he lowered his face to hers.

Their lips brushed.

Her mind whirled. What was he doing? He smelled of sandalwood. Why was he doing this? His grip was too tight. What was the purpose of this display? She felt so small compared to him.

The Earth spun.

Holding her firm and in place, Draco's eyes lifted to stare past her. She felt the moistness and heat of his breath against her face as he greeted the newcomer in a tone that sounded vastly different than the ones she'd heard out of him.

"Carrow."

Hermione's blood went cold. Carrow. Amycus Carrow. Death Eater amongst the ranks of the Dark Lord. She remembered him from . . . Where did she remember him from?

She racked her brain. What did she remember reading in school? He was definitely a part of the First Wizarding War . . . He . . . Had a sister. Alecto. Alecto Carrow. Harry tortured Amycus Carrow after he spat at Professor McGonagall . . . The last she'd seen of him was when McGonagall carried his tied-up body to Ravenclaw Tower.

Hermione clenched her fists at her sides and leaned into Draco on instinct, drawing strength from the anchor of his hand on the back of her neck. Amycus Carrow was the Death Eater who had taken over the Defense Against the Dark Arts position at Hogwarts after the Death Eaters seized the castle. He had practised corporal punishment intentionally, complete with using the Cruciatius on the students. According to the students she'd talked to when they'd snuck back into the castle the night of the final battle, he was a sadistic demon.

And he was standing right behind her.

"Draco," Carrow responded, sounding almost gleeful. "I wasn't aware you had taken a slave. Is she Muggle or Muggle-born?"
Draco’s reply slid off of his tongue as easily as venom from the tip of a snake's fang. "She's mine."

Carrow chuckled. "And that's all I need to know, I'm guessing?"

Draco said nothing, but Hermione felt his fingers twitching within the depths of her curls. She struggled to maintain control of her breathing pace, not wanting to draw any more attention to herself than needed.

As tense as things were now after the row they'd just had, Hermione had no more desire to throw Draco and his family to the wolves than she did to risk her own skin. The only way they were all going to be able to keep the Dark Lord from finding out who was being harbored at the Manor was for Hermione to play along when necessary.

"What's her name?"

"She doesn't have one," Draco said.

"Intriguing. You took her name from her when she came to you?" His voice moved closer, its volume rising upward. It sounded slimy. "Does that make her more or less obedient?"

"Did you need something, Carrow?"

Carrow let out a sound that was somewhere between a scoff and a snort. "Yes, in fact. I was looking for your father."

"All the way at the back of the bottom floor of the East Wing? You know his study is on the top floor of the West." Draco sounded mildly amused.

"Yes, well . . ." Carrow trailed off.

Draco ran his fingers down to the top of Hermione's spine. The move seemed absentminded, but it sent a shiver through her body all the same. "I'd like to get back to my slave now."

Hermione willed her knees to stop trembling, lest they knock together and show her trepidation. She knew how treacherous this was. The only thing standing between her and Carrow finding out who she was, was Draco's hand pinning her face to his chest.

"Of course, of course," Carrow said, and his voice got quieter as he walked out of the room. "Enjoy yourself, Draco."

They stood there for a second, Draco's fingers still curved around the base of her skull.

"The Dark Lord sent him here," he said. "I'm sure of it. He was sneaking about, trying to find where we're keeping my mother."

The emotions bubbled up, manifesting in the need to be away from Draco. Hermione placed her hands on his chest and shoved him away. His back hit the edge of the table, his hand curling around the lip of the tabletop to steady himself. Behind him, the already-toppled cauldron rolled and hit the wall. He looked bewildered, with the slightest hint of annoyance in the line of his shoulders.

She pushed all of her indignation into her eyes.

"I am not yours," she said.

He pushed his hair back. "This isn't a world where people like you go free, Granger. You know
Hermione shoved her foot back into her slipper. "Whether I'm free or not means nothing. A person can be held captive, and still not be owned."

"Is that so?" he said, scoffing. "I beg to differ. We all have our monarchs that we answer to. Yours just happens to be dead."

Hermione felt something twist in her heart, like he was taking a flat knife and screwing it deep inside of her. Who did he mean by "happens to be dead?" Harry? Dumbledore?

This was a mistake. Coming to the Malfoy Manor was a mistake. Hermione knew that now. She should have stayed out in the familiar. She knew how to run and duck and hide. She didn't know how to play this strange, domestic-yet-not game with a Pureblood wizard who was starting to seem more and more evil as the days went on. At least when she was sleeping beneath the open sky, there weren't people strangling her within an inch of her life.

"You're foul," she said, spitting the words out of her mouth as though they were as foul as she thought he was. "I came here to help your mother. I did not come here to help you, nor did I come here to be your property. This may be the Dark Lord's world, but that doesn't mean I had no choice in whether or not I came here in the first place."

"Choice?" he yelled, throwing his hands out. "Your choices were accept my help or die, Granger! You were being chased by Snatchers. Snatchers that would have killed you if it weren't for me. I saved your bloody life."

"I didn't ask you to save me."

"Oh, well in that case." He gestured toward her with one hand. "Don't let me stop you. You know where the fucking door is."

Hermione blinked and then looked him up and down. Her anger came back in full force, raging like a storm inside of her body.

She marched out of the room and turned towards the back door. She knew she wasn't thinking clearly, but she also knew that she didn't want to spend another second in a house with a murderer. This was Voldemort's regime, and this was a new world where it was common to kill to survive, however Hermione didn't want to live in a house with someone who had tried to kill her.

She didn't want to have to face that fact that she was more comfortable living in a house with Draco the Assassin than she was with Draco the Murderer. The selfishness that had grown within her over the past years that would enable her to accept the deaths of people she didn't know, but not her own? She despised it.

"You have the recipe, and you've made it clear that you have me here for the wrong reasons. I don't trust you," she called back.

She heard his footsteps on the carpet behind her. "And where are you gonna go, then? It's the middle of fucking February!"

"What do you care?" Hermione gritted her teeth against the way the energy of the argument bounced up and down inside her body. "Whether I suffocate or freeze, at least I'll still be dead."

"Stop."
She touched the handle of the back door, yanking the door open. A blast of cold air greeted her, causing her entire body to seize up against it. She closed her eyes.

Did she really want to go back to the uncertainty of living outside?

"Shall I get you a coat?" came his snide reply from the hallway.

Hermione stood in the open doorway, gazing out at the garden, the grass on the hill, and the thick treeline in the distance. She'd been in the Malfoy Manor for almost three weeks now. If she left, she would be leaving behind the small things that she'd already grown accustomed to: her chiffarobe of clothes she'd never wear in her past life, her apron with the perfect pocket for gathering ingredients in the garden, and the soft slippers she had wrapped around her feet right this second. The largest library she'd ever been privy to was enough to make her want to stay forever.

If she left now, she'd be leaving her life behind. Because even though it wasn't the life she would have chosen, it was the one she had been given.

Without turning to face him, she spoke.

"I belong to no one."

His reply was rapid-fire, as if he'd been waiting to say it.

"Would you rather belong to him?"

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. Who was he talking about? The Dark Lord? Or Amicus Carrow? The Dark Lord would kill her. Judging by the things Carrow had said, what he would do to her might be a lot less merciful.

Either way, the answer to his question was, "no."

She closed the front door.

"Look at me, Granger."

She kept her gaze trained upon the now-closed door.

"I said look at me."

Hermione felt his hand on her shoulder, pulling. She turned to face him, pouting up at him even as he curled his fingers around her chin. He tilted her face up and locked his eyes onto hers.

"You're lucky that I'm the one who found you," he said. "You'd do well to remember that."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him, her nostrils flaring as she tried to contain her anger. He had more nerve than anyone she'd ever met before. She was lucky to be alive, yes, but could she really consider herself lucky to be in the clutches of Draco Malfoy?

Then, he flinched and drew back, clutching his arm. Yet again, he was being called.

With one final, lingering look of fury, Hermione pulled her chin away from his grip and brushed past him. She stormed down the hall, headed straight for the stairs.

There, at the mouth of the hallway, stood Lucius Malfoy. He was dressed down in a loose-fitting white shirt and black trousers, and he had his cane in his hand. A smirk played about his lips that was almost identical to the one Draco liked to don. Hermione paused for a moment, glowering at
him.

Keeping his eyes on Hermione, he said to Draco, "Lost control of your mutt, son?"

Hermione felt the words like a slap to the face. She clenched her teeth so hard that she worried they might shatter.

The worst thing about this entire situation was that after the five years of torment she'd been through on the outside, a life in the Malfoy Manor was preferable.

The last thing she heard as she rounded the corner was Draco's scowling, biting words.

"Shut the fuck up, Lucius."

\textit{Crack.}

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

One week passed without Hermione and Draco speaking.

Hermione made sure to stay on top of what she was starting to consider her "chores." She maintained her duties in the lab, foraged for extra mushrooms twice per day, and ensured that Narcissa was given her medicine on time in the morning and evening. She avoided Lucius whenever possible as a courtesy to herself and made sure never to doze off in the library at night again. When she saw Draco, she made sure to keep her mouth firmly sewn shut.

Hermione was certain that if she spoke to him, she would get angry all over again, so she chose to remain quiet in his presence. He didn't speak to her or even look at her. If she passed him in the hallway, he kept his gaze trained forward. If they were in the lab at the same time, he poured himself into his work on the Dark Lord's potion.

It was nice, though, getting that free time to keep her thoughts organized. She was able to spend unlimited amounts of time thinking about things without having to deal with the spike in frustration that she got whenever she interacted with Draco. When she wandered the hall in the late afternoons before it was time to report to the lab, she was able to have that peace and quiet to think about
things. Sometimes she reminisced about the past, other times she thought about books that she'd borrowed from the Malfoy library.

But as was their nature, neither of them could be stoic and silent for too long. Draco was too snarky, and Hermione was too naturally talkative.

One night, when Hermione was fortunate enough to find four entire mushrooms in that evening's bloom, her first reaction was to rush back into the lab and tell him.

"I found four of them tonight, Malfoy!" she cried as she barrelled into the room and practically fell over onto his table. She held her hand out over his parchment, blocking his view of his notes.

Head ducked down, he blinked down at the sight of the four small spotted fungi. He looked at her through his lashes and the hair that had fallen forward to shroud his face.

"That's a lot more than usual."

Hermione couldn't help but grin. "Yes, and one of them's twice the size, too. Look, see?"

Draco set his quill down as he looked at the mushroom in question. "It could be because the full moon is tomorrow. The blooms may be more abundant."

Hermione gasped with excitement, looking at him with wide eyes. "That means I may be able to get even more tomorrow. The more we have, the better. We need a few extra to be able to try and come up with a substitute."

"Well, I guess you'd better get to work," he said.

Her grin faltered a bit as she remembered the state of the way things were. "Yes, I suppose I should. I'll prepare a couple of extra vials, but I'm going to leave two out. Two should be enough for the breakdown."

He nodded and picked his quill back up. "I'll handle that tomorrow. I have a specific way I like to break ingredients down for component study. You just work on my mother's medicine."

Hermione went to the table she usually worked at and immediately set to work, feeling a lightness to her step that she hadn't felt in a long time. She couldn't exactly remember what it felt like to be truly happy, but she was still capable of enjoying the little things. She could tentatively say that finding the extra mushrooms was enough to make her happy, even if only for the time being.

After a few minutes of silence, Hermione glanced up to see Draco standing at the end of her table. He had one hand on the edge of it. His other hand rubbed at his chin.

"Is something the matter?" she asked, pausing in her chopping.

He looked troubled. He stood there for an extra second longer, studying her cauldron as if it were fascinating, and then he looked at her.

"Your bruise," he said. "It's not getting better."

Hermione felt a slight flush rise to her cheeks. As if on cue, her happy mood dissipated and she was reminded of the fact that a fortnight ago, Draco had nearly strangled her to death. Her mood soured and the corners of her lips turned downward.

"It will heal," she mumbled, gathering up the dandelion shoots and dumping them into the
cauldron. "It doesn't even hurt."

"But it looks awful."

"Who cares how it looks?" she replied.

She knew how it looked. She'd seen it every morning when she looked into her mirror. Ugly and angry, colored purple and dark green, the bruise was no worse than some of the wounds she'd had in her life. It was no worse than the scar that Draco's aunt Bellatrix had etched into her right arm all those years ago. It was something she could definitely handle.

Hermione could handle a lot of things.

"I do," he said.

Hermione gave him a sharp look as she began preparing the mushrooms. "Why?"

His gaze fell to her throat, where she knew the bruise was visible, even in the dimness of the failing twilight through the windows. Her frown deepened on her face.

"Regardless of the previous nature of our relationship at school, Granger, I don't want to hurt you," he said. "I offered you sanctuary, and protection from harm was implied."

Hermione swallowed and gestured to his wand. He stirred the cauldron.

"Protection from harm? Yes. Protection from your poor temper?" Hermione shrugged one shoulder. "Apparently not."

He pulled his lower lip in-between his teeth for a second and pushed his hair back. "I should not have lost my temper with you."

Hermione's response was to raise her eyebrows and hum in agreement.

He went on, "Regardless of our past, I do enjoy your presence here, and I don't mind you touching the things in my lab. I would simply prefer if you ask first so that I know what's missing and what ingredients I need to request from the Dark Lord's sanctioned apothecarian."

Hermione stared down at the cauldron, watching the golden liquid bubbling, and she wondered if she'd heard him correctly. The fact that he enjoyed her presence was a miracle in and of itself. A miracle that she'd managed not to irritate him beyond all belief. And he'd been so against her touching his ingredients store, yet now he was giving her free reign.

At Hogwarts, Draco hadn't seemed like the type to think critically to solve disagreements. He was a bully and a jester. A pompous, arrogant arsehole. A prat. Draco Malfoy was not the type to apologize, let alone to tell Hermione of all witches that he enjoyed her presence.

He was different now.

She looked up at him. "The only potion I ever want to make aside from your mother's medicine is Dreamless Sleep."

He placed both of his hands on the tabletop and gave her a short nod. The expression in his eyes seemed amiable and sincere. "Then you'll have what you need stocked up."

Hermione twisted her lips to the side for a moment before she said, "And we need to go into the forest and look for more mushrooms. The garden is not feasible long-term, and we don't know
when your mother will start to improve."

"All right. Anything else?"

Hermione slowed her work again. "Anything else?"

"Do you want anything else? I've already given you everything you need, but is there anything that you want?"

Hermione tried to make sense of everything: his words, the situation, the implications, and his facial expression. On the surface, it seemed like he was attempting to apologize. But this was Draco, and Hermione couldn't be certain who he was, really. He was the Dark Lord's assassin. He'd strangled her. He'd never presented himself as anything other than what he was, even in school: a brooding yet sarcastic individual with a temperamental dark side. Could Hermione really be angry with him for being exactly who he'd always been, when she'd been given a choice in coming here? She was starting to wonder if she'd grown foolish.

"There's a book," she said, resuming her work on the medicine. "It's a Muggle book, and it's not in your library. I overheard your father reading it to your mother a few weeks ago."

Draco arched one eyebrow, looking surprised. "My father was reading a Muggle book?"

"Yes," she said. "It's one of my favorite books. Can you get it for me?"

"Yeah," he said with a nonchalant shrug. "Anything you want."

"It's called *Wuthering Heights*," she said. "Will you be able to remember that?"

He nodded, and Hermione gave him a small, almost polite smile. He gazed at her for a second longer before he shifted away from the table.

"And for your bruise," he said, leaving to walk over to the ingredients shelves. He pulled a container off of one and brought it over to her. "I want you to put this on it every night before bed. It will help it heal."

Hermione set her knife down and turned to take the container from him. Their fingertips brushed as she did so and for some reason, she felt an answering jolt in her abdomen.

"Is that an order?" she said, and there was both a taunt and a challenge in her tone.

His lips curved up into his trademark smirk. "Yes, slave."

"Shut up." Hermione turned to hide her smile. She placed the container on the table and went back to work.

He watched her for a bit, helping to stir when she needed it, and they did not speak further. Hermione found that she felt even lighter than before, the awkwardness and tension of the last two weeks having dissipated with Draco's makeshift apology. She knew a real apology from him was not something she was going to get, so she was content with what she'd gotten.

They weren't friends by any stretch of the imagination, but she could tell that her presence there provided him with a hint of their old life. For her, it was nice to have someone to talk to without having to worry about Snatchers, or rain, or hunger, or snow, or Death Eaters... The list went on. Hermione knew she wasn't his property and that he didn't see her that way, but neither of them
wanted her to leave the Manor. She was going to happily accept the peace offering of her favorite novel.

Things were strange at the Malfoy Manor, that was for certain.

He eventually went back to his potion. Hermione finished her brew and took her leave with a short farewell. She went to administer Narcissa's nightly dose, and then she went to her room to get ready for bed. Before dressing down, she did stop to put the poultice that Draco had given her on her neck. It was soothing, and it seeped into her skin to numb the ache.

She wished she could feel grateful. It was hard knowing that he was only trying to rectify a mistake of violence that he'd made. A mistake of violence in a world where she had about as much agency over her body and life as an ant.

Who would stop him if he did it again?

She put on her pyjamas - a pair of purple satin trousers and a white camisole - and then she started towards her bed with her hair flowing free about her body.

Knock, knock, knock.

Hermione yawned as she went to answer the door.

Draco stood there. He wore a pair of skintight black trousers tucked into black boots and an black jumper that seemed a bit too big for him. Hermione gave him a once-over. She didn't think she'd ever seen him dressed so casually before. He lifted his hand, which was curved into a fist.

"Hold out your hand," he said.

Confused, Hermione did so. Draco opened his fist and out slid a silver chain with a small teardrop-shaped pearl pendant on the end. It weighed hardly anything, the silver sparkling in the moonlight that came in from her window behind her. The moment she touched it, she felt a small, yet powerful magic flowing through it and into her hand.

"What is it for?" she said, tone cautious.

He rubbed the back of his neck with one hand, slipping the other into the pocket of his trousers. "I forgot to give it to you in the lab. It's got a protective charm on it that connects me to you so I can see your vitals, just in case you're ever in danger."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Why would I have to worry about being in danger?"

His gaze hardened a fraction. He leaned against the doorway, a foot or so away from her. "You shouldn't have to worry about it, but it's best you take the necklace, Granger."

Hermione pursed her lips and clasped the necklace around her neck. It was cold against her skin. She reached up to touch it, fingering the pearl as she looked up at him.

"There. Happy?"

Draco glared at her. "Ecstatic."

"Is that everything?"

He stared at her for a second, seeming to debate something internally. Then, he pushed away from the doorframe.
"Come with me," he said. "I want to show you something."

It took a few minutes of convincing, but Hermione eventually agreed to follow Draco outside.

She'd been apprehensive at first, because she had no idea where his thoughts were floating at. She didn't know if he truly believed she was his property, or if he had secretly enjoyed hurting her. She also had no clue what was outside in the trees at night, and why she'd caught him sneaking out of the house to go into them weeks before.

But Hermione hadn't been allowed to go out past the garden yet. The idea of getting to trek into the forest in a safe manner, rather than in the life-or-death environment that her previous forest experiences had been in, was enough to pique her curiosity. She enjoyed being outside, and he had tried to smooth things over. She was willing to take the risk and go out to the forest with him, if only to feel some freedom.

So she'd put some boots on over her pyjama trousers, shrugged herself into a coat from her chiffarobe, and followed him through the house.

"Aren't you cold?" she asked once they walked out through the back door.

"No," he said, and then he held up his hands. His fingers were covered in multiple silver rings. "Perpetual warming charms. I'm fine."

"Oh," she said.

They fell into a comfortable silence.

As they neared the thick copse of trees outside, Hermione finally broke the silence.

"You're not taking me out here to euthanize me, are you?"

Draco shot her a narrow-eyed look over his shoulder ahead of her. "I'm sorely tempted, and I have been sorely tempted many times this past month. But no. Not yet."

Hermione pursed her lips.

The grass of the estate lawn melted to mingle with the dirt of the forest floor. It felt oppressively quiet the further inward they walked, and Hermione couldn't help but wonder who would hear her screams if he did decide to kill her. The trees were so thick that it felt like they were in an enclosed room made of dirt, leaves, and tree trunks.

She supposed if she did die, it would be no great loss. She had nothing left of her own, no friends or family, and no prospects for life away from the Malfoy Manor.

"How big is the Malfoy estate?" she asked, glancing behind her as the moonlight faded into darkness. She could feel her footing getting more and more tentative as her ability to see became diminished.

"Big."

"How - ah!" She cried out when her foot caught on an upraised root and she went sprawling onto her hands and knees in the loamy Earth. Her palms scraped along sharp twigs and tiny rocks, beginning to sting within seconds. She hissed through her teeth.

Before she could right herself, she felt Draco's hand wrapping around her elbow and dragging her to
her feet. She couldn't see much of him, but she could feel him looking at her in the darkness.

"We've got a ways to go. Try not to need me to carry you," he said in a snide tone.

Hermione pulled a face in the dark and yanked her arm back. "As if you would be able to."

She shook her hands out, trying to get past the annoying pain. She had never had the highest pain threshold. She wished they didn't have to traipse around in the dark. It didn't seem like Draco had brought his wand, for some reason.

Suddenly, she felt his right arm wrapping around her thighs, underneath her rear. He lifted, pulling her flush against his body. She let out a cry of surprise as he raised her up into the air. On reflex, her hands clenched in the fabric of his jumper on top of his shoulders, feeling the hard, corded muscle that lay beneath it. She pitched forward, one hand moving to the top of his head to steady herself. At the same time, her stomach brushed against the side of his face. Heat rushed to her cheeks.

His hair was astonishingly soft.

"Put me down." The words tumbled past trembling lips. "Put me down right now, Malfoy."

"You're so fucking infuriating," he grumbled, and then he let her drop to the ground. His fingers seemed to linger on her waistline as he took his hand back. "Stop testing my patience. It's not hard to carry a witch. Now, come on. She's waiting."

Hermione blinked in surprise. 'She?' Who is 'she'?

They walked for a few more minutes, the darkness seeming to weigh heavier and heavier. For some reason, Hermione felt like it was difficult to breathe. She took a small, gasping breath. It was like something was squeezing her lungs inward from all sides. After the incident between her and Draco in the lab, the last thing she wanted to feel was any form of suffocation.

"Are you coming? Salazar's beard, you are slow," he said.

"Well, forgive me for not being able to see, Mr. I-Didn't-Bring-My-Wand!" she snapped, feeling about ahead of her with her hands and feet. It was so dark that she was virtually blind. "And I can't really breathe. I don't know why."

"Because I have wards around this area, and we're walking into them. You can't get into them without me, and you're not exactly next to me. Hurry up."

**Wards? Why would he have wards around this one area?**

Her hands came in contact with something hard and made of flesh. His torso? She started to draw them back, but felt his slender fingers wrapping around her left hand before she could. The coolness of his rings contrasted with the warmth of his fingers. She nearly froze mid-step, her heart racing.

He tugged on her hand and held tight. They resumed walking.

"You can't do anything by yourself, can you? How did you survive for five years out there?" he muttered. "It makes absolutely no sense to me." Then, he said loudly, "As for me not bringing a wand, you'll see why soon."

Hermione couldn't speak. She was too busy screaming internally at the fact that Draco Malfoy was
holding her hand.

The trek took another thirty minutes or so, and neither of them talked. Hermione found it curious that the edges of the wards had been so far out from wherever they were going in the massive forest, and she wondered who it was they were traveling to see.

She couldn't help but feel a tiny glimmer of concern, though. What if the person he was taking her to see was just as dangerous as him?

She could feel the scrape on her palm stinging as her skin grew clammy in the circle of his hand, but she didn't try to take hers back. As strange as it was to be holding his hand, she was fairly certain that if she weren't, she'd have fallen flat on her face more than once. Any time her feet almost stumbled over tree roots, he seemed to anticipate it and drag her to the left, behind him and out of danger.

She knew he was doing it out of irritation, but it didn't stop the pixies from doing somersaults inside of her stomach.

She didn't really want to take the time to unpack that.

Soon, she could see light ahead. It was fairly dim and got brighter the nearer they drew. It was definitely moonlight, judging by the tint. Curiously, as the light brightened, Hermione could see that the trees in front of them were no longer oak, but were now willow trees. The lengths of their drooping branches brushed against the ground, seeming to greet the grass she saw stretching out from the clearing before them.

Draco let go of her hand, and she tried to ignore the odd coldness she felt on her still-wounded palm. She wondered if he would care that some of her blood had likely stained his skin.

Not that she had any intention of letting him know.

He held the branches aside as though parting a curtain, and Hermione was unable to stifle her gasp.

They stepped into a moonlit glade that size of Hermione's bedroom, their feet sinking into the thick, plush grass beneath them. There was a small stream that ran through the side, flanked by mossy rocks and a fallen tree log that bisected part of it. A small pool had gathered, the water backed up behind it. There was a large boulder on the far side, much taller than Draco's height, and the tree branches seemed to embrace them with protective silence. Opalescent white flowers that Hermione recognized being briefly mentioned in her Fourth Year Herbology textbook littered the grass, stretching up towards the moon to drink its light and thrive. Above them, the stars twinkled and the moon gave off a comforting glow.

It was the most beautiful place she had ever laid eyes on.

"Moonflowers," she said, her voice quiet with awe. She knelt down and brushed her fingers along the underside of one of them. "We need to gather these and take them back to the Manor. They've got potential to be loads better than those mushrooms."

"They do?" Draco sounded surprised as he let the curtain of branches fall back in place.

She shot him an incredulous look. "Um, yeah. Are you joking? Moonflowers are one of the most powerful, rarest potions ingredients in the entire world. It would take an entire 30-inch essay to explain to you how powerful these flowers are." Her expression twisted with astonishment. "How long have you known this place existed?"
"Since I was a child," he said, putting his hands on his hips. "However, the first time I came here at night was a couple of months before I brought you here."

"And how often do you come here?"

"Every night, just about."

Hermione stared at him for a drawn-out moment.

"You mean," she said slowly, "you've been coming here for three months, every night, and you haven't taken any of these flowers back with you? You're virtually an expert in potion making, Malfoy! You have to have known what moonflowers were."

She saw something click in his jaw. His eyes hardened, the grey seeming to be almost luminescent in the silver of the moonlight above. "Excuse me for not caring about bloody Herbology. I'm not a fucking Pygmy Puff, Granger."

Hermione inhaled sharply. She didn't want to argue all night, especially not in a place as beautiful as this. She raised one hand. "Just . . . Let's just gather what we can and bring it back. It's going to be exactly what we need to adjust the potency of your mother's medicine. With these, we possibly get to a point where we can reduce the dosage to once per day. She may even improve at a faster rate."

"Wait," he said, his hand shooting up to grab her elbow as she started to kneel down.

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him and shrugged him off of her. He was starting to get a little too familiar with her. "What?"

"That isn't why I brought you here."

She fought the desire to shake her head. She couldn't believe he'd been sitting on the essential jackpot of potion making, and he hadn't even noticed. He was intelligent, but he could be quite dense. She remembered that from school.

"All right," she said. "Why are we here?"

Skreeee!

Out of the darkness of the willow branches above came the screeching sound of a creature that Hermione did not recognize. The leaves rustled and then something small and blue dropped from the branches. Draco barely flinched when a small dragon landed on his left shoulder and perched there like a cat on a ledge.

The majority of the dragon's body was royal blue, with scales that looked like sapphires, and numerous spikes the color of the night sky lined the length of its back. It had a small set of dark blue wings and when it opened its mouth to let loose a tiny roar, Hermione saw that its mouth was full of diminutive yet sharp teeth. Two horns jutted out of the top of its head, the bases of which seemed to fade into a series of darker blue scales on its arrowhead-shaped face. It had two arms and two legs, complete with claws. When it moved, its scales shone and a silvery substance on its wings glittered under the moonlight.

It looked eerily similar to the dragon she, Harry, and Ron had helped at Gringotts, all those years ago, but with a lot more color.

A pang of sadness ripped through her heart and she hurried to stuff it back inside where it
belonged. She focused on the baby dragon, which was curling around the back of Draco's neck and peeking out at her from the side of his head.

Draco smirked. "Meet Calypso."

Before Hermione could process that a dragon was on Draco's shoulders, the small creature had used him to vault itself across the space between them. Hermione let out a cry of shock as it barrelled full force into her chest, sending her toppling over onto her rear end.

Panting for breath, she clutched it around the middle, surprised to feel that the scales were warm to the touch and not cold, like she'd thought. The dragon slithered around her neck and settled in, breathing a puff of warm air out of its nostrils. The heat brushed the side of her face.

"She's hyperactive," Draco said with a smirk. He didn't seem at all perturbed by the fact that Hermione was on the ground. "But she likes you."

Hermione gave him a few rapid blinks, and then willed herself to calm down. She wasn't scared of dragons. In fact, she loved them.

Draco had always seemed like such a cold person. Yet here, he was keeping a baby dragon in a glade and it seemed completely happy to relax on the shoulders of human beings. She didn't know which she found more shocking: the fact that he had a dragon that he'd named, or the fact that he was caring enough towards magical creatures to have one hidden here in the first place.

A strange gnawing sound that reminded Hermione of a dog with a bone rang in her ear. She felt her hair shifting.

The dragon was chewing on one of her curls.

"And this is why I never bring my wand," Draco said, his smirk deepening. "She likes to chew on anything and everything. And she grows fast. When I first found her, her teeth were like pebbles. If I let her near my wand now, she'd snap it in half."

Hermione gingerly pulled at her hair, grimacing when Calypso growled and clutched at the curl with her claws. At this close proximity, Hermione could see that her large eyes were a very vibrant, rich cobalt blue. It looked like flecks of moonlight had been transported into the depths of her irises.

"I can see that," she said, finally managing to tug her hair out of the creature's maw.

Calypso made a dissatisfied growling noise and then leapt off of Hermione's back. She and Draco both watched as she spread her wings and drifted down to the grass. In moments, she had trotted over to the pool and jumped in.

"She's fond of water, too," Draco said. "When I first found her, I couldn't get her out of the stream. So I put that log there and dug a bit of a hole for her. She doesn't seem to feel the cold like we do."

At the mention of the temperature, Hermione's body seemed to realize that it was cold outside. She stuffed her hands into the pockets of her coat. "Calypso . . . That's a unique name."

"Calypso is the name of a star," he said, still watching the dragon. She was splashing about, prancing and whipping her long spiked tail back and forth. "It's located in the Scorpius constellation. Right over there."

Draco pointed up at the sky, and Hermione followed the line of his arm and finger. She looked up
at the stars, thousands of twinkling lights that outflanked the moon by the trillions. She knew
Draco was pointing to one specific constellation, but Hermione never could focus on just one. Not
when she loved them all.

For the first time in months, Hermione didn't feel sad while looking at them. Whether it was the
beauty of the clearing or the excitement at getting to experience what it was like to interact with a
baby dragon, she did not feel sad.

The ring on Draco's finger glinted as he twirled his finger in a semi circle.

"It's in that general area."

"And is that a favorite constellation of yours?" Hermione asked, curious to see this as-yet-unseen
side of him.

Draco dropped his hand, but his gaze remained skyward. "Every constellation is my favorite one."
He looked down at Hermione, and she felt like she could see the stars reflected in his eyes.
"Picking one would mean pretending the rest don't matter, and they all matter to me."

Hermione's heartbeat stuttered, and she didn't know why.

"So then . . . Why Calypso?"

His eyes searched hers, as if trying to locate something. "Calypso is the goddess of the seven seas,
in some myths. She is the daughter of the god who holds the Earth and she represents freedom.
The urge to do what your heart wants, no matter the repercussions." He looked at Calypso again,
watching as she leaped onto the grass, let out another screech, and then pranced back into the pool
of water. "Calypso is misunderstood. In mythology, she was treated as vile and jealous. But I think
she was a victim."

"A victim of what?"

Draco ran his fingers through his hair. He was silent for a second.

"Caring too much."

Heart still racing, Hermione clenched her hands into fists in her pockets. Was he talking about
Calypso . . . Or himself?

"Do you feel misunderstood?" she asked.

"All the time." He tore his eyes away from the dragon and looked down at her. "Don't you?"

Hermione studied him. His expression was the softest, least-sour that she'd seen there since their
Fourth Year.

"You seem to truly care for her," she said, her tone careful.

Without missing a beat, Draco said, "I'd kill anyone who harmed a scale on her body."

Hermione understood why he picked the name Calypso. From the short time that she'd lived at the
Manor, she had gotten to know at least one aspect of his personality.

No matter how callous Draco could be, when he cared, he cared fiercely, and he would do
anything - even harbor a fugitive - to keep the people he cared about alive.
Draco wandered further into the clearing, taking a seat on the grass in the center. Calypso spotted him and hopped right back out of the water. She trotted over and plopped down on the grass before Draco’s crossed legs. After a moment's hesitation, Hermione went to join them.

They sat there for a minute or so, Draco scratching and petting Calypso all over her body. Hermione watched, finding the fact that the dragon could feel it through her scales fascinating.

The sight hearkened her back to her school years, when she researched and read and absorbed everything she possibly could about magical creatures. She hadn't read much about dragons beyond what was needed during Fourth Year for Harry's tournament, but she knew enough to know that what they were doing right now with Calypso was ground-breaking.

She found her gaze lingering on Draco's face. He seemed to adore Calypso, in his own way. He never did much more than allow the ghost of a smile to flit across his face, but there was something in his eyes that shone when Calypso looked up at him. Hermione found it endearing, in a weird way. Like watching a troll in a jumper playing with a small animal.

Okay, maybe that was a little rude, Hermione thought, smiling to herself. He's a prat, but he's not a troll.

He certainly didn't look like one, either.

At one point, Calypso stood up on her back feet, placing her paws on Draco's chest. Draco looked down at her, that same smirk still playing about his lips and ducked his head down. Hermione smiled when Calypso pushed herself up and pressed her forehead against his.

She knew enough about dragons to know what this meant.

"From what I remember," she blurted out, "dragons only do that with their family."

Draco lifted his head to glance at her. "Really?"

Hermione nodded. "I think she cares about you, too."

The smile that cracked Draco's face open like an egg was startling. It seemed to make his entire disposition change, melting the ice she saw there into the gentle water of a flowing brook.

She couldn't help it. She stared.

Suddenly, Calypso screeched, drew her head back, and headbutted the underside of Draco's chin. He hollered and fell onto his back, laughing as Calypso pounced on his face and nuzzled him almost violently with her nose.

"Fuck! Salazar! Calypso!" he cried around spluttering laughter, throwing his hands up in a defensive position.

When Calypso leapt back over to Hermione and looked up at her expectantly, she was unable to hold her own laughter back. She congratulated her on a job well done, running her fingers down the length of her scaled side when the dragon clambered into her lap and sat back on her haunches.

"She's still my dragon," Draco said, "even if she does like you."

"Even if she likes me more?"

Draco fixed Hermione with a withering glare, which she returned with a smirk of her own.
"Are you sure Calypso is the jealous one?" Hermione teased. "Seems like it's you."

Draco narrowed his eyes. "I never said I named her after Calypso because she was jealous, Granger. I named her after a goddess that I resonate with."

Hermione rolled her eyes and leaned down to press a tentative kiss to the patch of dark blue scales between Calypso's horns. The little dragon crooned again.

"Jealousy is a poor character trait," she said, trying her hand at scratching Calypso's scales.

"Only when there's something to be jealous of."

Hermione looked at him. "I guess that explains everything that happened with Carrow."

He searched her face again, his eyes traveling back and forth between them. Hermione didn't know what to feel about his sudden seriousness. What she did know was that she didn't like how deep his gaze was trying to search.

"I guess it does," he said.

Hermione, who had been joking, felt her heart come shuddering to a complete halt. Her stomach flopped and she honed her focus on Calypso.

What did he mean by that? Why would he have anything to be jealous of? In regards to Carrow, was there anything more to worry about than just the chance he might give her location away to the Dark Lord?

A small bell went off in her head.

Does he see me as his property after all?

Why?

Calypso rolled onto her back and showed her belly, making a sound that drew Hermione's attention. When she looked, she caught sight of something faintly familiar.

"What's this?" she asked, pointing to Calypso's chest.

Embedded in the center of her chest was a circular jewel the size of a galleon. Draco reached forward to touch it. Hermione gasped when it gave off a faint glow in response. She'd never heard of dragons having such a thing before, but for some reason, she felt like she had.

"I haven't the slightest clue," Draco murmured, smiling faintly when Calypso growled and began to paw at his fingers like a playful cat. "It always seems to glow when I touch it, though."

Hermione immediately reached to touch it, her fingers brushing Draco's as he pulled his hand back. They tingled.

The jewel was ice-cold to the touch. It did not glow.

"Interesting," she murmured.

Where have I seen this before?

Calypso decided to get playful again, so Hermione and Draco spent an hour or so entertaining her. Hermione felt the calmest that she had in years, fond memories of the few happy times that she'd
had with Luna the past five years moving forth across the expanse of her mind. It hadn't been a nightmare the entire time.

And yet the memories still caused her enough pain to want to push them away.

When it was time to go, Hermione asked how they were to know that Calypso would be safe. Draco explained to her that the wards were iron-clad on the estate, and even more so on the forest clearing. The only people who could get in were him and whoever he brought inside. Calypso was too small to fly up and away, and she never seemed to venture out too far. There had only been one time, he told her, where Calypso had strayed too far, and she'd gotten so terrified that she'd screeched until Draco found her that night.

"I'm confident that she's safe here," Draco said as they gathered as many moonflowers as possible. "Callie's not going anywhere."

The walk back was quiet, but comfortably so. Draco did not hold her hand this time, but Hermione found herself naturally sticking close to his side. Their arms brushed against one another the whole way and any time she stumbled, his hand was around her elbow like lightning to steady her.

She did wonder how he could see so much better than her in the dark, but when she really thought about it, he'd been coming here in the dark of the night without a wand for months. He probably knew the path like the back of his hand.

And as he waved goodnight to her as though they were just two roommates living in the same house, Hermione found that this was the first time in over five years that she'd forgotten who he really was, what she'd been through, and how she'd come to be at the Manor.

She'd forgotten that he was a Death Eater. An assassin for Lord Voldemort.

*Why did he introduce me to Calypso, when it seems like such a huge secret? She thought once she was lying curled up in bed. Is it because he still feels terrible for hurting me? Does he want to be my friend?*  

*Why doesn't that bother me?*  

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**March 2004**

Things settled into a bit of a new routine in the days after Hermione met Calypso.

During the daytime, Hermione maintained her original routine. Breakfast, brewing, and then Narcissa in the mornings; reading, lounging, and lunch during the day, punctuated with the occasional glimpse of Draco fencing in the gym; and brewing, dinner, and Narcissa again at night. She foraged twice per day for whatever ingredients she could find in the garden and occasionally brought books back to her room from the library. Draco maintained his every-three-day-meetings with the Dark Lord, and he worked on his potion every day, so Hermione was guaranteed to see him often.

They didn't seem to have much to talk about during the day.

At night, Hermione found herself lingering in her clothing, waiting as long as possible to change into her pyjamas. She knew Draco went to see the dragon every night, but she didn't know if he would take her with him every night, too. She waited up for him for three days before she gave up the notion. Whether he wanted to be friends with her or not, Hermione had a feeling that it would be slow-going. He was still Draco Malfoy; she was still a Muggle-born witch.
She found herself missing Calypso and the Draco that pointed out the stars.

Something happened at Buckingham four days after her first encounter with Calypso, and when Draco returned from court, he had gone straight to the library to meet with his father.

Hermione had since put two-and-two together and realized that there was a door in the back of the library that she hadn't yet seen. She wasn't the type to explore a library in its entirety and sporadically read; she was the type to start in one section and absorb the entire thing before moving onto the next. She hadn't seen the door because she hadn't yet made it past the A section.

It turned out that the door led to Lucius's study. Which was why Lucius was always heading there at night when he returned from Buckingham every evening. It also explained why he didn't like seeing her in the armchair when he walked in.

She was in the library that night, looking for books on rare potion ingredients, trying to hurry and grab something before Draco or Lucius walked back out of the study. She had no desire to be accosted by either of them when she just wanted to go to her room and research.

The moonflowers were not as easy to work with as she'd originally hoped. She didn't know whether to crush, slice, or boil them, and she didn't want to waste a single flower. She figured the best thing to do would be to put them in a jar and leave them on the sill so they could stay in the glow of the moon at night. The mushroom method would do for a while longer while she did some research and figured out what she was supposed to do. Hence the reason why she'd come to the library to gather books.

As she left the library with the most promising book she could find, she thought she heard yelling coming from the study, but she couldn't be sure.

She stayed up reading until late that night, curling up against the wall under the windowsill in the window seat so she could use the moonlight to read by. She didn't have a wand, so lighting the lanterns on the walls after they automatically died out was impossible. There was nothing in it on moonflowers, but there was a section on the mushrooms that Hermione found quite interesting that implied that the spots could be replanted to grow more three-spotted fungi.

"You need to get in bed."

Hermione jolted awake, her heart leaping with trepidation at the sight of Draco standing in her doorway.

"What are you doing in here?" she asked around a yawn as she used the windowsill to hoist herself off of the floor.

"You need to get in bed," he repeated, sounding annoyed. "There's no reason to sleep on the window seat."

"How did you know I was sleeping on the seat before you came in here?" she asked, her tone just as full of annoyance. She brushed past him and yanked her covers back. "What are you even doing in here? Why didn't you knock?"

"I did knock," he said, "and you didn't answer."

Hermione rolled her eyes and climbed into bed. "Maybe - and don't quote me on this - maybe that's because I was asleep."

When she had slid down into the satin of the sheets and curled up on her side facing the door, she
noticed that he was looking at her strangely.

"Next time, I'll answer," she said, her eyelids fluttering with sleep.

"You will, if you want to see Callie again."

Hermione cracked her eyes open. "Don't threaten me with a good time."

"Cheeky," he said with a sneer.

Hermione yawned again and closed her eyes. After a few seconds of the feeling of his eyes boring holes into her face, she opened one eye.

"Can I help you?"

Draco's sneer returned. "Salazar, do you have to be such a bloody bint? I was just checking on my property."

"By watching me sleep like the mouth-breather that you are?" Hermione groaned in irritation and rolled over to face the wall. "Tell Calypso I miss her."

"I'll do just that," he muttered.

She knew he liked to rile her up, but this was ridiculous. It was the middle of the night. He'd come into her room for no reason other than to poke fun and irritate her. She just wanted to go to sleep.

Hermione had just started to drift off when his voice came from the doorway again.

"Granger?"

She let out a roar of frustration. "What, Malfoy?"

"Try to avoid my father tomorrow, yeah?"

Hermione's response was to grunt. It wasn't until she woke in the morning that she realized how cryptic his words were.

Hermione strolled into the tea room in the morning, hoping to see her favorite House Elf Teensy waiting for her.

She did not at all support House Elf slavery and she hadn't since Hogwarts, but Teensy had told her a lot of curious things about Malfoy Manor. The days of Lucius' tyranny had long passed. Ever since Narcissa had gotten sick, Lucius didn't seem interested in what they were doing as much anymore. Narcissa had always liked the House Elves and apparently, she'd argued with Lucius over them multiple times. Draco had essentially been raised by them, and Hermione rarely saw him ask them for things that weren't necessary.

Hermione was surprised to learn from Teensy that sometime after Narcissa was cursed, Draco tried to offer them all clothes, but they had all declined.

"Teensy and the other elfses thinks we likes it heres," Teensy had said with the brightest gap-toothed smile Hermione had ever seen. "The Manorses is our homeses. We thinks we'll stayses, okays?"

Hermione had merely nodded, resisting the urge to give her a sock from her drawer anyway.
Today, Teensy was not waiting for her. A full English breakfast was, however, complete with an extra plate of fruit and a cup of tea. But the chair across from Hermione's chair was not empty.

Lucius sat there, dressed in his Death Eater robes and black leather boots and gloves. His long hair was scraped back into a tail at the base of his head, secured with a thick black band. When he lifted his gaze to her, his eyes seemed to glow silver in the morning sunlight that came in through the windows. His cane rested against the back of his chair, the open mouth of the fanged silver snake hooked over the top of it. His breakfast was the same size as hers, and a folded copy of the *Daily Prophet* lay haphazardly on the table beside one of his plates.

"I can see why you take breakfast and lunch in here daily, Miss Granger," he said, dabbing at the corner of his mouth with a white linen napkin. He gestured to the large windows that stretched from floor to ceiling across the wall. "The light is wonderful, no?"

Hermione hesitated, not knowing what to reply with. Her only experiences with Lucius Malfoy had been tense and borderline negative. It was clear to her that he detested her and was not pleased that she had taken up residence in his house.

Would Draco be all right with this? She wasn't sure if he was in the house since she typically went down to the lab after breakfast. Judging by the parting words he'd had for her during his bizarre, uncharacteristic visit to her room the night before, she had a feeling that he was not present.

*Why do I suddenly care what Malfoy would be all right with?* Hermione thought, feeling more than a little uncomfortable with her mind's thought process. Between meeting Calypso and Draco's strange form of apology in the potions lab, Hermione had almost forgotten that Draco had strangled her.

She didn't like how easily she had let her guard down, and she didn't like who she had become. The old Hermione Granger would never have stood for any of this treatment. If she were the old Hermione Granger, she would have stolen a wand or Galleons, and at least made an attempt to run away.

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, she felt her sadness expanding in her chest.

She wasn't the old Hermione Granger anymore. This wasn't a world where she could run away or fight back. This was a world of acceptance and survival.

Lucius set his napkin down and then gestured with his hand to her empty chair.

"Please. Sit."

Something about the glint in his eyes told her that it was not a request.

Hermione took her seat, her movements wooden as she picked up her silverware. She ate with slow, measured bites, allowing the flavor of the bacon to ruminate on her tongue as a means of calming her nerves. She was still a Gryffindor at heart, even years later. She knew that eating breakfast alone with Lucius Malfoy was not something that she would have chosen to do at any point before the war. Doing it now felt just as nerve-wracking as it would have back then.

"I do have to make sure I brew Narcissa's potion on time," Hermione said, taking a sip of her tea. It was cold.

"Of course," Lucius said, and his tone was a relaxed purr. "But you can take breakfast with me today. I'd like to visit with you and see how you're settling in."
Hermione's fork slowed its ascent to her mouth and then returned to the table momentarily. After the last time they'd spoken and the argument she'd overheard him having with Draco, she was fairly certain that he did not care how she was "settling in."

"I'm settling in quite well," she said in a clipped tone. "Thank you."

"And your quarters?" he asked before taking another bite of his eggs. "Are they to your liking?"

Hermione delayed her response as suspicion thrummed its way through her veins. "They are."

"Wonderful," he said, and it did not sound like he cared whether it was wonderful or not. "I see you're wearing one of the dresses that I selected for your wardrobe. It's quite becoming on you."

Hermione glanced down at the pink short-sleeved dress that she'd chosen to wear today. She reached down to adjust the knee-length skirt. She had thought this entire time that the House Elves had chosen the dresses that hung in her chiffarobe. Now, she felt like she wanted to change clothing.

"Thank you," she said. She took another bite. The food was starting to taste bland as anxiety sent her heart rate rocketing to the sky.

Lucius gave her a curt nod and a smile that was more akin to a twitch of the lips. He tucked into his meal, so Hermione took the opportunity to do the same. She hoped that the faster she ate, the sooner she'd be able to leave his presence. Sitting here with him felt like playing a game of Russian Roulette. She was so anxiety-ridden that she didn't even have the wherewithal to look out the windows at the grassy plains of the estate. She could only stare down at her plate and hope that she could eat fast enough to get this over with.

After a few minutes, Lucius picked up the copy of the *Prophet*, sat back in his seat, and opened it. He lifted his chin and looked down his nose at the pages, reading in silence that was anything but comfortable for Hermione.

"Hm. It would seem that this week-and-a-half past, the Head of the Finnish Wizarding Council met an untimely demise in his home," he said after a while. "How unfortunate."

Hermione said nothing. She had no idea what was going on in the world outside, nor who that man was. There was once a time in her life when she knew every single political official in wizarding office in all of Europe. Now, the only knowledge she had was tidbits of information dropped along her journey on the run.

"I believe Draco was in Finland a little over one week ago," Lucius mused in a thoughtful tone. He straightened the paper, the rustling of it seeming to echo in the quiet room. "What an interesting coincidence. I'm unsurprised that it took this long to hit the *Prophet*. The Dark Lord is kind enough to ensure that we in Great Britain don't suffer from panic, of course."

He glanced over at her, but she remained stubbornly quiet and ate her muffin. As if a country full of oblivious Muggles and fear-enslaved wizarding folk knew anything other than panic.

"You know, Miss Granger," he said, turning his face back to the paper. "I know you are not as naïve as you pretend to be. I know you know what my son does for the Dark Lord, and I know you know what those potions on the shelf in the lab are. What I cannot figure out is why you, the witch who fought at Harry Potter's side, are helping my wife."

Hermione stared at him. How much did he know? How much could she tell him?
Memories of Wiltshire two years ago - of what Narcissa had done to help her and Luna - flickered in her mind. Was Lucius a threat to his own wife? If he knew what Narcissa had done for them, would he be angry or see it as a betrayal?

She decided it was best to keep Narcissa's secrets for her.

"I had nowhere else to go, and your son offered me sanctuary," she said. "And what he does for the Dark Lord is no business of mine."

"Intriguing," he said, bending down the top of the paper with his fingers and peering across the table at her. "A girl who risks everything to try and stop the Dark Lord, and now, years later, you don't seem to have a care in the world about the deaths he has caused."

"I didn't say that," Hermione said, glowering at her plate as she pushed the food around on it. "I said that what Draco does for the Dark Lord . . . Is not my business. I'm here to help your wife, and that is it."

He arched one eyebrow. "And you do not care who lives or dies?"

Hermione wished she understood his line of questioning. It felt like a trap, some web of words meant to poison and trick. She took another angry sip of her tea.

"I care to the maximum extent of my ability to recognize my power and privilege," she said. "I have none of either, and so my care can only extend to the confines of my heart."

"What an excellent, unique way to say that you haven't a care in the world." Lucius's amusement danced in his eyes. "You're an intelligent girl, Miss Granger."

Hermione clenched her teeth. That wasn't true. Of course she cared. But the amount of care she felt was directly proportionate to her ability to make a difference. In Voldemort's world, she had no power to do anything other than breathe and try to focus on what her life had become. She had accepted her lot in life.

Watching her friends die had seen to that.

It was better to say nothing than to go toe-to-toe with a Death Eater. She was brave, but contrary to what Lucius believed, she did know her place.

"Seems rather odd," Lucius said.

"What does?" Hermione took another bite of her food, chewing angrily and glaring at the tabletop. She just wanted this breakfast to be over with.

"That every time the Dark Lord encounters . . . Resistance . . . Someone ends up clutching at their chest." Lucius sighed as though he were truly forlorn. "And I had so wanted to Summer in Finland this year when my wife awakens."

Hermione felt her blood chill as she snuck a glance in his direction. Was he threatening her with a deadline for curing Narcissa? Was he trying to use the knowledge that Draco had killed a lot of people for the Dark Lord against her?

Her desire to know what weapons she was working with in this battle of wits with him won out. She took the bait.

"What's happened in Finland?"
"Mikael Koskinen, the Head of the Finnish Wizarding Council and the diplomat for magical folk of Finland . . ." Lucius turned the page. " . . . Has passed. As I previously stated."

Hermione slowed the pace of her chewing and swallowed. "And you think Draco killed him?"

Lucius's lips twitched. "My, you are blunt. I'd expect nothing less of a Gryffindor."

Hermione frowned. The non-answer was all the answer she needed. The question was: why was he telling her specifics? If Draco killed this Mikael Koskinen wizard, then did Lucius think there was something to gain from telling her about it?

It was obvious he was trying to manipulate her in some way, she just couldn't figure out how.

"Why would Draco kill the head of the Finnish Wizarding Council?" she asked.

"Resistance makes for a very unhappy Dark Lord."

Hermione was starting to tire of the run-around discussion. She looped her fingers through the handle of her teacup and held on tight to tether herself to a state of calm. She was on the verge of making a snarky remark - the kind she'd allow herself to make in front of Draco.

"So there was resistance from the Head in Finland, and you think the Dark Lord tasked Draco to kill him?"

Lucius raised his eyebrows, inhaled, and blew his air out in a half-sigh, half-scoff. "I wouldn't know. It is simultaneously my greatest pride and my deepest shame that my son is of higher favor to the king than I. I only mean to say that I find it-" He turned the page again, but Hermione wasn't so sure he was even reading the articles. "- odd that wherever the Dark Lord goes, my son and mysterious coronaries follow."

Seething inside, she took another sip of her tea. It tasted awful by now, but she was doing it out of an anxious habit at this point.

"What happened in Finland to warrant that, if it's true?" she asked, trying not to clench her teeth.

Lucius took his time replying, and it made Hermione want to scream. He had complete control of this discussion, and they both knew it. But no matter how infuriating it was to bow to him in this way, she hadn't heard anything about the outside world in so long. She had no idea what things were like now. In her five years of running, she'd only ever discovered that the Dark Lord had acquired control of Scotland, Ireland, England, Wales, and France.

Finally, Lucius said, "The Haltija have been . . . Less than agreeable to the new taxes Head Koskinen placed on the rhodonite mining industry. And you know gnomes. When they have to pay more than 3 galleons for anything, they act ghastly."

Hermione stared at him.

He continued, "In case you didn't know, Haltija are notoriously violent in uncontrolled groups, and their magic is just as strong as a House Elf's, if not more so. So, the Dark Lord and his entourage have been there for the past three weeks, attempting to strike a treaty."

"What sort of treaty?" she asked when he fell silent again.

He looked at her as though he were surprised to see her, and then looked back at the paper once again. "The Finnish wizarding community will be at war within days without the Dark Lord's help."
The Haltjia have been attacking wizards in the streets, killing, maiming... Acting like *absolute* paupers. The Dark Lord offered three packs of werewolves to help stomp out the uprising.

Hermione's mind spun. Haltjia were Unseelie Court fae. The Unseelie Court, as far as she remembered, had an iron-tight treaty with wizardkind not to attack unless conditions of the treaty were broken. The taxes, apparently, constituted as breaking the treaty. It was an agreement that had been in place for both dark and light fae for centuries. These were things she knew and understood from school.

What she didn't understand was how Voldemort had the ability to offer packs of lycanthropes for battle.

"And," Lucius went on, "it would seem that Koskinen rejected the Dark Lord's offer. Pity."

"How does the Dark Lord have the power to offer werewolves?" she asked, bewildered.

"Lithuania."

"Lithuania?"

"The Alpha Pack is located in Lithuania, Miss Granger," he said, casting a disdainful look in her direction. "Surely you haven't been out of school that long. Werewolf packs are spread all over the world, however the Alpha Pack that manages sociological relations for the species is located in Lithuania. The Dark Lord procured Lithuania one year ago and then promptly took over France. But then, no, I suppose you wouldn't know that. Living in squalor will do that to you."

Hermione tuned out his words. She didn't like to think about France. She didn't like to remember what it felt like to see the wolves ripping, gnawing, tearing... She had been there for an entire, peaceful year and three months. And then the wolves came.

She willed herself to focus, lest nightmares of the past overwhelm her.

Everything clicked into place.

"You think... The Dark Lord had Draco *poison* the Head of the FWC?" Hermione's eyes widened and her brows lowered. "When?"

Lucius looked up at the ceiling. "As I said, a week-and-a-half ago, Miss Granger."

Hermione's hand reached up to brush her throat, where the bruise had faded to a faint pink. A week-and-a-half ago, Draco had tried to strangle her in the potions lab. He'd been angrier than she'd ever seen him, and in a foul mood the moment he'd returned from court.

What if court hadn't been held in Buckingham?

What if it had been in Finland?

She felt blood rushing past her ears. She remembered the way Draco's hand had twitched, and how it had looked a lot like he was experiencing the phantom pains of the Cruciatius curse.

Could it be possible that the Dark Lord had *crucioed* Draco and forced him to poison the Head of the FWC?

But Draco had always Apparated from the potions lab. The furthest he could safely Apparate
would be to London. It wasn't possible for him to Apparate to Finland.

Her troubled expression darkened.

Unless he'd Apparated to another part of the house to get there faster. Perhaps the Floo. Perhaps a Floo trip to Buckingham to procure another Portkey. Or perhaps he just wanted to get out of the lab as fast as possible because he'd just choked her.

There were so many possibilities, and none of them seemed to matter. Lucius believed that Draco had poisoned Head Koskinen. Hermione had seen the poisons on his shelf and put the pieces together weeks ago as to what Draco's role was in the Dark Lord's regime. He was an assassin, and he probably had killed that wizard.

She didn't want to hold onto those thoughts. She didn't know how to reconcile Calypso's smiling, laughing Draco with a Draco that could kill an innocent man just because he'd been *crucioed*, especially when Hermione herself had been cursed in her Seventh Year and hadn't balked.

The problem wasn't that she couldn't imagine him as a killer. It was that she couldn't face it.

"I can see your little mind working," Lucius said, smirking. "Surely you can't be so dense as to think that my son is anything other than what he is. The two of you spend so much time in the potions lab, tinkering with your brews, that you've gone blind to the realities of the Dark Lord's world. A world that exists where you sit at the metaphorical dinner table with a boy who had a direct hand in the demise of your peers. Or have you forgotten who broke the curse on the cupboard and let us into the castle?"

Hermione didn't know how to explain to him - or to herself - that she had been through so much after the war that she didn't have the energy to care who Draco had been before the war anymore. She didn't know how she felt about him now, but she did know that if it weren't for him, she would have been torn into pieces by werewolves in a dingy back alley in Paris.

She would unpack it all later.

"Well," she said, unable to keep the snideness from creeping into the edges of her tone, "when a madman casts a mind-bendingly painful curse on you, it's probably easier to imagine taking a bottle of poison and tipping it over someone's meal than it is to endure that torment."

Lucius threw his head back and let out a laugh. He folded the *Prophet* shut. "Your intelligence is showing itself for what it is. Naïveté in the face of ignorance. You think that if you ignore it, then it absolves you of guilt. And I had already believed your blood status was the most unbecoming aspect of your existence."

Hermione stared at him with wide eyes, flinching when the chair scraped back from the table. He rose to his feet, looking terrifying with his silver eyes set in a fury-pale face.

"You are a selfish little girl. Every day that you remain in this house brings my family - my wife - one step closer to certain death. The level of risk that there is in keeping you under our protection is *sickening*. I should take the recipe for your medicinal brew and give it to one of the Dark Lord's potioneers. Then, we can send you to Buckingham, where you rightfully belong."

Hermione could feel her heart racing, fear setting her fingers to a tremble, but she remained steadfastly blank-faced. She lifted her teacup, hoping he didn't see her hand shaking.

"Then call for Draco. Call for your son and tell him what you plan to do with me." She took a careful sip of her tea. "See what *he* has to say about it."
"Why, you insolent little -" He cut himself off when his eyes met Hermione's, which stared at him unflinchingly over the rim of her cup. He inhaled sharply through bared teeth.

Hermione knew better than to flinch again. This was the second time Lucius had gone out of his way to make sure she knew how much he despised her. But Hermione knew she was safe. Draco wasn't willing to leave his mother's health up to a random potioneer, especially not one employed by the very wizard who had cursed her in the first place.

She knew that for certain.

Lucius sneered and then drew his shoulders back. His gaze fell to her cup and then, as soon as the rage had flared up, it subsided. The corners of his lips curved upward again.

"You Gryffindors. So trusting," he said, putting emphasis on the final word of the sentence. "It would be a real shame if there was a mix-up with your morning tea, wouldn't you say?"

Hermione felt her stomach churning. She slowly set her tea cup down and stared at it, wondering.

Would he really risk Narcissa's only chances at a cure by killing Hermione?

"I see that your cup is empty," he hissed, reaching for his cane. He snatched it off of the back of the chair. Then, he swayed slightly and trilled, "Ohhh, don't you fret. I'm sure there's a House Elf available. Would you care for another cup?"

Hermione wanted to be sick.

Lucius slammed his copy of the paper down in front of her, right on top of her half-eaten plate of food. He leaned down close to her.

"Take a look, Miss Granger. What does it say? Heart attack at dinner?" He tutted. "A shame."

As the thunk of his boots and cane against the stone floor faded out of the tea room, Hermione found that she could not look away from the front cover of the Prophet. The headline blared bold and black out at her. The moving picture was of a man she only recognized from an old Hogwarts yearbook. One that she'd come across during her Second Year while looking for images of Tom Marvolo Riddle.

He stood at a podium, smiling faintly and waving at what she could only assume was an assembled crowd of Finnish wizards and witches. The shock of black curls that fell into his eyes, heavy brows, and smirking lips were virtually unmistakable.

**Head of FWC dies of coronary; the Dark Lord named Finnish Head in interim.**

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE LEAVE A REVIEW. I have no idea if this story is going over well or not.

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Chapter Four

Chapter Summary

There will be two more fast updates, and then I will take a break from updating for a few days so I can pre-write a few more chapters. Chapter 5 goes up tomorrow.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Counting the Stars

Chapter Four

Huai Xiang Qu - Jia Peng Feng and Legend of Ashitaka - Joe Hisaishi

O

Lucius had rattled Hermione.

There was no way around it. She just had to admit that it wasn't only Draco who could fill her with fear and shake the iron walls she'd built around her heart to keep everything out. Both Malfoys made her want to look over her shoulder in every part of the house. Draco was unpredictable, like the waters of a stormy sea. Lucius was more like a volcano, spreading destruction from the moment it erupted.

Together, they were even more dangerous than she'd originally thought.
And then there was the article. Specifically, the moving picture of the Dark Lord that looked so horrifyingly familiar. The curly hair and dark eyes. Somehow, Voldemort no longer had the appearance of a snake. He now had the appearance that he'd held when he was eighteen, only a bit older - perhaps when he was in his early twenties.

How?

Hermione's only indication that Draco had come home was the fact that a weathered copy of *Wuthering Heights* lay on the floor outside her bedroom door.

Before, Hermione would have thought nothing of him being gone for an entire day and night. She hadn't liked to think about what Draco was doing when he left the Manor, even before Lucius' little display in the tea room. Thinking about how apathetic she was to Voldemort's regime compared to how passionate she'd been about stopping it disturbed her. She'd lost so much because of the Dark Lord and somewhere along the line, she'd hit her capacity for sorrow.

She supposed she was empty now.

"You were serious about your father," she remarked as she strolled into the potions lab after breakfast.

Draco looked up from his notes, staring at the wall as though something were delayed in his mind. He didn't reply, even as Hermione went to her table to start on Narcissa's medicine. She wondered why he was always working on that potion, and why the Dark Lord needed it.

A few gears in her mind clicked into a new position.

*Are the potion and Lord Voldemort's appearance connected?*

She glanced over her shoulder at him, studying his disposition. Draco let out a breath through his lips. It moved some of his hair out of his eyes.

He seemed exhausted. Where normally he sat with a straight spine and rigid shoulders, now he appeared almost haggard. His elbow was on the table, his forehead propped against his hand as his fingers threaded through his messy hair. His quill scritched circular designs in the corner of his parchment. He sort-of looked like Harry used to when he was daydreaming in class.

Hermione felt the grief rising up in her body like a visceral tsunami. She had to close her eyes to fight it back. She didn't want to think about him. She didn't want to think about how everything was so wrong now. She didn't want to feel anything.

"Have you been to bed yet?" she asked, opening jars and laying out ingredients. The moonflower jar remained on the sill for a day when Hermione could figure out how to prepare them the right way.

"No, Granger," he said with a weighted sigh. "Why? Are you offering?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes at his back. Good to know his personality was still intact.

"All right, so you're not dying," she remarked, sitting on her stool. "The ferret lives to fight another day."

She heard his snort. "What did my father say to you, then?"

"Oh, just the usual," Hermione muttered. "Death and destruction, doom and gloom. A sprinkle of
'my son is a murderer, look out.' It was a lovely breakfast, though.

He was silent and then he came to stand beside her. He placed his hands on the end of the table and leaned down until they were at eye level. Hermione hesitated before she met and held his gaze. She didn't know what he would see in hers, but she knew within seconds what she saw in his.

Anger.

"What did my father say to you?" he asked, voice so quiet that Hermione could barely hear it.

Hermione chewed the inside of her cheek, debating.

What Lucius had tried to do was cause problems between her and Draco. But if Draco wanted her to know things about the world outside the Manor, they were acquainted enough that he would simply tell them to her. She could understand why he wouldn't tell her about his job for the Dark Lord. She knew what the potions on the shelf were for, and they never talked about them.

They never talked about much of anything substantial. The first time she'd ever held a real conversation with him was in the clearing.

Draco did not own her and she was not his prisoner. He had made it clear that she could leave at any time, so it was fear that kept her inside the Manor. He was not her friend and he never had been. Their past was riddled with memories of his cruelty, taunts, and jibes. His reasons for bringing her here were entirely selfish and their ideas for "getting along" were bickering, snarking, and glaring.

Hermione set her pestle down and rested her hands on the table beside the mortar. The poppy seeds inside waited.

"Did you poison the Head of the Finnish Wizarding Council?"

The reaction was immediate.

The ire in his eyes flared like a hungry fire and he stood up tall. He breathed a laugh that was mirthless and incredulous at the same time. One hand still on the table, he used the other to rub his jawline. He laughed again.

Hermione raised her eyebrows. "The silence is answer enough."

She went back to grinding the seeds.

"What, you don't care?" he asked.

"I care," she said. "I just know there's nothing I can do about it."

He watched her work for a moment before he said, "It's like you're not even you anymore."

Hermione paused as his words lashed against her in a way that she couldn't have predicted. More memories than she could count or name flashed behind her eyes. Death. Running. Screams. Crying. Fire. Blood. Luna. She felt like she couldn't breathe.

With a mighty push of her mind, they all went soaring back into their boxes.

Hermione went back to work. How could he possibly know who she was and who she had ever been?
"No," she said, "I don't suppose I am."

Draco watched her for a second longer before his hand suddenly shot out towards hers. Startled, she jolted and drew her hands back before he could touch her. Something shifted in his eyes that she couldn't read and then, as soon as it had appeared, it was gone like dissipating smoke. He withdrew his hand to his side.

Was he about to touch my hand?

"All you need to worry about is what happens inside the walls of this Manor," he said, and she saw his shoulders sag. "What I do outside of it is left on the steps when I come in."

He went back to his seat, leaving Hermione feeling confused about what it was that was wrong with her that she would accept that as an answer in regards to whether or not he had killed an innocent man.

As they resumed working in silence, she wondered how many other people he had killed to help further Lord Voldemort's regime. If he could kill all those innocent people and still have the wherewithal to look at himself in the mirror, then where was the line? If the Dark Lord really had used the Cruciatous against him, how many times had it been for Draco to not be able to fight back anymore? Once? Twice? More? Which deaths were the Dark Lord's fault, and which were his?

If he could kill people to whom he had no emotional ties, then why would she, the girl he had despised since First Year for having muddy blood, be any exception?

She didn't trust him.

Hermione took lunch in the tea room.

In spite of it feeling a little less private due to the fact that Lucius had tainted it with his presence the previous morning, Hermione knew she couldn't give up her miniature sanctuary at mealtimes. The windows were the perfect size and the February sun was gorgeous when it hit the frost on the grass in the early afternoons. She would never let that go, even if Lucius came to harangue her every morning until the end of time.

While eating her sandwich, she did her best not to dwell on her fears. She'd done a fairly good job of waking up, breathing, and going to sleep every day, and she didn't want to disrupt that by sending herself into a panicked tailspin of terror. Draco was not going to poison her tea or her food, and she and Lucius both knew it. If he was going to do that, that would mean accepting that Narcissa might die.

She was starting to think she was no safer at the Manor than she was on the streets.

Hermione was no true Healer. Not in name or education. She simply had done a lot of reading and a lot of practising since Seventh Year. She'd learned that potions were a witch's best friend on the hunt for the Dark Lord's Horcruxes, and she'd found ways to whip them up when the ingredients were lacking. She'd learned that the recipes for potions were not concrete. A substitution could always be made when something wasn't available.

When Draco found her in Paris, it was not because he knew that she had those skills. It was because he remembered that she was the best in their Year. He'd come to her on a last-hope wish that she would agree to help if he offered sanctuary. The medicinal brew Hermione had come up with was something she figured out after two straight days in the Malfoy Manor library, a few hours doing diagnostic spells on Narcissa's prone form, and one hour practising mixing brews that
contained the one she'd made to help Harry and herself cope with the darkness of the Horcrux after Ron left the tent.

What she didn't understand was why Lucius had agreed to let her come to the Manor if he thought it was so dangerous to keep her there. Why not just tell Draco, "no," and turn Hermione in?

As she took the final bite of her sandwich, Hermione already knew the answer to that question.

Because Lucius wasn't willing to risk his wife's chances at life, even if that meant defying the Dark Lord.

Teensy came to take her plate, and they chatted for a few minutes. She mentioned offhand that Draco was in the gymnasium, so Hermione decided to head there and watch him fence for a while.

The gymnasium was nothing like the sort she'd seem in her Muggle primary school before she went to Hogwarts. She wasn't sure the Malfoys even called it a gym; she was certain it was only her that associated it with one for lack of a better word. It wasn't much larger in width than a master bedroom, but the ceiling was incredibly high up. Draco used it for activities like fencing, exercises, and practising flying on his broom. Sometimes, he flew for fun and sometimes, he let a Snitch loose and chased it around.

Hermione didn't know why she liked coming to watch him do these activities, but she supposed it was because she was bored. Between Narcissa's first dose and the time she began the second dose's brew, all she had to do each day was wait for lunch and dinner. Apart from reading and foraging, this was the most exciting part of her day.

_Withering Heights_ in hand, she walked over to the small bench against the eastern wall and took a seat, shifting aside the tall glass of water that he'd placed there at some point. The bench hadn't been there when she first came to the Manor, but after her third time of lingering against the wall with her arms crossed, Draco took the hint. A bench was installed.

Today, Draco was in the process of doing sit-ups with his body horizontal to hers on the carpeted floor, and the sound of him counting under his breath was almost soothing in its continuity. He was shirtless and wore only a pair of grey trackies, which Hermione had grown used to seeing him wear, and a light sheen of sweat glinted on his body. The windows that lined the walls allowed the sunlight to filter in. Hermione could see the little dust mites floating in the rays.

She read for a few minutes before he walked over to her.

"Water," he said, panting from exertion.

She glanced at him, ignoring the sight of his bare torso and lean muscles. She didn't like to look too long. It felt weird seeing a body that was objectively attractive attached to an even more attractive face, and then remembering that it all belonged to the world's biggest prat Draco Malfoy.

"Here," she said, handing him the cup.

He grunted and took it from her, his sweaty fingers brushing against hers. She pulled a face and glared at him. He smirked and wriggled his free hand.

"Shall I smear it all over your face?"

"If you do, I'll take your wand," she said, nodding to where he'd left it next to the water cup, "and hex you."
"And then I'd have to punish you," he said, running his fingers through his damp hair. "My slave taking my wand? Absolutely not."

Hermione's glare intensified and she turned the page in her book so hard that it almost ripped. "Then I suppose I'll have to kill you before punishment can take place."

He let out a strange mixture between a scoff and a laugh, and then downed the rest of the water. He leaned down to set the cup down, his body coming within inches of Hermione's face. As he pulled back, he stopped with his mouth near her ear.

"Try."

Hermione did not want to try and navigate the meaning behind the shiver that slid down her spine. She was just going to attribute it to the fact that any air being blown into someone's ear, whether a whisper or a yell, could cause the human body to react, and keep reading her novel.

Draco strolled across the room, to the corner. There was a tall, cylindrical silver canister that housed multiple fencing swords, and a couple of wooden dummies similar to the ones Hermione remembered using in the Room of Requirement during Fifth Year.

"Muggles wear masks when they fence, you know," she called out to him, wrinkling her nose the way she sometimes did when she didn't understand why he did something that he did. "To protect their faces."

"And why you think I would do anything that a Muggle would is beyond me," he called back, selecting a sword and testing the weight, as if it had changed since the last time he'd used it.

"Hm. Well, I hope you poke an eye out."

"Were you known for your charming personality?" He turned and glowered at her, holding the sword point-down beside him. "Or just your witty banter?"

"Neither." She turned a page and held her book up in the hopes that he understood she was trying to read. "I was known for my love of reading. Be quiet."

"Says the witch who started the conversation!" he yelled.

"Yep," was all she said. "And by the way, for someone who swears he would never do anything a Muggle would, I would just like to point out that you're wearing trackies."

He glanced down at his trousers. "Yeah. So? Wizards wear them, too."

"Not Purebloods."

He scowled. "Do you think we just exercise in our skivvies? Come, Granger, you can't be that classist."

"Says the wizard who's so purist that he won't wear a protective mask while fencing." She crossed her legs. "But that is none of my business. Carry on."

"You . . ." He held up one finger and then took a deep, deep breath. "Sometimes I wonder why I let you into my house."

"To save your mother," Hermione answered automatically. She was pretty sure she'd read the same paragraph four times now, but she wasn't counting.
He was silent for a long time, hefting the sword. "Right."

Hermione glanced at him over the top of her book. Knitted brow, downcast eyes, pursed lips. He studied the sword as though it needed a thorough inspection. There was no other way to describe how he looked.

Sad.

Suddenly, the expression melted into a mask and he pointed the sword at her. "Bring me my wand so I can put some life into these."

"Into what? The dummies?" She frowned at him. "Why can't you just accio it?"

"And miss the chance to annoy you?" He smirked. "Not a chance. Bring it to me."

Hermione narrowed her eyes and held the challenge in his gaze for a drawn-out moment. Then, she crossed her legs the other direction and resumed reading. Draco scoffed and then sighed.

"Fine, then do you want to spar?"

Hermione froze and shot him a sharp look. ". . . What?"

He had grabbed a second sword and was now walking over to her. She shook her head, slow movements back and forth as the realization that he was serious dawned on her. He drew near and she scrambled to her feet.

"No. No, that is not happening." She continued to shake her head, clutching her book to her chest. "I don't . . . Do that sort-of thing."

He raised one eyebrow. "What? You don't fence? Or you don't do anything fun?"

She glared at him. "I do fun things. But no, I do not . . . Fence. I don't do the activities portion."

"The activities portion?"

Hermione opened her mouth, but the words died in her throat. She couldn't stop the memories from coming forth again.

Harry and Ron were the ones who did the activities portion of their friendship. Quidditch, Wizard's Chess, common room parties, random Hogsmeade trips . . . Hermione stayed in the castle and read books. If she participated in anything else, it was a special treat.

And now Draco was just . . . Holding a fencing sabre out to her as though it were the simplest thing in the world.

Her gaze bounced back and forth between the foil and his expectant facial expression.

"There's rubber on the tip," he said, re-offering the blade to her. "So no chance of me killing you."

Why did it feel like sparring with him would be committing some grievous betrayal to Harry and Ron's memories?

"Granger," he said, sounding exasperated. "It's just a sabre. I'm not going to hurt you, and if the sword hurts you, I'll cast incendio on it. How's that?"

Hermione stared at him, a little taken aback. He seemed sincere, and that was the issue.
What the Hell were they doing?

"We're . . . Not . . . Friends," she said with a spluttering laugh, continuing to shake her head. "Stop trying to pretend that we are. Stop trying to pretend like the moment my usefulness runs out - like the moment your mother awakens - you won't take me straight to the Dark Lord."

He yanked the sword back, his brow furrowing deeply. "What?"

Hermione's heart raced and pounded in her ears in the midst of her storm of emotions. She held her book in one hand and pointed at him with one finger of the other.

"I'm not a complete imbecile, Malfoy. What's to stop you from turning me over once you don't need me anymore? What's to stop you from calling him the moment she opens her eyes?"

"Oh, come off it, Granger! I wouldn't go to all this fucking trouble of harboring you here if I was just going to throw you into the fires when I was done with you!"

Hermione blinked and then exploded. "Yes, you would! Are you joking? Yes, you would. You're Draco Malfoy, assassin for the Dark Lord. You just killed an innocent man and went back to acting like everything was normal! Who knows how many others you've killed, or - or hurt, or . . ." She stopped for a breath and then cried, "I don't even know who you are!"

Draco drew his head back on his shoulders and looked down at her in astonishment. "You pretend like you don't care about anything, for some arbitrary reason that no one will ever be privy to so you can feel better about yourself for staying here, but really you do care about what I do. You care about my role in the ranks, but your desire to have a roof over your head is more important to you than your morals. And that infuriates you because, by your twisted Gryffindor ideals, it makes you no better than me."

Hermione felt like she was going to throw Wuthering Heights at his face. "Of course I bloody care! Of course I bloody care! I'm not like you! I'm not like you - you Death Eaters, who can kill a man and come home to go play with your baby dragon hours later in the grass! I'm not here to become friends with you, and spar with you, and play in the potions lab with you! I'm here because I had no other option, and you know that! You know you have all the power!"

He took a threatening step toward her. "Don't talk about Callie."

Hermione, feeling the combined panic of his close proximity and her conflicted emotions regarding Lucius' words, couldn't stop the band of tension inside of her from snapping. Her hand pushed outward, shoving him backward.

"Callie's too good for you! She's too good for you and one day, she'll open her eyes and realize that the only thing you'll bring her is darkness. And when that day comes, I hope she escapes you. I hope she flies away and you never see her again!"

The silence was oppressive.

"You have lost your mind, witch." His eyes blazed down into her, as though he were trying to incinerate her. "You've lost your bloody mind."

She held his gaze. "Nothing a slip of the hand over my morning tea wouldn't fix, yeah?"

His eyes narrowed down at her and then he tossed both sabres down onto the floor. They clattered, echoing in a way that almost hurt to hear. He pushed his face down closer to hers.
"I'm the only one standing between you and an army of darkness," he hissed. "My father. Death Eaters. Werewolves. The Dark Lord himself. I'm the only one that has the means to protect you. If I were you, I'd keep that in mind next time you forget to mind your fucking tongue."

He stormed out of the door to the left, slamming the door open as he went. Hermione followed, stomping to the right.

Later, when Hermione went to the potions lab to prepare Narcissa's nightly medicine, Draco was not there.

Chapter End Notes

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Hermione sighed.

Narcissa was able to imbibe the potion, but her condition didn't seem to be getting any better. Hermione had been physically giving her the medicine for one month now, having waited a week or so after she first created it to begin using it on her. All Narcissa could do was lie there and stare. Yes, sometimes she mumbled things or seemed like she was looking at her, but Hermione was certain that she was not lucid.

The potion was not a failure. She knew that for certain because it had cured Harry and Hermione both of the curse's effects that had lingered after having worn the Horcrux around their necks for weeks. She knew the modifications she had made were effective. Draco had told her what curse Voldemort had used against Narcissa, and she had researched in the library until she was sure what its properties were. She'd covered all of her bases.

So why was it taking Narcissa so long to wake up?

She stood up, smiling softly down at Narcissa's half-conscious form.
"I love you, my dragon," Narcissa suddenly sang, beaming up at Hermione.

Her eyes were fogged over with the grey haze of the curse, and her teeth were a sickly yellow. But her hair was soft and kept in a neat plait to one side of her head. The book that rested in Lucius's chair by the bed was proof enough that he was the one caring for her. Hermione wondered why Lucius did not show that same kindness to his son.

Hermione felt her stomach twist. "My dragon." Did Narcissa think she was Lucius? Or Draco?

In spite of the fears she'd shouted at Draco that afternoon, Hermione did not want Narcissa to have to suffer any longer than she had to. Even if the Malfoy men tossed her into the Floo and sent her to Buckingham palace to be flayed alive by Lord Voldemort, she was still going to try to do right by a woman who had done right by her. She was going to try her damndest to save Narcissa's life.

Hermione plugged the cork into the now-empty vial and left the room, her mind set upon going to the library. The key was the moonflowers. She just knew they were the exact ingredient that she needed to be able to make this potion work as a cure and not just as a treatment.

She headed downstairs to the library. She had already pored through the Malfoys' Herbological texts, but now she was thinking it was time to venture into the Dark Arts. Moonflowers were rare and had a lot of uses during ancient times. There was a possibility that there was something in that section.

When she entered, pushing the heavy door open, she heard voices.

"... my charge. She's under my care. I promised her protection, so no one will touch her but me."

It was Draco's voice, and he sounded livid. The reply came from his father, who sounded just as angry.

"Do you not understand how reckless you have been, son? Now that he has come here and seen her, then who's to say the Dark Lord isn't already on his way?"

"He didn't."

"Didn't what?"

"He did not see her." Draco sounded like he was talking through clenched teeth.

Hermione inched through the stacks, the voices getting louder as she ventured closer to the Dark Arts section. When she peeked around the corner, she gaped.

There was a door there that she'd never seen before. It was slightly ajar - much too ajar for her to be hidden from if she were to step out of the shelves - and she could see a sliver of the inside of a room. Draco stood with his back to the doorway and since he was much taller than his father, she couldn't see Lucius. He was still in his trackies but now had a black shirt on. She saw part of a desk, a plush dark green carpet, and the foot of an armchair. The crackling of a fireplace could be heard in the dips of silence between words.

"Lucius's study has been back here, she thought, marveling. No wonder he doesn't like it when I'm in the library all the time."

"How fortunate for us," Lucius' voice hissed out, the syllables clipped and sharp. "She lives to see another day in these hallowed halls."
Draco shouted the moment his sentence ended. "If you didn't want me to bring her here, you should have told me not to bring her! Then, you wouldn't have to worry about Carrow, the Dark Lord, or your bloody floors getting muddy, now would you?"

"Do not raise your voice to me in my house, Draco!"

Hermione could feel the tension leaking out of the room, all the way out into the library. She bit her lower lip, recalling the day when Carrow had almost seen her face. She had thought that everything would be okay, so long as he didn't see her face. Yet here Lucius and Draco were, having a row about it.

Fear crept in.

Had Carrow said something to the Dark Lord about Draco having a "slave?"

"Now," Lucius went on, "what you are failing to grasp is the concept of gravity. The gravity of this situation, son. Before you make any decisions, as a wizard, you must always weigh both sides of the equation. The pros and the cons. You -"

"I did weigh the pros and cons, father!"

"No, you did not. You -"

"Yes, I did -"

"No, you did not weigh the," his talking speed increased, "pros and cons of the situation, Draco!" He paused and spoke more slowly. "You only thought of the positive effects of bringing her here. You did not think about what would happen if we were discovered, you did not prepare for the chance of guest visits, and you did not come up with any sort of contingency plan for what happens afterwards. Did you even stop to think about what would happen were the potion to fail, and your mother to die?"

"I don't care."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. What? How could he possibly not care about his mother's life?

"You don't care?" Lucius sounded beside himself with fury.

Draco sighed. "I'm not talking about mother. Of course I care about mother." Relief flooded Hermione's body, though she didn't know why it mattered to her if he cared about Narcissa or not. "I'm talking about discoveries and visits. I do not care about any of those things. I only care about mother."

Silence that caused a ringing in Hermione's ears.

Lucius said, "That's your problem, son. That is your problem. You are hyperfocusing on one aspect of the situation, and you have no plans whatsoever for what happens after, or for what happens if your little pet fails at the task you have given her."

"She won't fail."

"And how do you know that?" Lucius challenged.

"You don't understand who she is," Draco replied. "You don't understand how powerful she is as a witch. The things I've heard she's done, and the things I saw her do the day of the battle . . ."
She will succeed in healing mother. And when she does -"

Lucius cut him off, yelling, "And when she does, what? What will you do with her then, son? Let her live here forever in the lap of luxury while you," Hermione saw his hands go up in the air, appearing in the distance above the line of Draco's shoulders, "hide her from the Dark Lord until the day we all die?!"

Draco snorted. "I suppose I know now where I get my dramatic streak from."

"Do not make a joke out of this matter, Draco Lucius Malfoy!" Lucius sounded like a feral wolf. "At the end of the day, she is still just a Mudblood. No matter her prowess, no matter her skill. Whether she saves your mother or not, letting her stay is like taking pity on a cockroach."

"She is staying," Draco said in a firm, dark tone. "As for what happens after mother is better, we can discuss it at that time."

"No. You need to decide now. Do we let her loose in the woods? Do we give her a Portkey to Timbuktu? Do we send her to Buckingham? You need to make a choice, Draco."

"She. Is. Staying," Draco growled. "And we will discuss the rest later."

Lucius scowled. "Very well. In the event that Carrow does find out that she is here, reports us all to the Dark Lord, and sends the wolves to howl at our doorstep . . . And when the Dark Lord comes here and finds that you've been harbor ing not only a fugitive, but a Mudblood . . . Harry Potter's Mudblood . . . And if something happens to your mother . . . ? I will personally kill your muddy little insect myself."

Draco started to say something, but heaved a frustrated sigh when his father shoved past him with a violent shoulder.

"And you'd better leave the fucking portraits covered, Lucius!" Draco called after him.

Lucius didn't answer.

Hermione pulled in her breath and ducked back behind the shelf, scrabbling to hide in the shadows. Lucius stormed by without noticing her, an almost anguished expression on his face that would have made Hermione pity him if he hadn't just likened her to a cockroach.

When she saw that Draco was lingering inside the study, bent over the desk with his hands on the top of it and head hung, Hermione hurried towards the exit. She didn't want him to find out that she had been eavesdropping, especially when they had had a row themselves not even an hour ago.

She went outside, waited a count of three Godrics, and then walked back inside.

Draco stood near the second bookshelf back from the door, one hand in the pocket of his trackies and the other resting on the books before him. He looked troubled, and rightfully so. Hermione knew better than to ask him about it.

She said nothing as she walked by him, heart pounding from the leftover adrenaline. She went to the Dark Arts section, scanning the shelves for books on dark potions.

Her mind whirled. She wanted to focus on her research, but it was difficult with the remnants of Lucius and Draco's words floating about in her head. She'd already heard them arguing once before, weeks ago in the potions lab. Now, they were arguing again.
She already knew that Lucius hated her, and she didn't really care about that as long as he didn't try to harm her. However the situation with Draco was... Confusing. Why was Draco so adamant that she be left alone? Why was he so intent on avoiding discussion of the "after?" Did he think that Lucius would change his mind, or that Narcissa could be convinced to let Hermione stay?

It *was* possible that Narcissa was her ticket to safety. After all, she'd been her ticket to safety once before, even if Hermione didn't like to think about that time in her life. Would Narcissa be the one to help her start a new life, even if that new life was inside the Manor? And was Draco counting on this to happen?

But that begged the question of *why*? Why would Draco *want* her to stay?

An errant thought entered her head, speaking to her as though from an outside voice.

*Unless he wants to turn you over himself and get the credit for your capture.*

Hermione dissociated in front of the bookshelf.

Draco wandered into the stack, moving behind her and pulling her back to reality with his arrival. She fought the urge to cringe away from him. She hadn't trusted him before, but now? She did not feel safe.

"Granger," he said, tone muted.

"Malfoy," she said.

"Not surprised to find you in the library in the middle of the day," he said, reaching out to pull a book off of the shelf. He flipped through it. "Any free moment you had, you were in the library at school."

Hermione shrugged and spoke in a brusque voice. "And any free moment you had, you were on the Pitch. We all like what we like."

"True," he said with a sigh. "True indeed."

Hermione pushed herself up onto the tips of her toes, reaching for a book called *Dark Potions and the Art of Nyx*. At the height of her stance, she glanced at him.

He had placed the book back on the shelf and was now glaring at the books as though they'd done him some personal wrong. She wondered what he was thinking, and what type of emotions someone as callous as Draco Malfoy felt after a familial argument. She wasn't so sure she wanted to know.

It was harder to be scared of him when he seemed so human.

"Malfoy?"

He blinked thrice and then looked down at her. Even on tip-toe, with her standing at only five-foot-three-inches tall, he towered over her.

"What?" he said.

It came out like sick, spewing forth from the depths of her insecurities and fears. "Do you have something you want to tell me?"

He gazed at her, his eyes falling to her frowning lips for a brief moment. Her heart beat a new
Why is he looking at me like that?

Then, his hand reached easily past hers for the book she already had a grip on, his fingers touching to her own. They were softer than they probably should have been as a potioneer.

Softer than she thought a killer's fingers should be.

"No," he said, and then he pulled the book down for her. "Just do your reading."

Before she could respond, he walked away from the area. She waited there for a second, and then turned to dash after him, her elbow-length curls flying out behind her. He was already at the door.

"What are you planning?" she called from the stacks.

He paused without turning back to her. Hermione felt faint from how hard her heart was beating. Finally, he answered her.

"Nothing that concerns you."

The creaking of the hinges seemed much, much too loud.

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November 1998

There was a light.

It wasn't from a wand or anything Muggle. No. It was something small, bright, and alive.

A Snatcher? A Death Eater?

Hermione's eyes snapped open in the darkness of the log, her muscles spasming from being cramped in a semi-circular shape for the past three days. She could feel the crust of sleep that had gathered in the corners of her eyelids, and her tongue felt as dry as cotton. Confused, her eyes darted about in the semi-darkness.

"Luna?" she croaked.

"Hermione?" came the faint, weak reply.

"There was a light." Panic bloomed in her chest and she turned her head towards the opening on her side of the log.

What if it was the tip of someone's wand, or a Muggle's flashlight? What if the Dark Lord had Imperiused a group of Muggles to send after them?

But it wasn't.

There, hovering right beside her face, was a female pixie. She had bright green skin, four black almond-shaped eyes, and a head of curly blue hair. Out of her back stretched shimmering emerald-green wings and she was clad in a moss-like dress. She glowed so bright that it was almost too difficult to look at her after being in such a deep, feverish sleep.

Hermione saw her mouth moving, but only heard a tiny squeaking noise. She reached into the pocket of her denims, brought her wand out, and awkwardly aimed it at the faerie.
"Sonorus," she whispered, exhausted from the effort.

Just like that, the pixie’s words could be heard just loud enough for them to hear.

"Come with me, friends of Dobby!" she said in her high-pitched tone. "I have somewhere safe for you to go."

It didn’t take much convincing, especially at the mention of Dobby’s name. They were fatigued and starving, pixies were members of the Seelie Court, and they had no other prospects for where to go.

After the pixie assured them it was completely empty in the woods, she led them through the trees. They both needed to relieve themselves, but the faerie assured them that they would be able to when it was safe. They walked for a little less than one hour and then came to a stop by a tree. Before confusion could overcome the two tired witches, the pixie darted forward, turned, and shook some pixie dust onto the trunk.

"Ahead is an Underhill," the pixie said. "If you ever stumble upon one of the Seelie fae, just say you’re Dobby’s friends, and they’ll lead you to one. An Underhill won’t keep you forever, but it’ll keep you for long enough to survive."

Hermione and Luna exchanged glances.

"The tree is the door," the pixie said. "Once you go through, no one will be able to see you, and anyone who strays near will forget themselves and turn around. I promise that you will be safe."

Tentatively, Hermione reached forward until her hand reached the bark of the tree trunk, expecting to meet solid oak. To her surprise, her hand phased right through the wood. Her heart jumped with hope as she and Luna grinned with relief. Together, they walked through the trunk-that-was-a-door, and came out on the other side of the tree.

It looked exactly the same.

Except that it wasn’t.

Now, there was a pool of water, the ground was covered in moss, and there was a bush covered in ripe, red fruits that Hermione had never seen before. Luna started towards it, but even though her stomach was growling as loud as a stampeding herd of Hippogriffs, Hermione reached out to grab her hand and stop her.

"Fae food is dangerous," she whispered. "We might be stuck here forever if we eat it."

Luna looked worried. "Yes, I suppose you’re right, Hermione."

The pixie darted through the air and hovered in front of Hermione’s face. She put her hands on her hips. She looked heart-broken.

"I promise you it's safe. Please. We just want to help you all."

Hermione and Luna exchanged wide-eyed glances again.

"You mean . . . You've helped others?" Hermione asked. "From Hogwarts?"

The pixie nodded. "We've been finding as many of you that escaped the castle as we can and leading you to Underhills. Elf Dobby asked us long ago to help whoever we could if the Dark Lord defeated Mr. Harry Potter. The Seelie Court is and always will be loyal to Mr. Dumbledore."
"And so was Dobby," Luna said, sounding happier than she had in weeks.

Hermione's eyes filled with tears. Dobby. Harry. The rest of her friends . . .

Just the thought that some had survived and were being hidden safely by the Seelie Court was enough for her. She and Luna were tired, hungry, and scared. This was their only hope to recuperate and stay safe until they were either forced to leave or were able to safely send a Patronus. Until then, the Underhill would have to do. She’d never heard of nor read about one before, but again: they were optionless.

"We'll stay," Hermione said. She looked at Luna.

"Yes," Luna said in a dreamy voice, eyeing the fruit. "We'll stay."

The pixie flew in an enthusiastic circle. "I have to go look for others. Don't walk outside of the tree trunk until you have no other choice. The door will seal shut behind you."

Before Hermione had the chance to ask the pixie's name, she darted out through the tree and zoomed off into the darkness. Hermione, wanting to be safe, immediately set about putting up the same wards that had kept her, Harry, and Ron safe during the hunt. Even though she trusted the pixie, she wanted to be certain.

Hermione turned back around to see Luna falling to her knees before the fruit.

"It's covered in Boozlewumps!" Luna cried in joy as she plucked one from the bush. "That means it really is safe to eat!"

Hermione didn't know what Boozlewumps were, but she was bloody hungry. She dashed over and set into a piece of the fruit herself. The taste was divine, exploding on her tastebuds as though it was everything she ever needed. She wasn't sure how long they could survive on fruit and water alone, but they didn't have any other choice. They had to stay.

They remained in the Underhill for three entire months. It seemed that even though time passed normally inside the space, the weather did not. It was winter, and yet it was not cold. The pixie never came back, but Hermione didn't want to think the worst, so she simply didn't think about it.

The small pool of fresh water never seemed to empty and the few times they'd heard Snatchers nearby, they always turned around. It wasn't difficult to transfigure leaves into books that Hermione had memorized front-to-back from school, so they had plenty to do. They used Transfiguration for everything, making anything from beds to blankets to a large tub to bathe in using auguamenti and incendio. It was comfortable and indulgent and all they could do. She felt fortunate that she hadn't lost her wand, but terrible at the fact that Neville could be lost or worse.

The bush replenished itself every time they ate all of the fruit off of it, leaving them full and satiated after just two fruits per day. Hermione could tell that it had some sort of magical property that provided them with all of the necessary nutrients to be healthy and strong.

In fact, Hermione felt better in the Underhill than she had in a long time.

Hermione and Luna discussed leaving multiple times, but couldn't seem to decide which direction to go when they did. What if Voldemort had taken over all of Scotland already? What if even the Muggles were under his control? If Hermione's memory of the maps she'd studied were correct, the next wizarding village over was Rumple. It had to be South of where they were, but they were nervous to leave the safety of the Underhill and discover that they were walking into a trap.
But nothing lasts forever, regardless of fear and worry.

Towards the beginning of the fourth month, the bush stopped producing fruit.

"This must be what the pixie was talking about," Hermione said the morning they woke up to only two fruits. They seemed like parting gifts from the Underhill. "Time has run out."

Luna nodded. "Then... We'll have to leave. There's no other option."

"To Rumple?" Hermione asked.

Luna agreed, and they were off.

They made it to Rumple after two days' trek, only having to Disillusion themselves from Snatchers once.

The town was small, but large enough for them to hide in-between buildings and stay on the move while they figured out what to do. They were ravenously hungry as well, so they could tell that time was running out.

Until they struck gold.

At the end of the day, an old witch spotted them outside the back of her small apothecary. She'd known who Hermione was on the spot. After a brief moment where Hermione had to pull her wand on her, the old witch explained that she was a friend of Dumbledore's, and that her name was Mika Wigglesby. Half-starved and parched, Hermione and Luna had been forced to make another insanely risky decision.

They followed her into the apothecary, and to the apartment above the shop.

After some tense discussion, Hermione and Luna were finally able to relax.

She had a portrait of Dumbledore hanging on the wall in her home, and his depiction spoke to them. They'd both immediately burst into tears and sagged against one another on the floor. When Mika then showed them a copy of the Prophet that had an entire page in it dedicated to members of Dumbledore's Army that were on the Undesirable list, with Luna and Hermione's names near the top, she'd realized.

There was nowhere to go.

Mika showed them a room that they could share and for the first time in months, Luna and Hermione slept soundly with their fingers intertwined.

February 2000

Together, the three of them lived in the safety of Rumple for an entire year.

A whole year of Hermione's life spent trying to balance grief, forgiveness, and acceptance. Things that she was never able to manage, forcing herself to bundle the emotions up and stuff them deep into boxes inside of herself. She couldn't allow herself to be weak, not when Luna was counting on her to be a leader and keep her safe.

Mika's flat above her shop was small and neat. Hermione and Luna never left the flat just in case
someone betrayed them, so Mika brought them whatever they needed, like sweets and books. She sewed them clothes, cooked them hearty meals, and in the evenings, they played games.

In the beginning, Hermione asked for the paper.

She watched the headlines as the Dark Lord took over the United Kingdom, starting in the South and working his way upward. The entire town seemed to realize that one day, he might make it to Rumple, but no one seemed to have any idea what to do about it. The anxiety of watching the list of Undesirables get shorter and shorter got the best of Hermione - the inability to find out if the names were disappearing due to death or capture - and she stopped reading the paper at all. She lived in denial, and they called it peace.

Until the false peace shattered.

The Dark Lord’s army swarmed the streets of Rumple in the middle of the night, masked Death Eaters burning down everything in their path. The entire town was loyal to Dumbledore, and that was unforgivable in Voldemort’s eyes. They broke into the apothecary, and Mika woke them moments later in a panicked frenzy. Smoke filled the flat.

The shop was on fire.

Mika pushed a pouch of Muggle pounds and galleons, a package of vittles, and a knitted sock Portkey into their hands. The last image Hermione had of her as they twisted out of sight was Mika's wrinkled face streaked with tears and soot.

Hermione and Luna landed outside the Muggle city of Glasgow in their pyjamas, staring at one another in a state of pure shock and horror.

It had been two years since the Dark Lord took everything from them. Luna had no idea where her father was. Hermione knew she would never see her parents again. They had lost Harry, Ron, Neville, and countless other friends. The Undesirables list was likely getting shorter, the headlines worsening.

When would things get better?

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Six

Out of the Frying Pan - Nobuo Uematsu and Evening Hymn - Hans Andre Stamm

It had been one month and one week since Hermione arrived at the Malfoy Manor.

She felt like it had been so much longer. When she tried to think back to what she had been through before she got here, her memories seemed to be hazy and distant. They evaded her in waking and attacked her in dreams, filling her with inescapable grief that always seemed to make her feel heavy when she woke in the morning. She knew it was March, yet it felt like she existed outside of space and time itself.

Mika . . . Luna . . . The pixie . . . They felt like pieces to a large puzzle that would devastate her when it was complete. A puzzle made of memories that she had forgotten on purpose.

She didn't want to complete the puzzle.

Hermione spent the day after the big Lucius-Draco Library Showdown following her routine. She dressed in a long A-line skirt and a white tee with sleeves, left her hair loose, and headed down the stairs in her everyday slippers. Then came breakfast, brewing, and dosing. Draco was in the lab that morning, but he seemed so absorbed in his notes and tinkering with his brew that she didn't say a word to him. He left a little while after she arrived, making only the tiniest sound and clutching
his arm as he walked out of the room.

She wondered who the Dark Lord wanted him to kill this time, or if he just wanted to *crucio* him until he figured it out.

It was a cloudy day and much too gloomy to spend extra time in the tea room without depressing herself, so she decided to go into one of the Manor's two sitting rooms, which was across the corridor from the library. There were only two big windows and all she had to do was draw the heavy curtains and call for Teensy to light the lanterns and fireplace.

Hermione read texts all day, continuing to traipse back and forth from the library with books on Dark Arts and Dark potion making. She skimmed through book after book, not finding anything at all about the rare moonflowers. Skipping lunch, she threw herself full-force into her research.

The moonflowers were still sitting on the windowsill in the lab, and she hadn't the slightest clue what their longevity was once plucked. She knew *nothing* about them, beyond the fact that they were rare and potent. Fortunately, that particular section of the library had over one hundred books in it, so she was certain to find something eventually.

Instead of taking dinner in the tea room by herself like she usually did, she decided to have Teensy bring it to her where she was at. She didn't really feel like getting up out of the comfortable armchair, nor moving away from the warm fire, so eating her meal off of the end table was best.

She had just marked her place in her book so she could really start tucking into her food, when Draco strolled in. She looked up at him with a mouthful of salad, her legs curled up beneath her and the book perched on the side of her thigh. She blinked.

"Granger," he said. He wore a black blazer, tie, and button-up, and his hair was scraped back away from his forehead. His trousers were black and his shoes looked much too expensive to be worn in the house.

Though, it *was* Malfoy Manor, and he *was* Draco Malfoy. She supposed she should expect nothing less than the most expensive clothing from him. She supposed between seeing him exercising shirtless and in trackies, living in the same house as him for two months, she'd grown used to seeing his casual side.

She chewed and swallowed. Things had been more than tense, if not volatile, between the two of them for the past few days. She wasn't sure if he was here to talk, banter, or have it out.

"Malfoy," she said. "Not eating dinner?"

"I'm not hungry tonight," he said, plopping down in the armchair across from her. He rested one elbow on the arm, propping his chin on the pad of his thumb. He curled the fingers of that hand in front of his mouth and gazed into the fire. A lock of his platinum hair fell forward.

"How are your potion modifications progressing?" she asked, feeling obligated to make small talk, even if only for just a minute or two.

He grunted and did not look away from the fire.

She raised one eyebrow. "On what scale should I measure that grunt? Numerical? Or a scale of horrid to Master Potioneer?"

At this, he did allow his eyes to swivel towards her. "Can I have one day without your cheek? Or do you have an inherently poor attitude?"
Hermione ducked her head to take a bite of her food, leaning over the arm of her chair to keep from spilling anywhere but on the plate. She fought the urge to smirk.

"It's not inherent, but every day, I make a choice to do the right thing and make you miserable."

"The right thing?" He scoffed. "Brat."

"Prat," she shot back. "It's what you deserve."

"What I deserve?" He dropped his hand and shot her an incredulous look. "And what have I done?"

She finally allowed herself to smirk while spearing more food on the tines of her fork. "Where shall I start? During Second Year, I insulted your ego and you called me the 'M' word. You've insulted my hair, my teeth, my looks. I've got plenty more examples of your prattery committed to memory, but I'm getting revenge on those first. I had to use potions on my hair and spells on my teeth for years."

He watched her as though bored, putting his chin in his hand. "You are the most bizarre person."

Her fork froze in midair and she glared at him. "I'm bizarre? Malfoy, you have a dragon hidden in the forest. In case you weren't aware, dragons are the most dangerous magical creatures in the entire world. If that's not bizarre, I don't know what is."

"Me being bizarre doesn't negate you being bizarre, too." His lips curved up into a smirk to rival her earlier one. "So I guess we're both bizarre. You just happen to be the worse-looking of the two of us."

Hermione let her fork drop to the plate with a clatter. "That's not funny. You're so rude."

His smirk split into a genuine, amused grin. He bit his lower lip, seeming to debate something for a second. When he spoke, she realized why he'd debated saying it.

"Either you're an Animagus, or the potions and spells didn't work, because you still look like a beaver."

He was laughing before the words had even left his infuriating lips.

Hermione felt her anger hit her like a speeding spell. She grabbed her book and hopped to her feet, lurching toward him. She brandished the book like a weapon, lifting her chin and glowering down at him. He was such a prat, and she had no idea why she allowed herself to think that he was in any way normal at all, ever.

"Relax!" he chuckled, and then he couldn't seem to stop laughing. "Relax, I'm only joking. Salazar, fuck. I'm only joking! Put it down, you barmy witch!"

"Then why are you still laughing?!" She raised her book higher above her head, ready to eviscerate him with a heavy chunk of literature. "Malfoy, shut up, or this book is meeting your stupid, bloody face!"

She wished her parents hadn't been dentists. She was too aware of how perfectly straight and white his teeth were. She was really starting to tire of her traitorous eyes, or mind, or body - whatever it was that kept causing her to notice aspects of his appearance that she had never noticed before. He was still laughing at his own joke, tears collecting in his eyes as he held one hand up in a defensive position. Hermione prepared to drop it right on top of his head.
"I hope I'm not interrupting your . . . Game."

A new voice.

Hermione gasped, her body jolting with shock. She dropped the book on accident. It bounced off of the arm of Draco's chair, tumbling to the floor.

A man stood there. One that she did not recognize, but whose voice was a dead giveaway as to who he was. He had sandy red hair, a shrewd, mousy face with a large nose and forehead, and ink-black eyes. Clad in black dress robes, he stood tall and imposing in the hall.

Amicus Carrow.

*What would a slave do? Oh, what would a sodding slave do?* A moment like this had been coming for weeks, and Lucius knew it. Hermione and Draco had never discussed anything, but she hoped that he would understand and know what she was doing.

One second after Hermione realized who he was, she dropped to her knees on the floor beside the chair and lowered her eyes to the ground.

*Don't look scared,* she thought, her heart beating so fast that it was a wonder she was conscious. *Whatever you do, don't look scared.*

Was Draco going to play along?

Sweat clammed her palms. She curled them into fists on her thighs. *Please play along. Please, please play -*

Draco's hand dropped to the top of her head and began to comb through her hair in slow, measured movements. The scraping of his nails against her scalp was a little overwhelming, causing her eyelids to flutter, but she made sure not to move or make a sound.

*Thank Merlin,* she thought.

Hopefully it would be enough to trick Carrow.

"Evening, Carrow," Draco said, his tone polite. "Are you here with my father? Where is he?"

Carrow took a step forward in a sweep of robes, into the sitting room. "He is in his study, I presume. And yes, I am here to meet with him. Amongst other reasons."

Draco fingered one of Hermione's curls. She felt his eyes on her face. "And you're here bothering me . . . Why?"

Carrow said nothing for a long second. Hermione did not dare lift her gaze to see his facial expression. She heard a couple more footsteps.

"For your information, I am here on assignment from the Dark Lord." At this, Hermione felt queasy. "He grows tired of your slow progress on his potion, and he has some suspicions about what you're doing with your time. I can see that your . . . Games . . . Are more interesting to you than your work."

Draco wrapped one curl around his finger, the picture of indifference. He looked at Hermione, studying her like a painting. She tried not to blush. As impervious as she was to a lot of things, being stared at was not one of them.
"And why on Earth would the Dark Lord send his executioner to see if his potioneer is brewing?" Draco's tone was snide. "This late in the evening, no less."

Carrow's rapid-fire response flew into the room. "Just in case you weren't doing your job."

There was silence.

Hermione clenched her teeth. She couldn't figure out which was the truth. Was Carrow here on the Dark Lord's assignment? Or was he here to snoop, like Draco believed he was last time? Either way, they were fucked.

Carrow had seen her face.

"I had thought that it would be disturbing before, but I didn't think I would feel quite as horrified as I do now," Carrow said as he walked further into the room. Hermione saw his boots and the hem of his robes come into view. "You have taken a slave that has been on the Dark Lord's Undesirables list for over five years. And your father supports this?"

"My father makes no decisions for me," Draco quipped, tangling his fingers in a large mass of Hermione's hair. An involuntary shiver ran down her spine. "I am twenty-two years old, Carrow."

Carrow scoffed and sat down in the chair, uninvited. Hermione knew that if he truly was here to meet with Lucius, he would not be sitting down. If he was truly here on assignment for the Dark Lord and had just discovered an Undesirable, he would be pressing his wand to his Dark Mark - not sitting down. Judging by his words and Hermione's ability to put things together, she knew what was going on.

He'd been curious to see who Draco Malfoy's slave was and had come up with a false excuse to come back and see. Now, he was here, and they were fucked.

"You give your slave clothing?" Carrow asked. "And you eat together outside of the dining room? Draco, this is reprehensible behavior."

Hermione couldn't stop herself. She looked up quickly, just to see his expression.

He was sneering down at her.

Her gaze darted back down.

"I'm entitled to do with my property as I please in the confines of my own home, am I not?" Draco said. "Perhaps I prefer to keep her untouched by eyes other than my own, Carrow."

"Yes, well . . . The Dark Lord would be most displeased to know that you have taken Harry Potter's Mudblood as your slave. How long have you possessed it? How long have you been lying to our king?"

"Don't give me that Thestral shite," Draco snarled, the suddenness of his anger causing Hermione's shoulders to jump. His fingers twitched in her hair and for a moment, she worried he might accidentally pull it. "If you cared about that, you would have gone straight back to the Floo. Yet you've gone so far as to sit down in a chair and ask me questions. If you're here to meet with my father, go meet with him. If you're here to check on the potion, then we can go to the lab immediately. However if you're here because there's something you want, then spit it out. Which is it?"

The silence, broken only by the crackling of the hearty fire behind Hermione's back, was so...
uncomfortable that Hermione had to count her breaths to ensure she was still taking them. She wanted to look up so badly, to see the decisions flickering across Carrow's face, but something inside of her told her it wasn't something a "slave" would do a second time.

Draco’s fingers drifted through her hair all the while, tethering her to the smallest foundation she'd ever stood on. Part of her thought he was too familiar with her, if he was so easily able to touch her like this. But she knew it was better that he touch her in some way, than in no way.

"Let's not toss a Snitch back and forth for fun, Carrow," Draco said into the quiet. "What do you want?"

"As if I would want to spare even a moment of my precious time for a Mudblood," Carrow said in a very snide tone. His watery eyes and wheezing voice combined in Hermione's mind to create a caricature - someone who if she were still a teenager, she might have laughed at.

"Then leave."

"Oh, I will be." Carrow stood in an abrupt manner. "But first . . . How am I to know that you truly have taken it as a slave? You've offered no proof as to that fact, nor have you explained why you would not tell the Dark Lord. As head executioner, I believe it is my duty to report this back to him should I find your answer . . . Insufficient."

Hermione felt the tension. If Carrow didn't want something, he would be leaving. This little "visit" was not sanctioned by the Dark Lord, and that was so painfully obvious that it was almost funny. Carrow was not a strategist. He was an opportunist. He'd acted on suspicion and come to the Manor to see what he could dig up.

It was unfortunate that there was something to dig up.

But what the Hell could Draco offer to rectify this? Hermione wasn't his slave.

Her stomach churned. She hoped this wasn't going to end badly. She didn't want to know the worst that Carrow could ask for.

"I owe you no explanations," Draco said, his hand closing around the back of her neck in a gentle manner. She shivered again. "Finding something you covet has no restrictions. I've had my eyes on her since the moment the Dark Lord returned and told us what he imagined for his regime. The Undesirables list has always been hundreds-strong. She may be near the top, but she is mine."

Hermione felt chills running all over her body. Something about the way Draco said that, his voice getting stronger and stronger, hearing the wicked smile in his voice at the end of the sentence. Why did it feel like it was a little too easy for him to play along?

Something else piqued her curiosity. Where Carrow had referred to her as an "it," Draco had referred to her as a "her." Would Carrow notice?

Carrow cleared his throat. "I need time to consider this, and to think about my response."

Draco said, "And what, I just sit here at the Manor, spin my wand, and wait to see if you've decided to speak to the Dark Lord?"

". . . You're asking me to lie to the Dark Lord for you, Draco Malfoy." Carrow's tone was dark and dangerous. "You're asking me to commit treason."

Draco laughed through his nose for a moment. Hermione just knew he was smirking. "Don't
pretend you're here under any other volition than your own. The Dark Lord does not know the reason why you're here. He has not sent you to check on my potion. You are here to snoop and now that you have the information you seek, you think you have all of the power."

Hermione's brow furrowed. That sounded horrid. That sounded like everything was going to fall apart, and Carrow was the one in power.

What was Draco playing at?

Draco's hands wrapped around a large clump of her curls and, without warning, he dragged Hermione to her feet. She gasped, her eyes smarting as he pulled her stumbling towards his lap.

"Sit, Mudblood," he ordered.

*What is the purpose of this?* Hermione thought, her heart pounding wild, wild, wild in her chest. *What is he doing?*

Draco yanked on her hair, pulling her back until her knees buckled. She let out a soft cry of shock as his knee slid between her legs. Her back bowed, the pain causing her to sit down straddling his leg, the hem of her skirt lifting all the way up to expose her thighs. He pulled back further, until her head was on his shoulder, and then he nuzzled his nose against her cheek. Another chill rent her body.

Carrow watched with narrowed eyes and promptly sat back down.

*Why is he doing this to me?!* Hermione could feel unbridled rage running rampant through her body. She didn't like the way this felt. Feet flat against the floor, she wanted to use them to push up, so that his thigh wasn't in such a private area, but he was holding her with too much strength. Her scalp ached from the force and so she was forced to sag back against him. She placed her hands around the arms of the chair, digging her fingernails in to control her urge to slap at his face.

This was not what she wanted. This was not what she wanted at all.

"You see, Carrow," Draco said, the tenor of his voice hissing into Hermione's ear. "You have no power. Because I know exactly what you've been doing in the dungeons with the prisoners. I know exactly what you've been trying to hide."

Through eyes half-lidded from her own ire, Hermione saw Carrow's facial expression fall a fraction. Whatever Draco was referencing, it was not what Carrow had expected.

"What do you think the Dark Lord would say if he knew, hm?" Draco said, his attention on Hermione but his words directed across the room. "What do you think he would say if he knew that you were sneaking down to the backmost cell and having your way with -"

"*Enough,*" Carrow bellowed. In the wake of Draco's dark chuckling, Carrow whispered, "*Enough.*"

Draco let go of Hermione's hair, leaving behind a faint throbbing in her skull. Before she could think to move, he had placed his hand on her abdomen, pinning her in place with her back flush to his chest. She schooled her facial expression as far from anger and as close to blank as she could. As furious as she was with him, she had to make it look like Carrow was the barmy one for not believing Draco's claims. She had to play the part of an obedient slave.

She dug her nails even further into the chair's upholstery.

"I am here out of personal concern for your well-being." Carrow adjusted the skirts of his robes.
"My worry increases by the day, as you seem to grow more and more disenfranchised with the work that the Dark Lord has asked you to do. I've seen you misstep many times, Draco Malfoy. The Dark Lord tired of your incessant failures, that much is certain. I may be here without his knowledge, but I have personally witnessed his disillusionment with the false persona you present. Cold-hearted assassin? I think not. He has to *crucio* you just to get you to tip the vial."

Draco's hand pressed firmer to Hermione's abdomen, his fingers plucking at the hem of her shirt. She tried not to flinch. "And where have you seen these supposed failures, Carrow? At court, where my father is the Dark Lord's second most-trusted confidant, next to only Nagini? Or do they lie somewhere between the countries the Dark Lord has been able to successfully take over because of my potions?"

At the reminder of the snake's name, Hermione's ears perked up. Nagini. The Horcrux that Neville wasn't able to destroy.

Carrow fidgeted with his robes again. From Hermione's point-of-view, Carrow believed something that wasn't true. Draco's place in the Dark Lord's eyes was secure, based purely upon the fact that he had that shelf of poisons. The one with the power in this situation was Draco, even if Carrow knew Hermione was here.

"Every country -"

"Every country under the Dark Lord's power belongs to him because of me, Carrow. Scotland, Ireland, Greece, Lithuania, France . . . *Finland.*" Draco cut him off, sitting forward. To keep Hermione from falling, he held her even tighter. It felt uncomfortable and too warm, all at the same time. "You can tell the Dark Lord she is here, but when I explain to him how much I coveted the ability to claim her and control her since Hogwarts? I promise you, he'll understand. What he won't understand is why you're fucking the prisoners in secret, without his permission."

Hermione squirmed internally. Ireland and France and Scotland . . . Who had Draco killed? Which of her friends had died as a result of Death Eater and werewolf attacks in countries where Draco had poisoned their magical leaders?

She pushed the feelings back into the place she'd locked them into. She didn't want to think about it. She didn't want to analyze it.

Draco was a murderer. If she was living with the man who had directly caused the deaths of her friends? Then she was no better.

She couldn't live with that.

Carrow coughed and when he spoke, his voice had lost its edge to meekness. "Your throne has remained unoccupied for quite some time, Draco. I'd be careful, if I were you. I wouldn't want to see someone take it from you."

Draco sat back again, his hand sliding up closer to Hermione's diaphragm. His other hand propped his chin up as he regarded Carrow in his nonchalant amusement.

"No one will be taking anything from me. The Dark Lord needs me for more than just my ability to tip a vial. You and I both know that."

Carrow's glare was losing heat, faltering by the moment as Draco's words began to sink in. The tension was moving, morphing to wrap around him. He stared into the fire. It was clear that he'd been bested. He had not expected the conversation to go this way.
Hermione adjusted herself again, the feeling of Draco's leg almost bruising against her tailbone. His hand shifted in warning, pressing hard enough to push the breath out of her chest. She gritted her teeth.

She was so cross with him, it wasn't the slightest bit humorous.

"So," Carrow finally said, "you know - and have known - what I've been up to. And now, I know what you've been up to. However, I think your secret is a bit less believable than mine. The great Hermione Granger, slave to a Pureblood wizard? I don't think so."

The ball of tension was back on Draco's side of the Pitch. Hermione felt the beating of her heart slowly increasing again. It was exhausting. The fear, the anger, the confusion . . . The complicated storm of emotions was overwhelming her. It almost felt easier to lean into Draco and let him control the narrative.

"You don't believe she's mine?" Draco said, voice quiet. Amused. Defensive.

Carrow raised one eyebrow.

And then Draco's hand slipped under her shirt. His fingers trailed upward along her ribcage. They brushed the wire of her brassiere.

They slipped beneath it and froze there.

She nearly jumped to her feet. Tears of rage glittered in her eyes. She regretted leaning into him. He was more than a prat. He was foul.

"Surely you don't expect me to reduce what remains of the great Hermione Granger's honor to nothing," Draco said.

Carrow pursed his lips.

"You want me to fuck her right here, in front of you?" Draco let out an incredulous laugh, ignorant to the fact that his words made Hermione want to scream.

Her mind went on a horrifying tangent. What if none of this was a ruse for Carrow? What if the entire situation was a trick for her? What if Draco's words were true, and his intention with bringing her here to the Manor was to own her? What if this conversation with Carrow was only a taste of what was to come for her?

What power did she have to stop it, if so?

"It would . . . Enlighten me as to the . . ." Carrow wet his lips and his gaze fell to Hermione's chest. "Validity of your claims."

She felt nauseous. An ache had begun in her throat.

So this was why Carrow had come. Any slave that belonged to the Dark Lord's trusted assassin was covetable. The fact that Draco's "slave" had turned out to be Hermione was only an added benefit.

"No," Draco said, and the amusement had left his tone. "Absolutely not. What's mine is mine, for my eyes only. You need to leave."

They stared at one another, each one holding part of the tension in their hands.
Carrow was the first to balk. It was clear who had won this battle of wits and words. He cleared his throat and reached up to pull on the hood of his robes.

"We can discuss this later. Until then, provided you keep my secret, then yours is safe with me until such a time as we can speak again."

Draco started to reply, but then, Lucius entered from the hall. His gaze zeroed in on Draco, who was quick to withdraw his hand from Hermione's shirt. He rested it on her hip, keeping her firmly seated.

"Father," he greeted.

"What's going on here, Draco?" Lucius said, a small smile twisting up on his face. In his eyes, Hermione could see the fury towards Draco boiling there. His tone was sharp and clipped. "I was not aware that Amycus was to be gracing us with his presence this evening. And so soon after the last visit."

"Of course you weren't," Draco replied, tone smooth as water over ice. "Amycus was here on business."

"Yes," Carrow said, gaze lingering on Hermione. "Business that will be tabled until a later date."

Lucius took a step forward, his hands positioned behind his back. "Son . . . Why is your pet on display?"

There was electricity in the air between the Malfoy men.

"Why don't you run along to bed, Mudblood?" Draco said, his hand sliding up her side. He looked up at her, and she glared down at him. In his eyes, she saw nothing that she could understand, and she didn't care.

She hoped he knew how much she despised him right now.

"Yes, Master," she hissed, and then she was on her feet as fast as humanly possible. She hurried across the room, trying not to cringe as she passed Carrow.

"Straight to bed, insect," Lucius said the moment she reached him.

Hermione paused, glowering up at him through her lashes. She grabbed either side of her skirt, crossed her ankles, and curtsied.

"Right away, sir."

She walked past him, ignoring the way his lip curled at her cheekiness. But she didn't care. She hated him and she hated Draco right now. She would be going straight to her room and locking her door.

"I shall see you both at court," was the last thing she heard Carrow say before hearing both the crack of Apparition and the creak of the sitting room doors being swung shut.

Hermione hoped Lucius screamed at him.

Draco attempted to speak to her thirty minutes after she went to her room.

"Granger?" came his voice through the door.
She sat at her vanity and furiously ran a comb through her curls, gathering them in clumps and starting from the bottom. She shot continuous glares at the door. She could just imagine him, standing there by the door with his stupid hands in his stupid pockets, with his stupid hair falling into his stupid eyes.

Hopefully, he felt apologetic. She just wasn't going to accept it.

"Granger, don't be so bloody weird about it."

"Would you have done it, then?" she called, her hands shaking from how cross she was.

"Done what?"

"Done . . . Would you have . . ." She let out an exasperated scowl and yelled, "Would you have done what you said and used me like that in front of him?"

"Oh, you mean when I asked him . . . ?" He sighed. "Granger."

"No!" she cried, alarmed. "Answer the bloody question!"

He growled, sounding frustrated. "It's not that simple."

Hermione dropped her comb and stared at the door in horror. "What part of raping me is not that simple?!"

"Salazar, fucking bloody Hell, Granger!" he yelled, and she heard him pounding against the door once. "That isn't what I meant! Of course I wouldn't have - I would never - Come on!"

"How far would you have gone?" she shouted, stomping over to the door. Her hand hovered over the lock.

He sighed again. "I told you I don't want to hurt you, and I meant it. Now, can you open the door?"

"No! Tell me, now. How far?!

". . . As far as it took to save both of our skins. You know that," he said.

"Then I hope . . ." She took a deep breath and screamed, "you get eaten by a bloody Hippogriff!"

There was a second of silence and then she heard him laughing out of mirthless hysteria, muttering to himself, and then his voice fading. Overcome with unbridled rage, she finally threw the latch and twisted the knob, pulling the door open. She poked her head out into the hall.

Draco stood at the top of the stairs, one hand on the banister. He turned to glare over his shoulder at her. A House Elf was nearby, dusting a statuette. Hermione narrowed her eyes to slits and held his glare with one sharper.


She slammed the door shut.

Draco tried to apologize in his own way the morning after Carrow's surprise visit.

When she walked into the potions laboratory, she was greeted by the sight of not only a brand new, clean wooden table and matching stool, but also a cauldron that she would only have dreamed of
owning at Hogwarts. In the center of the smooth, shiny surface of the table sat one jar. One jar that was full to the brim with mushrooms.

Hermione's eyes widened in excitement and she dashed over to the new accommodations. She picked up the mushroom jar and twisted off the lid, reaching in to select one. She counted the spots on the stalk. Three. She picked up another. Three. Another and another. Three and three. She gasped.

He'd gone out and foraged for three-spotted mushrooms himself? Overnight?

She set the jar down, narrowing her eyes at the new things. She was still angry with him. These gifts were not replacements for the lack of consent that she'd been allotted. Yes, they'd been thrown into a bad situation and yes, he'd only touched the barest sliver of the underside of her breast, but that didn't negate her anger. It didn't cancel out the fact that she felt violated and overwhelmed. It didn't make her anger any less all-encompassing.

He could have helped her gather mushrooms before. He could have brought her a table and a cauldron at any point in time prior to the incident. Explanations and excuses were not apologies. It wasn't an apology unless you said the words, "I'm sorry."

When he walked in a few minutes later, she felt his gaze lingering on her back. She worked in silence and when she left to bring Narcissa her medicine, she did not say good-bye.

Hermione was not an angry person. She really wasn't.

She was firm, and she would always seek to do the right thing. She had fought in the war gladly and with eagerness. However, she was not at all an angry person.

Anger felt almost sickening to the touch, the way it scraped through her body and made her chest feel constricted while her heart felt swollen. It made her skin crawl when she just wanted to be able to take a deep, full breath. Being furious with Draco felt the same. He was the only person she had to interact with. The only piece of her past that she had left.

But not being angry at him felt like doing a disservice to herself and her self-respect.

Still, it made her feel tired. It took so much energy. Energy that she didn't possess. So, after a light luncheon in the tea room, she trudged upstairs to her bedroom for a nap. She locked the door and tumbled into bed.

When she woke, it was past dinnertime. Her hunger didn't matter, but Narcissa had to have her dose by 8:00PM. Scrambling for her slippers, she made a mad dash for the door. Unlocking it and throwing it open, she left the room . . .

. . . And tripped over a huge stack of books.

Groaning in pain, Hermione rolled over onto her rump to spare her carpet-scraped kneecaps. She looked at the stack. About ten books sat piled one on top of the other in order of largest-to-smallest, bottom-to-top. Her mouth hung open as she looked them over. They weren't all Muggle books, but every single one was similar to *Wuthering Heights*. Sweeping historical romance novels that Harry and Ron would have teased her for reading.

Hermione crawled forward and sat down beside the stack, picking up the top book. *Pride & Prejudice* by Jane Austen. One of her favorites. She wasn't sure how he knew it was her favorite, or if he had just guessed and hoped she would like it, but she smiled.
She supposed she wasn't *that* angry with him. It wasn't his fault that Carrow had come over. No one could have predicted that he would come by. Sure, there were always different choices that Draco could have made other than pulling her onto his lap and doing what he did. But in the grand scheme of what could have been done? Neither of them had known what to do; they'd just both shared a mutual silent agreement to pretend that she was his "slave."

When she really thought about it, it wasn't exactly him that she'd been angry at. She was more angry with herself for being too trusting and putting herself into these sorts of positions. She'd been doing it since First Year. Though, back then, her initial trust in Harry and Ron had been borne out of loneliness. Now, her trust in Draco was born out of convenience and the natural progression of time, rather than actual trust-building events.

Maybe she was overreacting.

Hermione gathered the books up and towed them into her bedroom. She bent her knees to lower them onto her bed. Her lips curved upward as she arranged them all in two flat, neat lines on the mattress. She ran her fingers over one of the books.

"*Hogwarts: A History,*" she said, reading the title aloud. It was her absolute favorite book.

There was no way he knew that. She knew for a fact he'd guessed that to be cheeky.

She marched down to the potions lab, limping slightly as her knees got used to their little carpet scrapes. She had decided that if he talked to her, she would talk to him. A new table and stool, new cauldron, the mushrooms, and now the books? She supposed that was enough for her to leave the door open for conversation.

He was in there when she arrived, working on his potion and notes as usual.

She cleared her throat as she entered, just so he would know she was there. She took her seat and began her brew, waiting for him to say something. She planned to talk to him and tell him why she'd been upset, and then thank him for the books. She particularly wanted to know what caused him to decide to get those particular Muggle books, and how he had known that historical romance novels were her favorite.

She waited.

And waited.

And waited.

He never said a word to her.

The longer the time stretched, the closer the clock got to 8:00. The closer the clock ticked towards 8:00, the angrier Hermione got.

He was really not going to speak to her? She wasn't angry anymore! And she hadn't done anything wrong, except to react to what he had done. Did he really think he was the one who got to control the conversation?

On her way out of the room with Narcissa's nightly dose, she peered at his back. He was hunched over the table, writing in his notes with furious speed. His cauldron was close to boiling over. She debated warning him, just in case he wasn't aware, but stopped herself.

Was it because she was Muggle-born?
Was he not speaking to her because she was Muggle-born, and he'd touched her skin and was now traumatized?

Well, if that was the case, he had some nerve. He could hold her hand walking her to a clearing and wrap his fingers around her throat when he had an angry outburst about being crucioted, but Merlin-forbid he touch a sliver of her breast.

What an absolute tosser.

Turning on her heel, angry all over again, Hermione left the lab.

She took her dinner in her room that night and sat on the floor below her window seat. With each bite she took, she glared more fiercely at the books on her bed.

Who did he think he was, feeling traumatized by her blood status? If he was so disgusted by her, then why couldn't he have thought of some other way to prove a point to Carrow? Rather than pulling her onto his lap and doing what he did?

She lay in bed, pouting up at the ceiling and seething. What were they supposed to do? Just not speak at all ever, just because she was Muggle-born? There was no way in Merlin's hut that she was going to accept that he was that sickened by her, and no way that she was going to let him believe she agreed with his childhood self that Muggle-born magical folk were less valuable than Purebloods.

Hermione rolled over. She glanced up at the clock, high on the wall above her vanity, peering through the darkness. It was close to midnight. Draco would likely be going to see Calypso soon.

She could always sneak out and meet him. She could confront him. Merlin knew he deserved a confrontation. She agreed to come and help his mother, and having to endure being called a racial slur was painful enough. Did she really have to walk the halls of the Manor with the added weight of feeling bad about herself on top of everything she had endured this past five years?

Without stopping to think about it much longer, she threw her coverlet aside and rushed to her chiffarobe. She shrugged into her coat, shoved her feet into her boots without tying the laces, and rushed out of the room in her lavender pyjamas.

When she got down to the back door, there was still 10 minutes until midnight. She didn't know if he'd already walked by, but she figured she could wait by the door until he returned if he had. She slipped her hands into the pockets of her coat, leaned back against the door, and waited.

And waited.

And -

"Granger? What are you -"

The moment he approached her, Hermione leapt to action. She turned to face him, reaching for him. When she had a proper hold of his wrist, she held his hand up and pulled it forward. It slipped between the open sides of her coat.

With purpose, Hermione pinned his palm to her breast, the warmth of it seeping in through her pyjama blouse to her skin.

She huffed. "There."
His eyes bulged and brow furrowed. "What the actual *fuck* are you on about?"

When he tried to pull his hand back, she placed her other hand over it, using both to hold him in place. She glared up at him.

"*There.* It's not so bad, is it?"

He stared at her chest, eyes wild, and then at her.

"Let go of my hand," he finally said, trying to escape her.

"Not until you admit the truth!" she cried.

"*What* truth?" He shook his head and then frowned at her. "Are you sozzled? Did the elves give you wine?"

"No!" She scowled and then let go of his hand.

He immediately retracted it and took a step back from her. They glared at one another.

"Is your hand covered in mud?" she asked, crossing her arms over her chest and pulling a sour face.

He blinked and raised his eyebrows. "*What?*

"You haven't spoken to me all day!" she yelled.

"Hush!" he growled, throwing a surreptitious glance over his shoulder.

Before she could say anything further, he moved forward, wrapping his arm around her side and pushing on her lower back. She could feel it through layers of fabric. She turned on instinct, allowing herself to be shoved out of the back door and outside. He shut it behind them and then looked down at her.

"I thought you were still angry with me," he hissed. "That's why I didn't speak to you, you bloody idjit."

"And I thought that you were traumatized by the fact that you had to touch the skin of a Muggle-born!" she retorted.

"*No,* you silly bint! Are you not angry anymore?" His brows met.

She gave him a once-over. "I guess not. Are you not traumatized?"

"No."

The two of them stared at one another, drawing their shoulders back as they both inhaled deeply at the same time. Hermione felt heat rising to her cheeks.

*I just made Draco Malfoy touch my chest for absolutely no reason.*

She was grateful for the darkness, and even more grateful that it was a new moon. Starlight was by no means enough to notice she was blushing.

"Do you," he said through clenched teeth, "want to come with me to see Callie?"

She passed the back of her hand across her nose, feeling light headed from how mortified she was.
"Yes."

"Fine," he said.

"Fine," she said.

"Then . . . Let's go."

"Let's."

They stared at one another for another moment, and then together, they set off across the grass.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

I just want to thank you guys for the sudden influx of love! Please don't forget to check out my website to join the Facebook group where we fangirl, and also to get the playlist on Youtube for this story!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Counting the Stars

Chapter Seven

Macalania Woods - Masashi Hamauzu, A Bit of Happiness - Yuki Kajiura, and Ten Thousand - Emilie & Ogden

Much to Hermione's chagrin, she tripped three times.

The first time she tripped, it was over a tree root in the darkness. She was able to play it off with a loud cough. The second time she tripped, it was because she stumbled against the back of Draco's feet. It was too dark to tell if he glared at her for that. The third and final time she tripped, it was because she hadn't tied her boots. She would have fallen flat on her face if it weren't for Draco.
turning and catching her with his arm curved around the front of her ribcage.

"Oof," she breathed as the force propelled her to slam into the crease of his elbow. "Merlin's beard, it's like you can see in the dark."

"I can," he said, moving away from her. "I always cast a charm, before I ever leave my bedroom."

"Really?" She looked in the general direction of his voice, but it was darker even than it had been the other time she'd come out here with him.

"You say that as if you're surprised I thought to do such a thing."

"I am."

"Granger," he said, sounding annoyed. "You were the Brightest Witch of Our Age. Not the Only Bright Witch to Ever Exist. Come here."

She started to respond, but the feeling of his hand wrapping around her own silenced her. Just like last time, he kept a tight hold on it as he tugged her through the darkness of the forest. Her cheeks were as hot as coals as he strode with purpose and she stumbled through the loam underfoot. She was holding the same hand that had just been on her chest by the Manor. She could still feel it against her skin, like that breast was warmer than the other.

It had been over one month since she'd arrived at the Manor. Over one month, and she'd managed to get by without wanting to crawl into a hole and die. Now, she wanted to amend that thought.

They walked in silence, which was odd due to the fact that they'd just argued about not talking. Hermione didn't know what to talk about. It felt like they were not friends, yet she'd reacted to the situation with Carrow the same way she would have if she were angry with a friend. And thinking of herself as being anywhere close to friendly with Draco was just . . .


She felt the panic rising again. No. She couldn't think about this. She couldn't think about any of it. She pushed it back, fighting with her own desire to fall apart.

Draco's hand around her own felt like a vice. The sort that left her feeling guilt-ridden and full of self-hate. Because no matter which way she looked at the place she had reached in her life, she was friends with Draco Malfoy. She didn't know when it happened, nor why, but they were friends. The fact that she didn't like it didn't matter to the universe, to Merlin, to the Gods, or to the dark dimensions of space. She was his friend, even if he wasn't hers.

He was a murderer, and she was friends with him.

"Walk faster," he said, pulling her until she walked alongside him. Their arms brushed.

"It's not my fault you're as tall as a tree," she muttered.

"And it's not mine you're as short as a goblin."

She scoffed and shot him an offended look, forgetting that he could still see.

"Wipe that look off of your face, goblin."

"Oh, honestly, Malfoy!" she cried, stopping in her tracks.
"Will you knock it off, and just keep walking?"

He tugged her arm again, forcing her to have to keep up. She stomped her feet as she went, not caring if it made her seem less than mature. She supposed maturity didn't matter anymore. Not in this world.

"Salazar, you're such a little brat," he complained.

"And you're rude," she shot back. "Name-calling is rude."

"Thanks for letting me know, Prefect Granger." She could almost hear him rolling his eyes, his sarcasm was that overt. "Are you gonna take points away from Slytherin?"

Hermione felt something shifting in her heart, something painful. It reacted to the nostalgia in a visceral way that left her a bit breathless.

"Maybe," she said in a soft voice.

They walked for a while. Hermione allowed her thoughts to swim and swirl as freely as they could behind her emotional barriers. She let herself think of the parts of Hogwarts that hurt the least to remember, and then she sighed.

"Missing school?" Draco said. His boots crunched against a branch.

Hermione didn't reply.

"If it helps, I always miss it," he said.

She frowned. How could he miss the school? He must have hated it to have let the Death Eaters in the way he had. If it weren't for him, perhaps everything would be different.

Her frown deepened.

And here she was, walking to a clearing with him and holding his hand because she couldn't "see." The older version of herself would have rather tripped and crawled than accept his help. She would rather be anywhere other than the Manor. She would rather be on the run than lying her head on a satin pillow offered to her by a Malfoy.

She didn't know who she was anymore.

"How's your bruise?" he asked.

"It's healing," she said. "It doesn't hurt anymore."

"Hm." He paused and then said, "On the days that I go to administer his potion, perhaps it's best if you stay in your room in the evenings."

Her brow furrowed. "You mean . . . Instead of going to the lab?"

"Yeah."

Hermione looked up in his direction. "Are you certain? Who will give your mother her medicine?"

"I can. I'll make sure I'm home. You can brew it early, and then head to your room."

Hermione's mind raced. Why would he want her to stay in her room? Because of Carrow?
She looked up at him a second time, wishing that it wasn't dark so she could see what his facial expression revealed.

She highly doubted she was going to follow his orders, because she was herself, but she would humor him for a moment.

"How -" She almost tripped, but caught herself. "- come?"

He didn't answer for a minute. Longer than a minute.

"I don't . . . Know how to explain this, but . . . What Carrow said was partially true. The Dark Lord does curse me. However, it's not because I disobey him, or because I'm falling out of favor. He does it because he likes to do it."

Hermione's stomach churned with a whirlwind of emotions. Disgust at the Dark Lord. Confusion as to why Draco killed people if the Cruciatus was a guarantee whether he did it or not. Pity at the thought that Draco had to live his days out knowing he was going to be subjected to the curse at random intervals. Anger at herself for not feeling as perturbed by Draco's willingness to kill as she felt she should be. Understanding as she realized that there was a missing piece to the puzzle that was Draco and his role as a Death Eater.

If he was going to be **crucio**ed no matter if he removed people from the Dark Lord's path to power or not . . . Then what was his motive? There must be something that he was worried would happen if he didn't do what he was told. Something bad that would occur.

What had been his motive in the struggle to decide whether or not to kill Professor Dumbledore? What had been his motive in fixing the cupboard and letting the Death Eaters into Hogwarts? What had been his motive when he walked across the courtyard during the final battle and into his parents' arms?

"Malfoy?"

He pulled her out of the path of a jutted tree root. "Hm?"

"Why do you want me to go to my room on those days?"

He stopped walking and she stumbled against his side. His hold on her hand tightened and she felt the press of his metal rings against her skin. She could feel even in the dark that he was gazing down at her. So she tried to make sure her facial expression was sincere.

"So that I can't lose my temper with you again," he said in a soft voice, one that she almost couldn't hear. "Like last time."

Hermione walked the rest of the way at his side in a complete daze. He said not a single word more, and she kept her mouth sewn shut. Her thoughts were prancing about like Patronuses in her head, whispering different things to her as she processed the conversation. His hand felt cold in hers, when before it had felt warm, and she didn't know why.

As they neared the clearing, Hermione felt a pressure on her lungs. She needed to ask him now, or she might never know.

"Who are you protecting?"

He stopped at the willow branches. She saw his head lower in the faint light coming from the starlit clearing.
"You already know."

He entered the glade. Hermione hesitated a moment as the last piece was put in place. The puzzle finally became clear.

Slytherins were extremely loyal. Pay a favor to one, and that Slytherin would lay their life down. The reason why Draco debated killing the Dark Lord, fixed the cupboard, endured the curse, and followed the Dark Lord's orders was because he was protecting the people he considered family.

Hermione had been in the Manor for only a little over one month, and he already considered her family.

She realized now that his real answer to her question was, "You."

Heart racing, she entered the clearing.

Calypso bounded towards her, her long tail whipping about like a rope. Her razor-sharp teeth glinted in the bluish glow of the stars, and her eyes glittered like sapphires. She wove in and out of Hermione's legs, her horned head bumping in her rear and causing her to take a couple of steps forward.

Hermione's jaw dropped. "She's as big as a wolf now!"

"Yeah," Draco said, the somber mood lifting with the rise of his smile. "Dragons grow extremely fast, apparently. When I got her, she was the size of an egg. Now, here we are."

"I had read that they had a long lifespan, but I never read anything about the length of time between childhood and maturity." Hermione sank to her knees and hugged the very enthusiastic Calypso around the neck. "At this rate, she'll be full grown by the end of the year!"

Draco's smile faded. "We'll... Cross that bridge when we come to it. Won't we, Callie?"

Calypso was away from Hermione like a flash of blue lightning, her scales shining and reflecting the stars as she streaked back over to Draco. He knelt to meet her, finding himself flat on his back in the moss and grass.

Hermione looked across the clearing at the stream and the pool. "She's going to need a much bigger pool."

"Yeah," Draco replied before laughter overtook him. Calypso had rolled onto her side and was pushing her nose into his armpit. Apparently, Draco was ticklish.

Hermione stifled a giggle. She stood there with her hands in her coat pockets, watching them play.

Draco was a completely different person around Calypso, that much she could tell just from looking at him. It was like the moon lit him from within, spreading out along the planes of his face and making his eyes go from a dull grey to a vibrant silver. All the exercise he got during the day enabled him to be able to handle it when Calypso plopped down on top of him, or leapt into his lap or arms. He laughed, which was odd to see already because it was so rare.

Sometimes, Hermione wished she had the ability to laugh so freely and without guilt.

"It's so interesting," she said.

"What?" Draco panted, lifting his head from the ground. There was moss collecting in his hair and
Calypso was stretched out horizontally over his midriff. She crooned and looked at Hermione with what she could only describe as the face of a very happy dragon. The shimmer of the substance of her wings was enthralling.

"I said, it's so interesting," she called, a bit louder this time. "When she rolls on top of you, she flattens her spikes so she doesn't hurt you."

"Oh?" He looked down at Calypso, who swivelled her head to blink at him.

She blew a puff of air at him, pushing his hair back with the wind. Hermione laughed and it drew Calypso's attention. Draco grunted when she leapt off of him, spread her wings, and soared over to Hermione. She squealed when the dragon landed in her waiting arms. She weighed a lot more than a dog, with the scales and bulk of her wings, so Hermione's knees immediately folded. They went crashing to the ground.

Hermione fell apart in peals of laughter as Calypso began bumping her face and chin over and over again with her nose. The juxtaposition of her cold nose and the hot air she breathed tickled. She eventually managed to rise up onto her knees and grip Calypso's horns. When she did, she smiled and lowered her chin so she could look deep into her multi-faceted jewel eyes.

"You are too precious," she said.

And then Calypso's tongue darted out, scaly and rough against Hermione's nose. Before Hermione realized that it hurt, Calypso was already prancing happily over to her pool. But when the blood started to trickle down her face, Draco rushing over with a furrowed brow alerted her to it.

Her eyes stung with tears but she let out a small laugh anyway. "Well, that's another thing we've learned. Dragon tongues are really rough."

Draco said nothing, falling to his knees beside where she knelt. He took off the blazer he was wearing, leaving him in only a black shirt with a V-shaped neckline. The sleeves were short and she could see the black ink of his Dark Mark on his left forearm. Without warning, he tore a strip of fabric off of the bottom of the jacket. Hermione watched in shock, blood dripping from her chin.

"Tilt your head back," he said in a gentle voice.

"I bet you wish you'd have brought your wand," she said. "I -"

"Be quiet," he said, his eyes flashing. She closed her mouth, tasting a bit of her blood on the inside of her lips.

Hermione stared up at the stars as he used the fabric to clean her face. She tried to still the beating of her heart, wondering why this felt so strange. It was no different than what a Muggle Healer would do, though probably with a lot more sterile and effective equipment than a torn blazer hem. When he ripped another one and began to dab at the tip of her nose, the pain redirected her thoughts to another place.

She counted the stars. It was easier to do that than it was to look at him, or to lean into the pain. She remembered so many of them from Astronomy, so many constellations and numbers and myths. She wondered what it would be like to be up there, floating through space and time. She wished she could reach out and touch one.

After discarding the two soiled strips, Draco held a third strip of fabric against her wounded nose. His other hand wrapped around the back of her head, as though he were worried she might try to move away. His facial expression was calm, but his eyes seemed more alive than she'd seen them
in days. She tried not to shiver at the feeling of him touching her.

Behind them, Calypso was lounging in the pool, growling Merrily at the sky.

"It's just a flesh wound," Draco murmured into the quiet. "You'll be all right."

"And to think," she said, her voice muffled by the cloth and his palm, "I thought I'd lost my nose."

"A shame," he said, shooting her a pointed look. "Maybe I ought to ask Calypso to help with those teeth, beaver."

Hermione's anger flared and she tried to move back. His fingers tangled in her hair a bit to still her.

"Don't you move," he warned with a half-smirk. "You'll ruin your good looks with a scarred nose."

"I don't care about looks," she said, raising her voice. "But what you said was rude. Especially last night."

He rolled his eyes. "You don't look like a beaver."

"Then what do I look like? Some other animal with giant front teeth?" She fixed him with a glare.

Draco pulled the cloth away from her nose and leaned closer to inspect it. She skipped a breath for a moment, her hands flat on the moss between her knees. His breath was warmer than the temperature inside of her body. He then reached up to tug something out of her hair. When he pulled his hand into her line of sight, she saw a bundle of moss there.

"You look . . ." His gaze flitted all over her face, stopping at her lips and then bouncing back up to her eyes. He gave her a smirk. "Presentable."

"Malfoy!"

He laughed. "I'm joking!"

They looked at each other for a moment. Hermione maintained her irritation, but Draco's face seemed to sort-of melt in the way it relaxed. He wore the ghost of a smile, as though it had never been there before. His eyes were dark and glowing at the same time.

"Granger, I find you -"

Calypso cut him off by leaping onto him from behind.

Hermione was careful not to smile too much, lest she hurt her nose all over again. She stretched her legs out and leaned back on her hands, watching as Draco wrestled with the dragon on the ground. The mixture of growls and laughter echoed around the clearing, leaving Hermione with an almost giddy feeling in her stomach.

She wished she didn't feel so guilty about it.

After awhile, Calypso and Draco trotted over to her. Draco sat down across from her and Calypso slithered along the ground between them. Hermione giggled again when she folded in her wings and rolled onto her back, showing her underbelly.

Hermione patted the dragon's stomach. Calypso hummed and for a moment, it made Hermione think of Crookshanks. Another violent pain ripped through her heart. Poor Crooks . . . Hermione had never been able to reunite with Crookshanks. He'd stayed behind at the Burrow with the
Weasleys and now . . .

She couldn't think about that, either.

"She's got such a round tum," she said. "It's adorable."

"She eats well," Draco said, smirking. "I taught her how to hunt, and I usually bring her food at night. I just don't when you come along."

Hermione, who had only been there twice now, gave him a curious look. "Why not? I understand that dragons have to eat meat."

"Weren't you a bit of a magical creature fanatic back when we were young?"

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Malfoy, we're still young. I'm only twenty-three, and you said you were . . . What? Twenty-two?" He gave her a nod, his gaze focused on Calypso. "And yes, I value the lives of magical creatures. Which is more than I can say for your king. And don't act like you're superior to me just because you're younger than me."

He looked at her. "I remember hearing tell of your little House Elf club."

Hermione glared daggers in his direction, moving her fingers up to scratch the underside of a sleepy Calypso's chin. "For your information, I was the President of S.P.E.W."

He laughed incredulously, tipping his head back. His messy blond hair fell back away from his face. "Oh, for fuck's sake. And what does that stand for?"

Still glaring, Hermione said, "Society for the Promotion of Elfish Welfare."

Draco continued to laugh, pulling his knees to his chest and resting his elbows atop his kneecaps. He scrubbed at his face with his hands, as though he were trying to wipe away his amusement.

"Granger, I mean . . . Really?" he said, blinking over at her. "S.P.E.W?"

Hermione growled in frustration, the corners of her lips pulling downward. "Oh, you're just like everyone else. No one seems to grasp the importance of acronyms."

"Apparently, neither do you!" he spluttered before he burst out into hearty guffaws. "You named your club after vomit."

Hermione wanted to yell at him, but the sting of her wounded nose stopped her. She hoped it didn't scar. Instead, she just decided to change the subject before she got into another row with him of his overuse of sarcasm.

"Can I ask you a question, Malfoy?"

He looked at her, expectant.

She hesitated, not knowing how he would react. "Did the Dark Lord curse you? The day you . . ."

She gestured to her neck and gulped.

He averted his eyes. "Yes. But like I said earlier, it's just what he likes to do."

Hermione's brows twitched together. The moss felt soft underneath her hands. "That doesn't bother you?"
"Of course it bothers me, Granger. It's the Cruciatus, not the Cuddly Fun-Time curse," he snapped, hugging his knees with his arms and grasping his wrist with one hand. He continued to watch Calypso sleep. Hermione could tell by the look on his face that he was thinking about something he didn't want to think about, and she felt a bit bad about bringing it up twice in one night.

He spoke again, into the awkward silence.

"And before you ask me: yes. It hurts."

Hermione studied him. He looked more than uncomfortable, but she didn't know if it was because they were talking about it, or because he was reliving it.

"So is that why you -"

"I have a temper," he cut in, turning his head to the left, glaring across the expanse of the willow glade. "And that day... It was just not a good day. I regret how I acted and what I did."

Hermione nodded, even though he wasn't looking. "I mean, I forgive you. I just want to know what was going through your head."

"What?" His head swiveled towards her.

She shrugged. "I said I forgive you."

"I know. I heard you." He looked troubled. Taken aback. "Why?"

Her words felt trapped in the path of her throat. "I don't... Know."

More staring.

He said, "You forgive me, but you don't know why?"

As he voiced the words, she felt the weight of her guilt over considering him a friend weighing her down. Was she an imbecile? He had strangled her and she was picking his brain to find out why and forgiving him? This was Draco Malfoy. A large portion of blame for the war could be placed solely on him. He was an adult now, and he was still doing horrid things. He was still doing horrid things, and laughing while playing with his pet dragon.

She wondered. Did that make him heartless? And if so, then wasn't she just as heartless for laughing and playing with Calypso, too?

"I don't know why," she said slowly, "but I am trying to figure it out."

"You're trying to figure it out," he repeated. It was his turn to study her.

Between them, Calypso let out a loud snort. Hermione held her hand over her mouth to stifle her giggle and Draco gave a soft smile. He unlocked his arms and put one on the grass behind him. He used the other one to card his fingers through his hair.

"I guess we're both trying to figure some things out," he said.

Hermione felt her heart jump at that.

What did he need to figure out?

"Why haven't you asked me why I haven't poisoned the Dark Lord myself?" he said.
Hermione looked at him in bewilderment. But as his words settled in, she realized that it was a good question. She lifted her eyebrows and looked down at the grass while she searched for an answer.

"Because he's your king," she said. "Why would you betray him? You fought for him."

He didn't reply. Hermione wondered what his reasons were, if it was out of fear or love that he served Lord Voldemort. In any case, why was he asking her such a thing?

Had he tried to poison him and failed?

*It doesn't matter anyway,* Hermione thought, the words drifting on a wistful memory of the hunt with Harry and Ron. *As long as Nagini lives, the Dark Lord cannot die. I hardly think he would let Malfoy live if he had tried to kill him.*

She wondered further. If Nagini was still alive, but the other Horcruxes were destroyed, then was that why he looked like a younger version of himself again? Was that why she had seen Tom Riddle on the front cover of the *Prophet*, and not the snakelike demon she saw in her nightmares? Was that even possible to get your looks back after splitting your soul so many times?

Her blood slowed to an icy chill in her veins and she closed her eyes for a second.

Nagini was left. The other six were gone, including Harry. Harry, who they hadn't realized was a Horcrux until it was too late.

She still didn't know what went wrong in the forest. She knew Harry was alive in the courtyard, in Hagrid's arms. He'd been waiting to leap out, she just knew it. But then, after monologuing and accepting people like Draco back into his arms, the Dark Lord had cast the killing curse on Harry's prone form, killing both him and Hagrid instantly. In seconds, the war was over.

Had the pieces of his soul returned to Voldemort when she, Harry, and Ron destroyed the other five?

"Sometimes, I feel like my father wishes I would tip the vial over my own food," Draco suddenly said. Surprised at his words, Hermione waited for him to keep speaking. "Sometimes . . . I think he wishes it were me in my mother's place."

"He doesn't think that," Hermione protested. "Besides, if there's anyone he probably wishes dead, it would be me."

Draco's gaze snapped to meet her eyes. "He knows better than to try."

Another leap of her heart. She stared at him with apprehension. There was that strange, uncharacteristic protectiveness again. She wished she could tell if he was protecting her because he actually wanted to, or if it was because he just wanted her to save Narcissa.

At least if she knew he had one genuinely selfless, good trait, she wouldn't have to feel quite so bad about considering him a friend.

"I don't think he wants you to die," she said in a weak voice. "He's your father."

"Things have been dissolving between my father and I for years," Draco said, his voice as bitter as ginger root. "It began way before the war even started. It began when nothing I ever did - no achievement, no mark I brought home - was good enough for his exorbitantly high standards. Imagine my surprise when the Dark Lord saw those same marks and brought me on as head
potioneer. Imagine my father's surprise when the Dark Lord asked us to switch seats at dinner. The only one of us with a room at Buckingham is me."

Hermione raised her eyebrows. With the contention between them regarding her presence at the Manor and Lucius' concern for his wife, she could understand Lucius being angry. If Draco had been moved to a higher rank in the Dark Lord's eyes, then she could understand him feeling envious. From what she remembered, Lucius had always been a cruel, miserable old man.

But wanting his own son dead? That, she wasn't so sure about. She thought it was a little more alarming that Draco believed that about him. Amongst all those arguments, with all the angry words Lucius had to say, did he realize that he was pushing Draco further and further away?

As Hermione gazed across the way at him, at his furrowed brow and the way he stared at the air as though it contained his father's missing love for him, she understood how he felt.

Draco was hurting.

"Your parents love you," Hermione said with conviction. "It's war. It's war, but they still love you."

"The war?" He issued forth an amusement-free laugh. "The war is over, Granger. The Dark Lord won. My father loves one thing and one thing only: breathing. He'll do anything to save his own skin."

"You just said the same thing last night," Hermione countered, earning a sharp, confused look from him. "You said you would have done anything to save your skin."

"No," he said, his tone dark and almost threatening. Hermione fought the urge to shrink back. "I said our skins. That includes yours. And I don't do that for love of breathing air and living. I do that because it's not my place to decide whether you live or die."

Hermione averted her eyes, feeling a bit awkward. She didn't know why he was like this, so fierce and vigilant now when as a kid he'd seemed so cowardly to her. She didn't know what to do when faced with this person who looked like Draco Malfoy, but who acted nothing like him.

"Okay," she whispered.

"I mean it, Granger," he said. "If I wanted you to be dead, you would be dead."

"Okay." She lifted her eyebrows and looked away from him again.

She didn't understand what he was trying to say. He wasn't the sort to speak plainly. He spoke in vertical lines and semi-circles, always dancing around or missing the point with intention. Either he was a completely different person than he'd been in school, or this was who he'd always been and she'd just been unable to see it.

"I'm sure you had great parents," he said, still bitter. "Did you?"

"Did I what?" Hermione's eyes were wide. Was he really asking her about her parents?

"Have great parents?"

Hermione didn't want to talk about her parents. It brought her more pain even than the memory of Harry, Ron, and her other friends and professors did.

"I don't want to talk about my parents."
They sat there in the quiet, listening to the world around them. The rustling of the night breeze through the willow branches. The sounds of owls hooting into the darkness in the forest around them. The chittering and clicking of nocturnal creatures. The soft sounds of Calypso in sleep, her belly facing up and claws pawing faintly at the air.

Hermione looked up at the stars again. Those same stars that had seen her trials and tribulations, her joys and her sorrows. The first twenty-three years of her life. She found comfort in the knowledge that they'd been there with her. That even when she'd cried, she hadn't been alone.

As long as there were stars in the sky, she would never be alone.

"Can I ask you a question?" Draco said, his voice one half-octave above a whisper.

She nodded.

"Does it . . ." He shrugged his shoulders, showing discomfort. "Does it bother you being called a Mud - Muggle-born slur so often?"

Hermione bit her lower lip. "I think I'm just numb to it. This isn't the old world anymore. It's the Dark Lord's world. In his world, I'm nothing."

"You can't actually think you're worth less than the rest of us, can you?"

She frowned over at him. "You're the one who introduced me to the possibility that I might be."

He looked stunned. "I don't think that anymore."

It was her turn to be astonished. "You don't?"

"No." Finality.

He was being honest.

Hermione looked at him, her eyes studying the planes of his face as she tried to make sense of his semi-circles and vertical lines. Why was he suddenly so open tonight?

"When I say it around other people, it's because I'm playing a role," he said, looking down into her eyes. "I don't mean it."

"Did you ever?" she asked, her eyes narrowing a fraction. "Did you ever mean it?"

"I can't lie," he said. "At one point in my life, yes. When I was younger. Yes. But I don't . . . I can't put the energy into hating other people anymore when I already . . ."

He trailed off and looked up at the sky. When he didn't continue, Hermione came to the slow realization that what he had been about to say might have been too open and honest.

He couldn't put the energy into hating other people when it was so exhausting hating himself.

She knew what that was like.

And that was why she considered him her friend. She didn't have the energy to hate him anymore.

They stayed there for a little while longer, the words and conversation within them dried up for the time being. Calypso woke up again briefly, but it was clear that she was completely tuckered out. She fell back to sleep with rapid speed, so they decided it was best they leave. Hermione was okay
with that, since she was struggling to keep her eyes open.

"What type of dragon do you think Callie is?" Hermione asked as they walked.

Draco took her hand as though it were the easiest thing in the world, wrapping his fingers around hers. She didn't know how she felt about it.

"She's a Ukranian Ironbelly," he said. "It means she's going to be massive. I've already done all of the reading and photo comparisons. She has all the markings, the spines, the wingspan-to-body ratio... Her color's off, obviously, but I think it has something to do with that jewel in her chest. Have you ever seen a Ukranian Ironbelly?"

Hermione's memory showed her flashes of the escape from Gringotts. She hesitated. Draco had been open. Could she?

"I've ridden on one," she said.

"You've ridden on one?"

"Mm-hm," she said, gaining a bit of courage. "Harry, Ron, and I, we... Well, do you remember the dragon at Gringotts that escaped?"

"It was all over the Prophet," he said. He was clearly in awe. "You three bloody did it, didn't you?"

"Yep," she said, "and we flew him all the way to Scotland. Poor thing. They'd been absolutely abusing him. He was completely devoid of color; his scales were stark white. I'm not sure where he went after that."

"Do you think he was aware of you lot?" Draco asked. "Do you think he remembered you afterward? Dragons are very loyal, you know."

"I'm not sure. We certainly spoke, so he heard our voices." She gave his hand an involuntary squeeze, not really knowing why. "But I don't doubt he was glad to be free."

They walked a little further and the dim starlight of the glade faded into darkness. Hermione slowed her steps, not wanting to trip accidentally. She walked a little behind Draco, holding his hand with both of her own just in case she fell.

"Where did you find her?" Hermione asked, stepping over a tree root that he warned her about and stepped over first.

"The Ukraine," Draco said with a short chuckle. "I was there to see dragons, specifically. The sanctuary has fallen apart, and I wanted to see if there was any way to figure out where they went."

Hermione's heart sank. Charlie... She knew the Weasley family had been eradicated, but for some reason, she'd held out hope. She would always hold out hope that things could get better.

Though if any of them could see her now, holding Draco's hand and living at his house, being his friend...

She tasted something foul in the back of her throat.

"The sanctuary's gone?"

"It fell into disrepair," he said over his shoulder. "It was either abandoned or the dragons got to be too much to handle. There's some that still nest there, but the Ukranian Ironbellies are all gone."
When I got there, I didn't know what I was looking for. But I found Callie. She was freshly-hatched and it was already so cold for October. I don't know what came over me. I just took her home with me."

Hermione made a mental note to do some reading in the library when she had the chance. There had to be a reason why he felt compelled to take her home with him. There had to be a reason for the compulsion, as well as the stone in her chest.

She wished she knew what happened to the sanctuary, and to Charlie.

They walked in silence the rest of the way, but it was comfortable. Hermione found that she didn't mind holding his hand. That was getting more comfortable, too. She was so lost in thought that she didn't notice herself using her fingers to trace the outline of the rings he wore on each finger. The temperature outside was cold, but the more she traced them, the warmer her hands stayed.

She told herself that was why she did it.

When they neared the edge of the trees, Hermione could see the bluish glow of starlight and night ahead. She stopped walking. His hand almost slipped out of hers, but she held on tight. She saw his silhouette turn to face her.

"What, Granger?"

"What were you about to say?" She wet her lips against her nerves. "In the clearing. Earlier."

She felt him looking at her as he tried to remember what moment she was referencing. He was standing so close to her that she could feel the expansion of his chest as he breathed.

"I thought you didn't care about looks," he said, and it sounded like a taunt more than a statement.

"I don't," she said. "But I want to know what you were going to say."

Suddenly, he pulled her hand up to his lips in the dark. Her mind reeled with the unexpected emotions the move dredged up. Confusion, shock, and nervousness. She felt like she couldn't breathe.

He brushed his nose against the inside of her wrist. She felt his breath, hot and damp against her pulse point. For some reason, it made her knees go weak the same way that Viktor Krum's kiss to the back of her hand had made her feel at the Yule Ball. Her stomach coiled into a tight knot.

What is he doing?

He inhaled. She felt him staring, but she couldn't see his face clearly. He spoke with his lips brushing against her skin, right below her palm.

"Did I ever tell you that you always smell like honey?"

And then he walked away.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Eight

Chapter Summary

To address some things: This plot is stuffed right now, so if you end up writing a question in a comment or review that I didn't think of or include in the plot already, please comment in the FB group! As for an out-of-characterness, I'm sorry. I have an amazing Alpha in mayghaen17, and we both feel the story is solid.

Don't get hung up on canon. This story is a fantasy, and a LOT is coming out of the depths of my wild imagination.

Pronunciation Key: Drakin is pronounced Drah-keen. With a rolled R and a Japanese "i."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Hermione's nose was going to scar.

It would be small and shallow, but it would be a scar nonetheless. She was going to go to the library and look up a brew for something that could minimize the appearance, but she wasn't so sure it mattered. Maybe before, when she was a teenager and wandering the halls hoping to get Ron's attention. But now? She couldn't be arsed to care.

*I wonder if Draco cares about scars,* she thought the morning after she'd gotten the wound, her mind wandering and straying wherever it wanted to go. *He seems like the type to care.*

She stared at herself in the mirror, at her hazel eyes and the scabbed-over wound on the tip of her nose. Had she fallen on her head? In what *universe* did Draco Malfoy's opinion on her looks matter?

Shaking her head, she decided it was best to start her daily routine. Today, she was going to spend her free time reading about dragons. She would keep researching moonflowers later. She was starting to feel poorly about how little success she was having and was half-ready to just prepare them whichever way she could. After all, the willow glade was chock-full of more.

Hermione dressed in a pair of loose-fitting black satin trousers and a brown oversized knit jumper. She dragged her mass of curls up into a haphazard bun at the top of her head, put her slippers on, and then headed down the stairs.

As she passed the tea room, she came within millimeters of colliding with Lucius on his way out. Behind him, Hermione saw that he had already finished eating. The place where she normally sat was not set. She returned her gaze to Lucius, looking up at him.

"Good morning, Miss Granger," he said in his usual hissing tone. "Or shall I refer to you as 'slave?'"

"Miss Granger will do."

Lucius's lips twitched up into a smile. "I would watch your tone, if I were you. If your skills are anywhere near as extensive as I'm told, then I'm quite confident my wife will be waking up soon. And when she does, I've no doubt in my mind that she'll not want the house to feel so . . . Full. Though," he gave her a distasteful look down the length of his nose, "I'm sure you've got my son wrapped around your wiry little fingers."

Hermione opened her mouth to go tit-for-tat, and then she stopped.

What was the point?

Narcissa was in a state of magical delirium and laid in bed for 24 hours per day. His son was sure that Lucius would rather him be dead than his mother. Lucius was in a bad mood day in, day out, and he had never had anything positive to say the entire time Hermione had been in the Manor. Lucius was a miser, plain and simple, and he had no idea how fortunate he was to have a family left.

She knew it wasn't her place, but after the things she'd talked about with Draco and the conflicted feelings she was sorting through, she was making it her place.

"If you're not careful," she said, frowning up at him, "you're going to lose your son before you ever even have to imagine life without your wife." She paused, gaining strength at the sight of his mask of disgust faltering. "And in the event that I do mess up - that I fail . . . You're *going* to need your son, Lucius."
Lucius stared at her, his eyes glazing over for a half-second. Then, he stood up straight and took a step to the side, out of her way. Hermione took it as an invitation to go into the tea room for her own breakfast.

*Thwack.*

She cried out when his cane slammed down on the stone in front of her and slightly to the side. It hit her across the knees, which were still scraped from when she'd tripped over the books yesterday. She stared up at him with a mixture of annoyance and trepidation in her eyes.

"Stick to healing potions, Miss Granger. And stay out of my family's personal affairs."

He turned and blew down the corridor without so much as a snide look over the back of his shoulder.

Hermione breezed through her morning brewing.

Draco was there in the lab, working on that potion again. Today, instead of poring over notes, he was actually trying things. Cutting them up, putting them into the cauldron, using his wand, etcetera. He was so focused that his only words to her were, "Your hair looks like a bee's nest."

She didn't know whether or not to take it as a compliment, but her reply was to tell him his hair looked awful when it was slicked back with ten tons of grease.

"It's a good thing I don't do that anymore then, isn't it?" was his reply.

After Hermione finished giving Narcissa her dose, she practically skipped down to the library to start reading.

Finding books on dragons was a lot easier than finding books on moonflowers. She had a full stack of tomes in her quivering arms within minutes. She carried them over to the armchairs and set them down on one of the end tables. Then, she fell into the seat and got to work.

At first, she wasn't able to find anything new. She'd done a small essay on Hungarian Horntail dragons in her Fourth Year, after Harry's little run-in during the Tournament fascinated her so much. So she'd done plenty of basic research on dragons before. The first couple of books she picked contained a lot of the common facts and information, such as their sleeping and eating habits, their mannerisms, and historical events related to dragons.

But then she made it to a book called *Dragons and their Kin.*

Hermione had thought by "kin," the book meant family. She had thought it would be the key to why Draco had felt so compelled to keep Calypso. And she was right.

Somewhat.

What Hermione knew from prior reading at Hogwarts was that dragons were everywhere. They were in every country, from Australia to Russia to China to Brazil. There were many different breeds with many different strengths and many different histories. They had always been destructive and feared. Lone demons that lit the night skies with flames and terror.

But not according to this book.

Hermione spent an entire three hours reading *Dragons and their Kin* from cover to cover. She
skipped lunch and ignored when her feet grew numb from sitting on them. She just kept reading. Page after page, passage after passage. She was reading fast, trying to absorb too much all at once, but she couldn't stop. When she was done, she knew she couldn't waste another second.

She had to find Draco.

Marking the pages she thought were most important, she clutched the book tightly to her chest. Just as she had many a time in the halls of Hogwarts, she ran. Down the hallways and past the gymnasium, shouting his name. Past the tearoom and the entryway.

"Malfroy! Malfroy, come quickly! Malfroy!"

She was just dashing down the left-side hallway to the lab when he burst out of the room. His eyes were wild, his hair disheveled. His wand was in his hand. He was wearing a pair of black trousers and a white button-up, so seeing him look so unruly and so put-together simultaneously was quite humorous.

"What? What's the matter?!"

When she saw him, her bright smile dimmed.

"Oh . . . Nothing's wrong," she said, a bit of a blush staining her cheeks. She held up the book and allowed her smile to grow once more. "I found something I think you'd really like to know."

Draco inhaled and then let out a heavy breath. He turned and walked back into the lab. Hermione followed, practically dancing on his heels to show him the book.

"Don't ever scare me like that again, Granger," he said. It sounded like his teeth were clenched.

"Oh, you'll be fine," she said with a dismissive wave of her hand. She pranced over to his table and lay the book on it a little ways to the left of his cauldron. Standing beside the stool, she patted it expectantly. "Come. Sit."

He rolled his eyes and did as she bid. The moment he sat, his shoulder brushed her own, but she paid it no mind. She leaned over the table and opened the book, flipping to the first page that she had marked.

"Look," she said, pointing to one section. "I figured out why Callie has the stone."

He peered down at the page and began to read under his breath. "... 'crystal is indicative of the ability to connect and Kin with a magical individual. When the match is found, the crystal will glow when touched.' Kin? What is Kin? As in, family?"

Hermione, positively jumping at the gills with excitement, hurried to turn to the next section. "Read that one."

"'When the land was rife with war and struggle, the dragons roamed the land, seas, and skies. It was said that when Kinned, there was nothing more powerful that soared above or swam below. A dragon together with its Drakin could wield magic more potent than any wizard alive could hope to possess. The dragon would Kin with its rider, redirecting his or her magic through the prisms of the crystal to award them both different, more powerful abilities such as elemental magic, flames made of ice or lightning, and understanding . . .' Granger. What the fuck is 'Kin'?!"

"And now read this one." She flipped all the way back to the first page, bouncing on the balls of her feet. She hadn't worn this big of a smile since Hogwarts. "Read the last two lines of the first
He shot her a look of pure confusion. She tapped the portion in question. He acquiesced, reading on the wake of a sigh.

"It says, 'Here is an in-depth look at the mythical existence of the mightiest, most extraordinary, and terrifying warriors on Earth: Dragons and their riders. Their Kin.'"

Hermione waited, watching as he stared at the page for a long, long time. When she could hardly stand it any longer, she blurted out the answer.

"Ignore the fact that it says mythical. The reason why Calypso has a crystal in her chest is because she's an extremely rare type of dragon that has the ability to *Kin* with a witch or wizard. If she encounters her perfect match, then her crystal will glow. If her crystal glows, that means that when she is of age, her and her match will Kin. And when that happens, that witch or wizard becomes one of the Drakin. A dragon rider who shares a magical core with his or her dragon and has enhanced magic and abilities. Malfoy. Do you understand what this means? Do you understand what a rare anomaly this is in the realm of magic?"

Draco's head snapped up to look at her, his eyes as wide as saucers. "Callie . . . I'm meant to . . . Ride her?"

Hermione beamed down at him. "Yes."

He stared at her, looking somewhat pale.

She leaned over the book again, her hair and the pearl pendant on the necklace he gave her falling forward. "There's so much information in this book. It tells you everything that the author was able to dig up. There's passages on historical moments in time, the different ways the magical abilities manifest, and extensive studies of crystals and their ability to amplify magic . . . And it says the last of the known Drakin passed away in 950AD. Which is why we've never heard of this because our textbooks in Care of Magical Creatures start at 1100AD. And I mean, we've been told dragons were feral for our entire lives, so why do much research as to the contrary?"

He was still staring at her.

She looked at him, suddenly realizing how close her face was to his. Noticing how intense his gaze was at this proximity.

His hand lifted and he picked up the pendant. He lowered his eyes to look at it and it was as though she could feel his touch through her jumper, directly on her skin.

When he met her eyes again, she felt his gaze exposing her in a way she didn't quite understand.

"My nose is going to scar," she blurted out.

One corner of his mouth lifted slowly. He looked at her nose and then dragged his gaze upward a third time.

"I don't mind."

Hermione spent a few seconds trying to figure out what he meant. Flustered, she stood up in an abrupt movement. Her stomach was fluttering and her heart was beating and her head was spinning and -
She moved forward, reaching across the book to grab the right side of it and pull it closed. As she did, her foot caught on the edge of the stool's leg. She knocked into the table, which then caused the cauldron to start to tip. Draco jumped up, his arms shooting forward to stop it from falling over, and he elbowed her in the process. She was shoved back a step and, losing her balance, fell towards the table. She hit it with her hip bone hard enough to not only make her cry out in pain, but to slam the edge of the table into the wall.

It happened so fast.

The table hitting the wall caused the shelf of potions above them to rattle. The small glass bottles toppled over in haphazard ways, rolling about. One small red bottle - the same bottle that Hermione and Draco had fought over the night he strangled her - rolled off of the edge and shattered against the tabletop, spilling its contents all over the wood. The poison inside was crimson in color and grey smoke rose from it the moment it met with the oxygen.

"Granger, cover your nose and mouth! Back away!" Draco shouted as he threw his arm over his face.

It was too late.

She'd already taken a breath.

Fear spread its icy fingers in the cavern of her chest as a violent, burning pain ripped its way from the skin of her mouth down into the lining of her stomach. She screamed, but it caught in her throat like a bubble and she couldn't breathe past it. It felt like acid. She tried to take another breath, but couldn't. She began to cough, clutching at her stomach as blood spewed forth from inside of her.

Hermione started to fall forward, her mind completely void of anything other than agony and sheer terror. The acidity - it was like it was eating her alive. She could feel it melting through her jaws. There was so much blood.

"No, no, no," he breathed, eyes frenzied. "Come here. I've got you. I've got you now."

Draco was there to catch her, wrapping one arm around her back to grip her elbow on the opposite side. The other arm curved around the underside of her jaw, pushing up to hold it together. Her blood sprayed his neck and chest as she continued to cough and hack.

He looked beside himself with every emotion in the book. Fury, concern, horror, despair. He was screaming for a House Elf and when one appeared, then he was screaming for the antidote on the other shelves.

It hurts, she wanted to say, her vision blurred with tears that spilled onto her torn cheeks.

But he couldn't hear her.

Her vision faded to black.

February 2000

They used Hermione's wand to disguise themselves.

It wasn't difficult. Changing parts of her appearance for short periods of time with Illusion charms was something Hermione had done often when she was younger. The moment she got a handle on Transfiguration, Hermione was quick to alter whatever she could without garnering anyone's
notice. The last thing she’d wanted to do was attract the attention of Draco the Bully.

Now, this was life-or-death. Hermione and Luna needed to go into Glasgow. It was a city full of Muggles and if there was one thing they knew about Muggle cities and the Dark Lord, it was that he didn’t pay much attention to them. He saw Muggles as bugs under his feet, and so Hermione had no doubt that he was saving their cities and towns for last in his crawl to complete domination.

They had to stop to have a cry. Neither Hermione nor Luna had been prepared for the shock of losing Mika, a savior that had become a dear friend to them. Hermione wept for more than just her, though. She wept for Dumbledore’s portrait, which had likely been consumed in the flames as well. She also wept for Neville and for Harry and for any of her friends that she no longer knew the whereabouts of. Most of all, she wept for herself. For her failures and the way she’d let everyone down.

Hermione temporarily transfigured Luna’s waist-length waves to a dark brown, almost black color, gave her green eyes instead of blue, and changed her pyjamas to a warm winter dress. She handed the wand to Luna, gave her a crash course on the particular charm she had just used, and then stood patient while Luna turned her collar-bone length curls into a short black bob, tilted the arch of her eyebrows, and swelled her lips a bit bigger. When Hermione’s pyjamas had been transfigured into a fancy purple blazer and trousers, the girls set off.

No one paid them any mind, which was a huge relief. The girls were able to relax for the first time in ages.

They used the Muggle money that Mika had given them and looked for a grocer’s. When they found one, Luna wasn’t sure how to properly count her pounds out, so Hermione did it for her. They were careful to only get enough for one meal from the deli, just in case they had to run or couldn’t find lodging that they could afford. They didn’t care that it was so late at night. Any food was food, even if it tasted stale.

They sat down on a bench in a park to eat, the words between them far and few. Hermione felt drained of emotion, like she didn’t have any tears left within her. Luna had no shortage of them, but she had this strange ability to cry silently while still speaking and interacting normally. They watched the nighttime joggers and dog-walkers go back and forth in front of them, and Hermione could tell that it was awe-inspiring for Luna.

They spent a long time on that bench. It was nice to just . . . Be for once. To just be, without having to run or flinging hexes. There were no cramped logs here in Glasgow.

"We should find somewhere to sleep," Hermione said. "It’s already after midnight."

"Yes," Luna said in that same dreamy tone she always used, using the back of her hand to wipe her cheeks free of tears. She finished the last of her sandwich. "The Nargles like to come out at night, and we wouldn’t want to give them anything to feed on. It’ll only tire us out."

"Agreed," Hermione said.

She glanced about, trying to decide which direction to go. Muggle hotels were expensive and the Muggle money was not much. Mika had only given them 150 pounds and while that was plenty for rationed food for at least a couple of weeks, the moment they used some of it to get a hotel room for one night, their prospects went from two weeks to a few days.

Perhaps they could risk wizarding lodging? There were some galleons in the pouch.
"We need a different plan," Hermione said with a grimace. "We can't use Muggle lodging. There's just not enough funds."

"Let's walk through the park," Luna suggested. "Perhaps we can . . . Try to find a Seelie Court faerie again?"

Hermione hesitated. The pixie that had helped them was one of the Seelie Court, but not all individual faeries followed the masses. As far as Hermione had learned in school, while most followed their queen to a certain extent, there were always those who gave in to the temptation to trick humans into sticky situations.

But did they have another choice? At this point, being trapped in the Seelie Court for all of eternity was preferable to living in fear of the Dark Lord.

"Okay," Hermione said with a sigh. "I have a charm that can help us locate an entrance to the Court."

They tossed their rubbish into the nearest bin and then, their arms interlocked, the two girls slunk off into the darkness of the path. They left it, heading on a trajectory through the woods. Hermione cast the charm and held her wand out in front of them. It glowed bright blue at the tip, changing to a reddish color whenever they were headed in the right direction.

She hoped they weren't making the worst mistake of their lives.

"If we do go down there," Hermione said to Luna, "please try not to eat anything. Nothing at all. We only need a place to lay our heads while we figure out what to do. We can leave tomorrow and get more Muggle food."

"All right," Luna said. She opened her mouth to say something else, but the light on the tip of Hermione's wand suddenly glowed a glaring, virulent red. She smiled at Hermione.

Hermione heaved a sigh of relief. The tree in front of them was an entrance. She racked her brain, trying to recall any sort of pattern or rhythm that she could use to knock on the trunk and alert the faerie at the gate. She'd never been to Court before, and it was not something students should be doing.

But she supposed they weren't students. Not anymore.

"I suppose you just . . . Knock," Luna whispered.

Hermione shrugged. "I guess so."

She stepped up to the trunk and raised her fist.

It was completely by chance. Perhaps a freak accident, or the universe's meddling. Hermione didn't know how to explain it and Luna didn't seem to care. Because the moment they saw him, they knew it was him. His temporary Illusionment charm was nowhere near as good as Hermione's, and he hadn't been able to hide the unmistakable shape of his teeth and sloped line of his shoulders. But the moment the choked sob left Luna's lips and she began to fly across the grass, Hermione confirmed it.

Neville Longbottom.

"You're not gonna wanna go down there" he called as he trotted over. "That particular entrance is abandoned."

Luna launched herself the last few yards and threw her arms around his neck. She peppered his face with tearful kisses, laughing and sobbing with near-hysteria. Hermione had found a backup reserve of tears and was now hovering behind them with her hands clutched around her wand, weeping openly.

Neville wrapped his arms around Luna's waist and lifted her into the air, spinning her around. The expression on his face hovered back and forth between disconsolate and euphoric. He transferred Luna to one arm and held his other arm open for Hermione.

All three teens wept.

They stood there, shivering in each other's embrace while they slowly came back to a calm state of mind. They separated, but Luna remained wrapped around his arm, her face buried in his chest.

"How did you find us?" Hermione asked, sniffling and wiping her eyes furiously. "We're disguised! How come you're not disguised? And it's been -"

"It's a little weird . . ." He rubbed the back of his neck with his free hand. "I have special plants all over my house that do different things. I have one with spores that make me unrecognizable to enemies, and another that deters Muggles from my doorstep. The Bimbly plant is what helped me find you."

Hermione's brow furrowed and then it came to her. "The Bimbly plant! It's the only plant in the world that can use magic, namely Legilimency. You showed us to it. It would have known it was us, disguised or not."

Neville nodded, grinning. "And the second you guys entered the city, it woke me. I can't Apparate, so I had to run all the way here. Luckily, I'm used to running now."

"How were you able to get money? You didn't lose your wand?" Hermione felt chock-full of questions. "And how did you make it all the way here on foot? Has anyone caught on to your whereabouts? And have you heard from the others?"

"Hermione! Hermione," he said, laughing as he pressed his cheek to the top of Luna's head. "Let's just get back to my flat, yeah? It's safe there, and we can catch up."

Hermione reached for his hand and he took it.

She never wanted to let go.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Nine

Chapter Summary

Hi guys! So I have updated 5 times in two days lol. So tonight, I will put Chapter 10 up around midnight. I have 17 chapters written, and I would like to write 18 and 19 before I post Chapter 11. So it may be 2 days before I update again.

Beware in advance. Trigger warnings for dub-con, non-con, violence, etc will start appearing from here on out. This happy, light, caring mood? Hermione's gonna ruin it lol.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Someone was snoring.

No . . . That couldn't be right . . .
Am I snoring? I don't snore. Who is snoring?

Hermione felt her consciousness struggling forth, wading through heavy layers of darkness and sleep. She didn't know what was going on. Her body seemed to be pinned or - or stuck to a bed. To something soft. Why couldn't she move her mouth?

Who is snoring?

What was -

It hit her like a speeding Bludger.

The pain. It was excruciating. Her entire mouth, jaw, throat, and chest felt like it was on fire. It made her eyes automatically fill with tears as desperation for reprieve flooded her chest with panic. She felt her feet sliding against the mattress she lay on, her fingers digging into the fabric of the cotton sheets. She was screaming. Screaming inside the recesses of her mind.

Aloud, she let out a whimper.

The snoring abruptly stopped. There was a split second and then she heard a voice inside of her head.

Granger?

Her mind's voice just kept screaming.

Granger, it's all right. It's okay. You're okay.

It was Draco's voice. But why was it in her head? Where was he? Why couldn't she open her eyes?

Screaming.

It's -

The agony overwhelmed her. She lost consciousness.

Neville's flat was as safe as a Muggle flat could possibly be.

It was tucked in a shabby building situated in the depths of the less affluent part of the city. The buildings around it were taller and wider, so it was hidden from the view on the streets. If a Muggle who lived there owned an automobile, they would be required to park a few blocks away. To get to the building they were staying in, it was required to walk down two narrow alleys.

The flat was nothing special without magic. With the charms he'd used as well as Transfiguration, he'd turned a small 500-square foot space into a full one-bedroom, one-bathroom flat complete with doors and walls to separate them. There were plants of all shapes and sizes, both magical and mundane lining wall shelves and the sill of the dingy window. Some of them seemed to perk up when Neville walked in, and one had yellow eyes that blinked up at them.

Hermione and Luna were reluctant to sleep apart, since they'd been at each other's sides for over one year. That meant one of them taking the couch was right-out. Neville was happy to transfigure a chair into a full-sized bed for the two of them beside his own in the bedroom.

They stayed up talking for a couple of hours, the three of them sitting cross-legged on the beds. Neville told them everything that he knew had happened since they'd parted. He'd ended up
traveling for an unimaginable amount of time in the water, losing the sword of Godric Gryffindor in the rapids. He hadn't worried about it much since it was well-known information by now that the sword appeared and reappeared at will. Eventually, he saw a low-hanging branch and grabbed onto it.

Once on the bank of the river, he met a pixie. It wasn't the same one that Hermione and Luna had encountered, but it seemed to be part of the same group of searchers. The pixie had led him to an Underhill, where he stayed for as long as he could until the fruit ran out. Then, he traveled on foot to a wizarding village that was in the opposite direction of Rumple called Cinderston. Like Rumple, it was a town that was small and had plenty of Dumbledore supporters.

He lived there until news that the Death Eaters were coming for Cinderston next reached the town. At that point, whoever he was staying with gave him the same supplies that Mika had given Hermione and Luna. His Portkey had also taken him to Glasgow and over the course of the next six months, he took time trying to assimilate with Muggle society. It took him a lot of surreptitious visits to the wizarding alley in Scotland as well as rudimentary Illusion charms, but he did all right.

"And what about the Dark Lord?" Hermione asked, grimacing. "Where are we at with the war?"

Neville's expression darkened as he ran his fingers through Luna's now-blonde hair. She was cuddled up to his side with a distant smile on her face. "The Dark Lord has control over almost the entire United Kingdom. No one knows where he's going next. He hasn't made any moves in the past month. For expansion, I mean. If what you guys told me about Rumple is true, he's spending time squashing out the rest of Dumbledore's supporters in wizarding villages in Scotland. England and Wales are completely his."

Hermione felt despair pulling her heart down into the pit of her stomach. "And what about our friends?"

Neville twisted his lips. "I don't know, exactly. I do know that a lot of people defected to the Dark Lord's side. The Patil twins, namely. A lot of the Slytherins, like Pansy Parkinson and Theo Nott. And you saw Draco Malfoy walking to join his parents, so . . . As for who escaped, I'm unsure." His expression twisted into a fierce grin. "But I have heard whispers down in the wizarding sections of the city. There's a sanctuary in Ireland for Dumbledore's supporters. I don't know how to get there; I just know that there's a man who can get us a meeting with someone who can help."

"Who?" Hermione asked at the same time as Luna.

"The man or the someone?"

"The man," Hermione said.

"Or the someone," Luna added.

Neville replied, "I don't know who the someone is. But I do know who the man is. I know exactly how to find him."

"Why haven't you?" Hermione asked.

Neville looked at her, seeming puzzled. "Because I was waiting for you. Do you really think I'd leave the island without you guys? Without Luna?" He gazed down at her as though she were going to disappear. She closed her eyes and burrowed into his chest. "I'd rather live here until I got captured, than leave without Luna."

Luna tilted her face up to gaze into Neville's eyes. Hermione looked away out of respect. She heard
their kiss. All it did was make her think about her first and last kiss with Ronald. She had hardly any hope that he was still alive. If he was, she knew he’d have come for her.

"Anyway," Neville said, sounding a bit sheepish. "Now that you're here, we just have to wait. The man isn't here often. He's a traveling rare artifacts dealer, but he's part of Dumbledore's Army. He goes from town to town, and he can secure us the meeting we need. For now, we'll just have to wait."

"All right," Hermione said. "It's what we'll have to do."

They sat in silence for a bit. Hermione glanced around at the room and took in the sights while Luna and Neville whispered to one another.

"I do hope that our friends are all right," Luna said after a while, yawning. "I hope they're as safe as we are now."

Hermione nodded, but found that the ache in her throat was too severe to speak. Even if her friends were all right, her best friends weren't. Ron and Harry . . . Poor Harry.

It was criminal, how quickly it had ended. How anticlimactic his death. How anticlimactic it was, yet it caused the downfall of an entire island. The loss of Harry Potter - the people's beacon of hope - was all it had taken for them to give up or give in.

She lay awake late into the night, listening to the sounds of a city full of people who had no idea that the wizarding world was dying.

She wished she had a Time-Turner.

Luna crept into Neville's bed not long after they turned out the lights, and Hermione didn't have it in her heart to try and stop her. What was the point? Whether she was in the room or not, they deserved to have love and be loved.

If only she could have seen Ron one last time.

She turned and faced the wall.

"Oh, Luna," came Neville's whisper, because it didn't matter if Hermione could hear. "I thought I'd lost you."

Luna's answer was to sob.

And as the quiet sounds of their lovemaking reached Hermione's ears, she wept for more reasons than just one.

Hermione's eyes snapped open to darkness.

She couldn't see anything, but judging by the faint smell of stone, she knew she was still in the Manor. She took a deep breath, feeling the air rushing in through her nose. For some reason, her mouth was either glued, wired, or charmed shut. The pain was still there, but it felt dull, like there was a barrier behind it.

Why was she here, lying prone like this? For a wild moment, she felt an alarming thought cross her mind. What if she'd been cursed, like Narcissa? Was this what it felt like to be in her position?

She banished the thought. No. Narcissa was able to talk, even though she was in a delirious state.
And speaking of delirium, Hermione didn't feel delirious. Her thoughts felt coherent and even if she felt like her entire body was frozen, she did not think she was in a magical coma.

Her eyes darted to the right. They were beginning to adjust to the darkness. She could see her vanity and chiffarobe. Okay, so she was in her bedroom.

She looked to the left and felt her heart skipping a beat.

Draco sat curled up in an armchair that had been brought to her bedside, a blanket pulled up over his body, and his head pillowed on the back of the chair. His hair was a disaster and she could see that he was so deep in slumber that soft snores were leaving his nostrils.

*So he was the one who was snoring,* she thought, awed. *Why would he sit by my bedside? What happened to me?*

She couldn't remember anything. When she tried, her head throbbed dully, as though something were weighing down her mind. She couldn't even lift her head from the pillow.

Then, confusion warred with an unfamiliar warmth in her heart.

Draco was sleeping in a chair by the side of her bed. She was in an obviously unwell state. She couldn't remember what had happened to her, but one thing was clear.

He'd been worried.

She did remember something. Not from before the darkness, but from before she'd lost consciousness in the bed. She'd heard a voice in her head. One that now that she saw Draco here, she knew belonged to him.

She considered speaking into her head again, to wake him up, but she didn't want to. He looked like he was sleeping the deep sleep of someone who was exhausted. She didn't know why he was exhausted, if it was because he was just tired, or because he'd healed her from something, but she knew she didn't want to wake him.

Now that she thought about it, she felt rather tired herself.

The darkness in her mind was starting to churn again, tendrils of it wisping up to wrap around her arms and pull her back down again. This time, she didn't feel any fear. She supposed it was okay.

Draco was here.

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**August 2000**

*It was six months before the man who could help them returned to Glasgow.*

*Things had settled in well for Hermione and Luna at Neville's flat. The two witches stayed in most of the time, only leaving one time just to see how it felt. They were too nervous, so they went back inside. Neville went to work at a pub nearby during the days and when he came home, they talked, ate supper together, and played games.*

*Luna was so happy, happier than Hermione had ever seen her in school. Just seeing her friend so joyous was enough to infect Hermione with positivity and hope.*

*Perhaps more of them had survived. Perhaps their classmates were happy, too.*
One night, Neville rushed into the flat with a large grin on his face.

"He came back! He came looking for me at the pub because I told Barrity to let me know, and -"

"Barrity?" Hermione cut in. Luna walked into the sitting room, setting a plate of vegetable snacks in front of her on the coffee table.

"Oh, he's an old friend of McGonagall's who lives in this building. I met him in one of the wizarding alleys in the city, and he's the one who took me to this building to get a flat."

Cautious, Hermione narrowed her eyes. "Who is he loyal to now?"

"Dumbledore," Neville said, still grinning. "Anyway, the man - the dealer - he came to the pub and ordered a drink. When he did, he slipped me this coin." He held a gold coin between his thumb and forefinger. "It has a Protean charm with a direct connection to the person who's going to be helping us!"

Hermione and Luna gasped, exchanging wide-eyed glances.

"Do we have a meeting?" Luna asked, jumping to her feet with her fists by her chest.

Neville nodded. "We have a meeting!"

Hermione hopped up, too, her face split into a smile. "We're going to the sanctuary?!"

"We're going to the sanctuary!"

The three teens grabbed each other's hands and screamed with happiness, jumping up and down as the feelings overwhelmed them. Hermione couldn't believe it. Soon, they would see whichever of their friends was left.

Soon, they would be home.

The days following the news were light and full of the buzz of life. They'd settled into a routine, only to have it interrupted by the best possible thing it could be interrupted by. Hermione couldn't remember feeling so happy in over a year. Even living with Mika, Luna and Hermione hadn't had this much to look forward to.

Hermione wondered every day that led up to the meeting if Ron would be at the sanctuary in Ireland. Would he run to her and gather her up, swinging her around in circles the way Neville had for Luna?

Would she cry? Would he?

She knew for certain that the moment she saw him again, she was grabbing his face and pulling it to hers. She wasn't going to waste another second. She was going to snog him until he couldn't breathe.

The day came for the meeting. They were to meet the person who was helping them in a Muggle restaurant that was way fancier than anything any of them could afford. They were to give the surname Phoenix to be taken to the table, where the meeting would then take place.

It was decided that Neville would go alone, just in case it was dangerous. As worried as Luna was, the decision was unanimous. He left, giving Hermione a squeeze of the hand and Luna a lingering kiss.
They waited.

Hermione read the same page fifty times. Luna cried and ate an entire tub of ice cream. Hermione made cookies. Luna tended to the plants.

Hours went by.

When Neville returned, his expression was unreadable.

"Well?" Hermione said, standing up from the couch.

"What happened, Neville Longbottom?" Luna asked in that same dreamy tone she possessed, no matter her emotion. She crossed the room to his side.

He gazed down at her, and then across the room to Hermione.

"Who was it, Neville?" Hermione cried.

"Narcissa Malfoy."

The third time Hermione woke, she was lying on her side facing Draco's chair.

That had to be a good thing, she hoped. That meant she was free to move or sit up.

She didn't really want to, though.

She lay there for a long time, watching him sleep. Her head bounced with questions. She wanted to know what had happened, and how long she'd been asleep. She still couldn't move her mouth or wrinkle her nose, and she wanted to know why. When she tried to at least wiggle her tongue, she couldn't. She could feel it; it just couldn't move.

Draco stirred, his eyelids fluttering open. He was still curled up in the chair beneath the blanket. He didn't move.

Do you still hurt? came his voice in her head. It was odd. It sounded exactly like he was talking out aloud, but his lips weren't moving. He was just watching her, looking strange with his head poking out of the blanket in the chair.

Hermione's brow twitched together. Are you using Legimency to talk to me?

Maybe. Are you gonna call the Aurors on me?

Maybe. She would have smiled if she could. What happened to me? I can't remember anything.

He frowned. You breathed in my - you were poisoned. I accidentally elbowed you, and you hit the table, which hit the wall. Potions shelf shook, bottle broke, you inhaled the fumes. And here we are.

Hermione's heartbeat increased. The memories were there, tinged with pain. She wasn't sure she wanted to remember. What did it do to me?

Draco sighed aloud and pulled his blanket down. He sat up and leaned forward with his elbows on his thighs. He clasped his hands, looking at the floor as he spoke.

"The particular poison you breathed in is a highly acidic brew that's specifically designed to melt flesh on contact. I don't really use it because it's impractical. The bottle itself has to be imbued with
protective charms to keep it from melting through the glass. And so . . ." His gaze darted up to hers and then down again. "When you inhaled the fumes, they started burning you. I had to . . ." He cleared his throat and ran his fingers through his hair, sitting up straight. "I had to hold your jaw on so it didn't fall off."

Hermione's eyes widened in alarm and anxiety began to wash over her like a tsunami wave. The memories were there, she could see them like watching a movie in her head. Something was holding them back.

What?! You had to do what?!

"Hey," he said softly, leaning forward and letting his hands fall between his legs. "Stay calm. You're going to be fine. Rickety got the antidote and Teensy fixed you right up. I brewed a restorative potion for your esophagus, stomach, and mouth. Everything is fine. Stop trying to remember."

But - but -

"Stop -" He raised his eyebrows and chin. "- trying to remember."

Hermione was very close to hyperventilating.

Flashes of memories kept trying to jump out. She reached out with her magic, prepared to rip the barrier down and let them flood through her.

"Legilimency," he said through gritted teeth, "is not a precise art, Granger. Unless you're the Dark Lord. Stop trying to remember."

Hermione let the memories go. You're holding them back?

"Yes."

Why?

"Trust me. You don't want these memories right now."

Hermione looked at him, seeing that he wore his pyjamas: a pair of black trackies and a white tee shirt. She could see his Mark, but the way that the moonlight lit him from behind made it more difficult to see his face than it was to see the tattoo. How long had he been here?

Was he here out of guilt, or for some other reason?

How long have I been out?

He sat back in the chair. "Four days. I had to use Legilimency fairly quickly and keep you unconscious. You woke up once and nearly ripped open your wounds."

And the potion that you used to . . . Th antidote . . . Is it effective?

"Very," he said with a half-smirk. "That, plus Teensy's help? You're still the Golden Girl. Since I know you care so much about looks, I can assure you that your beauty remains unmarred."

Hermione stared at him, hoping he couldn't tell how strange she felt hearing him allude to her having any sort of beauty.

She did not care about looks.
"But your nose . . ." he said, grimacing. "That's still gonna scar."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at him. What, the great potioneer to the king couldn't save my nose?

"You'll have to take it up with Callie," he said, lifting one defensive hand. "She's the one to blame."

Hermione wished she could laugh at that, but it was impossible.

"You should try to go back to sleep," Draco said. "The potion works better that way."

_But I've been asleep for four days._ Her eyes widened. _Who's giving your mother her medicine, Malfoy?! She can't miss a dose!_

"Relax," he breathed, tilting his head to the side as he studied her. "I've been giving her the dosage. I don't know if my brew's as potent as yours, but I followed your recipe. My mother's fine. Sleep."

_I'm going to have to take a look at her as soon as possible_, Hermione thought, still panicking. _If she misses the proper dosage, then -_

"Sleep," he murmured.

Their eyes locked.

Hermione felt a gentle finger of magic slipping into her mind, caressing her as though it were a massage. Her eyelids fluttered and her anxiety immediately subsided. She knew she'd have to get angry with him for violating her like this later, but for now?

She thought it might be nice to close her eyes.

"Sleep," she heard him whisper. "I'm here."

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE LEAVE A REVIEW!

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Chapter Ten

Chapter Summary

This is the last update until I finish writing Chapter 17 and 18. Should be about 2 days! Also, please join my Facebook group, HoneySweetWriting!

We await you.

WARNING: abuse, minor "gore" (description of wound being sewn up), blood

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hermione knew something was off.

It took her another few days to fully recuperate. She ate her breakfast in her room for the last time,
already eager to take lunch in the tearoom so she could see her beloved view of the estate again. She dressed inhumanly fast and practically flew down to the potions laboratory.

Draco wasn't there.

Now, normally that would be nothing out of the ordinary, but today was different. Today, he'd promised to stay near her all day just in case she fell or her jaw melted off or her hair fell out, or some other manner of horrible thing. Today was also the day that they had decided to go to the clearing in the daytime and see Calypso. They both wanted to take a closer look at the crystal in her chest.

They'd agreed upon it the night before when he'd poked his head into the room to glare at her and demand that she stay in bed. She'd already been in bed, but she was trying to conserve her energy so she could finally leave her room the next day, so she just glared in response. They'd exchanged a few snarky words, and then he suggested going to the glade for some fresh air. It was Hermione's idea to look at the crystal, since the only memories he'd taken were the ones of the actual poisoning. The answering flicker in Draco's eyes was enough to let her know that he was as intrigued by the things they'd read about Drakin as she was.

He was always in the lab in the morning. Why wasn't he here?

She wandered back out into the hall. If he was on the bottom floor, her options were the entryway, the tearoom, the kitchen, the Drawing Room, one of the Manor's two sitting rooms, the gymnasiu, or the library. She doubted he was in the kitchen, and there was no way in Hell she was going near the Drawing Room. It had been locked and avoided ever since she arrived at the Manor in December, so it wasn't likely that he was there.

Hermione checked the gym, but he wasn't there, either. She walked to the sitting room, but saw only empty furniture, shadows, and a dead fire in the fireplace. That left the library.

She walked inside, wandering the stacks. No luck. When she came to the end, she saw the door to Lucius's study was ajar. It wasn't open fully, but it was open enough to let out a sliver of morning light. As she drew closer, she could make out the sounds of a crackling fire.

Well, if anyone would know where Draco was, it would be Lucius. She hesitated and then lifted her hand to knock.

"Enter."

Hermione crept sideways into the room through the cracked door, eyeing him with caution. He was bent over his desk, signing the bottom of some parchment that was already full of writing.

"Do you require something?" Lucius drawled. "Perhaps my son's undivided attention?"

"Where is he?"

"Why, I don't know," he said, the sarcasm evident in his tone as he dipped his quill into the ink. His gaze snapped up to regard her. "He isn't upstairs making your bed? Did you check with the House Elves to see if he was finished washing your unmentionables?"

Hermione couldn't stop the acidic words that left her mouth next. He was just so nasty to her, with the snide curl of his lip and the hatred that festered in his grey eyes. She was tired of being treated like dirt when the only person who stood between his wife and certain death was her.

"I asked, and the last time they saw him, he was in the process of drawing my bath."
Lucius stared at her for a long moment. He set his quill down. Hermione's heart skipped a beat.

Mistake.

"If you think for one second that I'm letting your whore legs split open for my son?" Lucius said, his voice quiet and threatening. It was the smile that was terrifying, though. "Then you are sorely mistaken."

He rose to his feet. Hermione regretted ever allowing her personality to come out. It was only her Gryffindor pride that kept her from backing up when he rounded the edge of the desk and came towards her. His dress robes were black, woven with intricate silver embroidery and his hair was pulled back into a tail.

As he came towards her, Hermione wondered to herself if she had a death wish, or if she was just too bold.

"If I discover you're fucking my son in any corner of this estate," Lucius hissed down into her face, his eyes flashing, "I will tie your ankles to two Abraxans and send them running in the opposite direction. Do you understand me?"

Hermione held his gaze, even as her entire body trembled. The horrifying images that his words brought forth made her want to be sick. They were more visceral than the faint thought of what it would be like to even be that way with Draco in the first place.

"You're here to heal my wife," Lucius spat. "Not spin your web around Draco. Now, run along. He's not coming back today."

Hermione's brow furrowed. "Where has he gone?"

Lucius, who had already turned to walk back to his desk, shot her a revolted look.

"Do you defy me intentionally, or is that one of your character traits?" he roared, eyes blazing with fury. "I said to stay away from my son! Go back to the lab and do the job you are here to do, or I will call the Dark Lord here faster than you can blink!"

It was the yelling. Arguing with Draco was one thing, but with Lucius Malfoy? He had no reason to do anything in her best interests. One wrong move, and she was fodder for a curse or hex.

Turning tail, she dashed back out of the study and through the library.

The Malfoy Manor was a boring place.

Hermione was starting to realize that inside, it was exactly the way it looked outside: cold, dreary, and lonely.

She had a specific list of things that she liked to do: go to the potions laboratory, forage in the garden, sit in the tearoom and gaze out the window, read in the library, or read in the gym while Draco exercised. For some reason, today she noticed that a lot of them were things she was doing because there was nothing else to do.

It's not as if I did anything other than read at Hogwarts, she thought.

But she knew that that wasn't true. She had done much more than read. She studied. She learned. She didn't just look at words and file them away for later. The words in books used to come to life
for her. Now they just seemed dull. Flat.

After her encounter with Lucius, she wandered around the Manor trying to decide what to do. Nothing sounded entertaining. There was no one in the gym, and nothing for her to do in there. She didn't need to go to the lab. She didn't feel like brewing any Sleeping Draught. She didn't have any interest in foraging. She thought about reading, but the thought of looking at words and rearranging them into images in her head seemed daunting.

Could it be possible that the threat of Draco walking in and engaging her in some snarky tête-à-tête had become . . . Exciting?

The only time Hermione felt stimulated was when they were bantering.

That terrified her.

She spent the rest of the day in a near-stupor, her mind screaming for some form of invigoration.

Narcissa's eyes were open when she went in there, but she didn't say anything. Giving her the medicine was run of the mill.

Hermione ate lunch in the tea room, even though the sky darkened a little earlier than normal today. She spent the mealtime with her chin propped in her hand, her spoon trailing circles in her soup, and blowing weary sighs between her lips.

After lunch, she curled up in the seat of her bedroom window. She gazed out at the trees in the distance, wondering what Draco was doing and if he was bored, too. Whatever he was doing couldn't possibly be fun.

Did he have to sit around a table, nodding and clapping at everything Voldemort said? Or did he just have to stand in the throne room of Buckingham Palace and stare at everyone? She imagined he probably struck quite a sight, tall and imposing with that splash of platinum hair on top of his head. His eyes were so piercing, too. There was no doubt in her mind that he looked just as intimidating as the Dark Lord.

Though, if the photo in the article she'd seen in the Prophet was accurate, the Dark Lord looked imposing, too. Albeit in a different way than he'd looked when he was still a skeletal serpentine being, but none the less intimidating to Hermione.

As a bird lifted off of the top of a tree in the forest and took flight, a tiny black dot fluttering through the orange late afternoon sky, she wondered.

When Draco was gone, who visited Calypso?

She felt herself frowning. She hoped the dragon wasn't lonely. She could just imagine her, prancing about, playing in the grass by herself. Hermione would sneak down there herself if it weren't for the wards.

She thought back to the things she'd read about dragons and shown to Malfoy. What was it that encouraged the match between dragon and wizard? Was it something ancestral? Had any other members of Draco's family been one of the Drakin? If so, which side would it have been passed down from? Black or Malfoy?

Dragons with the ability to Kin were rare. Hermione had never seen a picture of a dragon with a crystal in their chest, never in any book or textbook in her entire twenty-three years of being alive. How rare were these types of dragons? Was the ratio less dragons to more wizards with the ability?
And was that why they were so lost to history?

Perhaps it was fear of the dragon race that had caused Kinning to stop. If people were too scared to approach dragons, then there would be no opportunity for them to Kin. Over time, the natural evolution of the species would produce less dragons with the crystals. It made sense.

The coincidence of Draco finding Calypso by accident on a trip to the Ukraine to check on the sanctuary? Astronomical.

*I suppose we'll have to see where this goes,* Hermione said. *Callie's too small to do any sort of flying with Malfoy on her back, and the last thing she needs is to be pulled into the Dark Lord's ranks and used for her enhanced abilities.*

That was something she could not see Draco doing. She wasn't sure why, but something inside of her told her that Draco would rather die than let Voldemort know about Calypso's existence.

Hermione went to her bedside table, where the books that Draco had brought her were stacked. She picked *Wuthering Heights* off of the top and brought it back over to the sill. As bored as she still was, she might as well just read. It was silly to let her day be affected by Draco not being at the Manor. She had never seemed to be affected by his absence before.

When she began to feel her stomach grumbling, she looked up at the clock. She gasped to herself. It was already close to 7:00PM. She hadn't realized how fast time was passing by. Narcissa needed her potion!

Hermione threw her slippers on and made a mad dash out of her room to the potions lab. She threw everything together as fast as she could without messing anything up, taking calming breaths as she watched the self-heating charm on the cauldron kick in. She didn't want Narcissa to have to suffer because Hermione was bored for one day.

Once Narcissa was handled, Hermione was finally able to relax. The moment she closed the door to the room the Malfoy family matriarch was being kept in, she was able to focus on the fact that she was still hungry. A late dinner was in order.

As she walked across the entryway, headed for the open doorway to the tearoom, the chandeliers and firelit lanterns on the walls lighting her way, she stopped in her tracks.

Lucius was standing outside of the room, talking to a House Elf. As Hermione got closer, she could hear that he was hissing down at the elf in anger.

This elf must have been one of the ones that handled the outside of the house. She knew every House Elf who frequented the inside of the walls, and this one was unfamiliar to her.

When Lucius suddenly lashed out and caught the elf across the head with the back of his hand, Hermione felt old opinions flaring to life.

"Stop!" she cried, dashing forward and putting herself in-between the whimpering elf and Lucius. She put her hands on her hips. "There's no need to be so *vile!*"

Lucius stared at her as though she had just sprouted an extra head. His hand flashed upward, lightning- quick.

*Smack.*

White-hot pain bloomed across her cheek, coupled with a prolonged stinging on her cheekbone. Hermione was confused. What just happened? Why did her face hurt?

Lucius had just hit her.

She moved backward, clutching her face with one hand and looking up at him in shock. He seemed furious.

"I don't appreciate it," he said with gnashing teeth, "when the help steps outside of their station to reproach what I do in the confines of my home."

Hermione scoffed in incredulity. "You're hardly deserving of your station! You stalk the halls like a demonic entity, and you care more about the cleanliness of my blood than you do the well-being of your own wife!"

"Have you forgotten your place, you Mudblood filth?!" he spat, taking a threatening step toward her with his hand held up as if to strike her a second time.

This man was foul. Hermione knew that this was Voldemort's world - his realm where Muggle-born magical folk were considered worth less than a sickle. But she was Hermione Granger, and she couldn't stand being treated like this for another second. She couldn't live under this roof without taking some of her agency back. Agency that Draco had slowly been awarding her as their friendship had grown.

She pulled her hand away from her cheek, glaring at the smear of blood she saw on her fingertips. The lioness that had always resided within her spirit opened its maw for the first time in over five years and let loose a mighty roar.

"No," she said, tone as icy as the Arctic. "No, I haven't forgotten my place. I've simply lost it. Because if I had a wand, my place would be kilometers above the likes of you, and you would be on the ground at my mercy. There's a reason why they called me the Brightest Witch of Her Age, and it wasn't because I know how to brew a good potion."

Lucius' jaw fell open in a gaping expression of affront and his hand balled into a fist in the air. Then, the shock boiled red-hot and turned to fury. He advanced on her suddenly. She took multiple steps back on reflex. She felt a droplet of blood rolling down towards her jawline.

"You are without a doubt the most insolent, foolish, senseless little cur," Lucius snarled, his boots heavy against the stone. "I should tear your flesh from your bones and teach you who's in the position to grant mercy."

Hermione's own anger burned just as hot. She'd had it with Lucius Malfoy. She had reached her absolute limit. She was tired of his hypocrisy. If he didn't want Hermione in his house, then he should have told Draco not to bring her here.

She squared her shoulders and stopped backing up, causing Lucius's chest to come within millimeters of brushing her upturned chin.

"The only one with the power to grant any mercy is me," Hermione snapped, holding her fingers to her chest. "I'm the one who's in control of whether or not your wife lives. If you stopped for one second and ceased thinking your tiny brain is more superior to me just because the blood that runs through your veins is pure, you'd realize that the moment you send me away is the moment you resign Narcissa to death!"
Lucius looked nightmarish. His eyes were wider than she'd ever seen them. His face started to redden. He held his hands up before her, like he was going to strangle her, but she did not flinch away.

She had the upper hand.

"The more you spend time hissing and spitting in my face, the less inclined I am to believe you truly care for Narcissa. And who do you think she's going to want to trust when she awakens? Her vitriolic tyrant of a husband who threatened the life of her Healer every chance he was able to?" Hermione lifted her chin higher and said, "Or me?"

The moment Lucius' lips curved up into a small, tight smile was the moment that Hermione realized she'd gone too far.

"Do you realize how worthless you are?"

Hermione felt the breath leave her lungs as he loomed over her like a monster.

"Do you?" he said in a soft voice. "Do you not realize that I or Draco could take the recipe for your little medicinal brew right out of your head and then make it ourselves? You didn't honestly think that you were alive by the grace of your potion making skills, did you?"

Hermione's brows twitched together. When Draco had failed to make the brew, she'd deemed him too heavy-handed. But now he had managed to make it for an entire week while she was recuperating.

Draco was just as skilled as she was. Possibly more so. While Hermione had many interests in school, everyone knew Draco Malfoy lived and breathed potion making. How he could fail a brew that she'd made up from what were essentially wild guesses in her head was beyond her.

Her breath caught in her throat.

What if he'd failed it on purpose, the first time he'd tried to brew it when she arrived at the Manor? If that were the case, then what would be the reason? Why would he fail the potion intentionally?

Lucius began to chuckle, a dark laugh that rolled down her body and sent a chill through her spirit.

"My son is the reason why you are here," he said, and his breath was hot against her face. "My son is the reason why you breathe. He's the reason why the sun rises and sets for you, and the moon watches you sleep in peace." He waved the fingers of one hand in a mocking, fluttering motion. "And you are alive by his grace. His mercy. He is, for all intents and purposes, your God, your Zeus, and when you see him, your knees should meet the ground in reverence."

Thunk. He dropped his cane and grabbed her upper arms. His grip was hard and bruising.

Hermione couldn't breathe for the fear that pulsed through her heart. She wanted nothing more than to turn around and go back up the stairs, to get away from this man who was either hysterical with anger, or mad with hysteria. Either he was always this twisted, or his grief had turned him so.

"The mercy my son extends to you is mine to give. Both of you seem to have forgotten that even Zeus himself was beholden to Cronos."

Hermione let out a sob as his hold tightened further. She felt the anxious desperation that one feels when they long to escape torment. Was he going to kill her?
She wished Draco was here.

"If you care about your wife, then you'll let me go," she said, voice shrunken with distress. She tried to twist herself out of his grasp, but it was impossible. "Just let me go. If Draco comes home and finds out that you've -"

Lucius' spluttering laughter broke through the barrier of her words. "If Draco finds out that I've what? That I've beaten you?"

Confusion. What was he -

He punched her.

Hermione let out a cry as his fist smashed into the side of her face with brutal efficiency. She felt her teeth biting into the flesh of her cheek, her entire head throbbing in pain. The shock rendered her speechless. Her ears were ringing. She stumbled to the side, her hand slapping against the stone wall beside the tearoom doorway.

But he wasn't done.

"What will my son say?!" Lucius roared, all semblances of Pureblood decorum completely eradicated by his fury. It had grown as hot as the stars. He struck her again, on the front of her shoulder and then a third time in the mouth. Her jaw tingled and sparked and she tasted blood where her teeth cut the inside of her mouth.

A whimper left her lips as her brain struggled to process that Lucius Malfoy was actually beating her in the entryway of the Manor. Where was Draco? Why wasn't he here?

"What will my son do when he finds out I've beaten his little Mudblood toy?" Lucius snarled, grabbing a fistful of her hair and yanking her up onto the tips of her toes. "He seems to have planted a seed in your revolting head that you have the power to speak your mind to me in my house. That you're safe. You're not safe, you stupid girl."

Completely losing her bravado, she wailed and reached for his fingers in the depths of her curls. There was blood in her mouth, collecting in a miniature pool underneath her tongue. Her eyes were stinging with tears, her face with the early formations of bruises. Her heart raced, beating to the song of sheer terror.

He slammed her back against the wall and another violent pain exploded in her skull. She saw spots dancing in her field of vision, flitting across his wrathful face. Her knees went weak and she started to slide down the wall. His hand pinning her shoulder to the stone stopped her. She could see that his teeth were clenched.

"You. Are. Nothing."

He struck a heavy, agonizing blow to her diaphragm.

The rush of breath leaving her chest mingled with the lingering sensitivity from having only just finished healing, and she collapsed on the ground. She caught herself on one hand, whimpering again as she held her other arm across her aching ribcage. She wheezed for breath.

He leaned down to pick up his cane and pointed it at her.

"Breathe a word of this to your master, and I will avada as you sleep."

As he walked away, she wondered when she had become so naïve.

Hermione couldn't speak any words, let alone breathe. Her lungs screamed for air that she couldn't seem to take in. With one final cough, her eyes closed.

Where are you, Malfoy?

It was not pain that Hermione woke to.

It was to Teensy, kneeling over her in a potato sack and tipping a potion down her throat. Hermione swallowed it, rolling her head upward while still lying on her side so she could do so. She felt the potion taking effect immediately, clearing her body of the ache in her bruised flesh.

Teensy smiled, though her eyes were watery.

"Wormsling tells us youse tried to helps," she whispered, casting an anxious glance over her narrow, frail shoulder. She set the empty potion bottle on the floor and picked up another. "This ones is for the headaches."

Hermione drank it, too disoriented to care about the bitter flavor. The magic soothed her throbbing skull. She placed her hands flat on the floor and pushed herself into a sitting position.

"Hurrys," Teensy whispered, her hand on Hermione's arm as she tried to help. "Youse should goeses to your roomses."

"Th-Thank you, Teensy," Hermione said with a meek smile.

Teensy gathered the bottles in her arms and dashed off towards the kitchen, her little feet pattering against the floor. Hermione watched her go, feeling oddly self-satisfied. If standing up for Wormsling had caused her to get a beating, then so be it. The cause was just.

As she hurtled up the stairs, taking them two at a time, Hermione wondered if she should follow Lucius' final order or not.

Should she tell Draco what happened?

If she told Draco, what would he do? She'd seen him argue with his father. She'd heard him shout at him. But she'd never seen Draco be violent. In fact, she was the one who had punched him in Third Year. He had a snarky, biting personality, but she'd never seen him raise a hand to another person.

Except that he had strangled her.

The question wasn't whether or not she should tell Draco. The question was whether or not there was more danger in telling him than not. Realistically, Hermione could not see Draco going so far as to hurt his own father. If she told Draco and he confronted Lucius, the next time she was alone in the Manor with him would be her last. She was sure of it.

No, she couldn't tell him. Not if she wanted to live.

There was no bravery in throwing herself before the fangs of a snake.

She couldn't trust Lucius. He had gone mad. Or he was on the spiral downward. Whichever it was, he was dangerous and unhinged. Whoever she remembered him being in her Second Year, when she'd encountered the reserved, aristocratic wizard in the bookstore? That man was gone, and he
would stay gone until Narcissa woke up.

Maybe he was gone forever.

Mad though he was, a lot of the things he'd said had resonated with her in a negative way. As brave as she was, she knew this was not her world anymore. She had a place picked out for her, and it was not on equal footing with Pureblood wizards. She was worthless in the eyes of the pure. The only reason she was alive was by Lucius' extension of mercy through Draco. Draco didn't want her dead, and so Lucius was reluctantly honoring his wish.

Hermione and Draco both knew that her potion brew was not complicated.

She owed Draco her life, the life that he was granting her every day that she woke up on satin sheets and soft pillows.

But why? she thought. Why me?

There was something else that had been bothering her.

If Voldemort's werewolves were the ones who came after us in Paris . . . Then why was Draco there?

She trotted down the hall, sending surreptitious glances towards Narcissa's door. It was cracked open. She could hear the murmuring of Lucius' voice. As much as her curious nature wanted to hear what he was saying, her fear won out. She made a beeline for her bedroom door.

When she was inside, she turned to face the door. She pushed it shut as quietly as she could, wincing at the creaking of the hinges. With a gentle click, the door was shut. She exhaled with relief.

Crack.

Hermione shrieked in fright at the loud noise echoing through her bedroom. She whirled around with a look of bewilderment on her face. She pressed her hand flat over her pounding heart.

Draco.

"Merlin's beard, Malfoy." she said, closing her eyes against a sudden, overwhelming spike of emotion. It was relief wrapped in safety. A feeling that she hadn't realized she'd been absent of feeling all day. "You frightened me!"

And then she took a second look at him.

He was wounded.

There was blood smeared on his face and neck. He had a forearm held across his chest and there were places on his robes that looked damp and dark. His platinum hair was speckled with crimson.

There was a sword in one hand, long and thin. It dripped with black ichor. He held his wand in his other hand. As he dropped both to the floor, he appeared somewhat disoriented.

Their gazes locked across the room.

"Granger," he said, managing a very meek, lopsided grin. Hermione saw blood in the lines between his teeth.
He fell to his knees.

For a moment, panic forced Hermione to think about all of the horrible things that had ever happened to her in her entire life. About the war and the screaming of children and the blood of her friends. About the fact that she could let him die right there, and it would probably be vengeance for any number of innocent lives he had taken since the war. Perhaps even during it.

His expression was full of anguish. He let out a groan of pain and started to sway.

_In this moment . . . He belongs to me._

A beat passed.

The panic subsided, becoming replaced by the calm demeanor that had gotten her through five years of running.

Draco was her friend. She couldn't - and wouldn't - watch him die.

Hermione scrambled to his side, sinking to the floor as he fell against her chest. She grunted with exertion from the full weight of his body, struggling to lay him on his back. He was talking, his words mingled with coughs and moans of agony.

"The n-necklace," he murmured, one bloodied hand reaching towards the pearl pendant she still wore around her neck. He seemed too weak to make it, and his hand fell against her chest, over her right breast. She paid it no mind. "I . . . C-Came as soon . . . Ah . . . Robes. G-Get my r-robes off."

Hermione grabbed the edges of the gaping hole in the chest of his robes and the shirt he wore beneath it. She pulled and ripped, exposing his bare chest. It was dark with blood and the scar from his Sixth Year duel with Harry in the bathrooms had been torn open.

"What happened?!!" she cried, her hands splayed out as they hovered over the wound. She didn't know what to do, or where to start.

"A-Apparated . . . Spliced," he said, blood gathering in his mouth. He coughed again and it spilled out of the corner of his lips and down towards his ear.

Hermione's eyes widened in alarm. If he'd been Splinched and there was blood coming out of his mouth . . . He needed potions. Serious potions. Now.

She had no other option.

She had to get Lucius.

"I'll get your father," she said.

"Wait!" he cried, and he sounded like the boy she remembered in school. Scared, with a whine to his tone. His hand lifted again, seeming heavy with invisible sand, and wrapped around the side of her waist. He was looking at her with a desperation in his eyes that she'd never seen before. "Are y-you . . . All right?"

"What?"

"The necklace," he said around a moan, one hand thrown onto the floor by his head, the other digging its fingernails into her back and side. "C-Couldn't get a-away . . . V-Vampires attacked . . . Came as . . . Ngh . . . Soon as I c-could . . ."
"Where were you?" Hermione whispered, horrified. "Where were you when you Apparated?"

His face scrunched up in agony and he arched his back for a moment. Hermione felt the anxiety clawing at her chest, but something kept her on the floor, poised to jump up.

"F-Finland," he groaned, shuddered, and then his eyes rolled up into his head. He let out a rough scream. "Oh, fuck! It f-fucking hurts!"

Hermione took off like a lightning bolt, throwing her bedroom door open with the sounds of Draco's agonized howling coming out from behind her. She tried not to think about anything other than the fact that he was dying on her bedroom floor with each passing moment.

Her mind betrayed her.

*He Apparated from Finland for you,* her thoughts chanted at her as she flew down the hall, screaming Lucius' name. *He Apparated from Finland for you.*

The only way it was possible to Apparate all the way from there was to Apparate multiple times from place to place. From the looks of it, he'd done it from wherever he was in Finland, across the water and onto the island, and all the way to Wiltshire. The Apparition had Splinched the weakest part of his body: his scar.

*Why? Why did he Apparate from so far? Why?*

Lucius came stumbling out of Narcissa's room, silvery-white hair fluttering around him. He wore a pair of black trousers and a black shirt. The casual look threw Hermione off, but the murderous look in his eyes remained from earlier that evening.

Hermione didn't even need to say anything.

Draco's cries said it all for her.

Lucius's eyes went as wide as saucers and he took off running towards her bedroom. Hermione followed, panting for precious air as they dashed into the room.

Draco still lay on his back, one knee up and the other leg outstretched. He didn't seem to know what to do with his hands, alternating between hovering them over the open wound as if to try and stop the pain by touching it, and covering his face in anguish.

"Father," with a half-lidded look of pain was all Draco managed before his face scrunched and he was crying out again.

Hermione didn't understand why he was reacting this way. She understood that he'd been Splinched, but Ron had been Splinched and had only shivered and groaned. Draco was outright screaming in agony. Like he was burning from the inside out.

Lucius fell to his knees, already whipping his wand out of his sleeve. Hermione went to Draco's other side, kicking his discarded sword aside. She knelt down beside him.

"*Vulnera sanentur!*" Lucius cried, the glowing tip of his wand moving back and forth along the shoulder-to-hip wound. "*Vulnera sanentur!*"

Nothing happened.

Hermione racked her brain as she tore Draco's robes the rest of the way open. "It's . . . He was
Splinched, so it . . . " She took a breath, trying to calm down. It was so hard when her heart hurt at the sound of Draco's pain. "The counter curse for Sectumsempra won't work. He needs Dittany and . . . And unicorn hair thread."

Did they have such an expensive item?

She shook the thought away as soon as it appeared. They were the Malfoys. Of course they had unicorn hair thread.

Lucius snapped his fingers and a House Elf appeared.

"Greeves, bring us unicorn hair thread, restorative potions for flesh and organs, and Essence of Dittany," he ordered, the words leaving his lips in quick succession. "Immediately! Do not dally!"

The House Elf nodded, looking concerned, and then disappeared. He reappeared almost instantaneously with the things they needed. Lucius pointed to Hermione, and the House Elf trundled over to give them to her.

Hermione took one more deep breath. Draco sucked in a scream, turning it into another groan.

"All right," she said, voice strong. She opened the packaging on the lavender thread and unraveled the spool. She used her teeth to snap it off. "We need to use this to sew his wound up. It looks flimsy, but when it touches blood, it firms up. It's charmed to pierce flesh while sewing. Here."

Lucius took the thread she offered, narrowing his eyes. She ignored it, not caring about the bruises she could feel on her cheek, head, shoulder, and torso. She bit some more of the spool off for herself. Draco whimpered and trembled, watching her. There were tears mingling with the specks of blood on his cheeks, but he just looked angry and tormented.

"Start at his hip. I'll start at his shoulder," she said firmly. "Just work through the blood; we can't Scourgify him until it's sewn. Now."

Hermione wasted no more time. She wasn't going to wait for Lucius, either. If he was too slow, she'd just keep sewing. After twisting her curls up and knotting them at the top of her head, she began.

She pinched the two ragged sides of Draco's Splinched scar together, ignoring his whimper and puncturing his flesh with the end of the magical thread. As she began to weave the thread in and out in a puncture-pull-puncture pattern, she saw Draco lift both of his knees. His legs were shaking.

"Just grab onto me," she said, taking the cold tone she'd used with Lucius and melting it to a soothing one for Draco's sake. "It's not going to hurt any less."

Lucius had begun to sew. The moment his thread pierced Draco's skin, Draco's hand slammed down on top of Hermione's thigh through her skirt. He clenched her flesh so hard that she knew it was going to leave another bruise. He hissed and breathed through his teeth, whining in his chest.

"Greeves," Hermione said, completely taking charge.

The House Elf leapt forward from behind her. "Yes, Missus?"

Lucius made a dissatisfied sound at the moniker. Hermione ignored that, too.

"Blood Replenishment Potion, down his throat. Hurry," she said, diligently working. Her fingers were slipping in the immense amount of blood that covered Draco's torso, but she ignored it. Sweat
beaded on both hers and Draco's bodies.

Greeves did, and Draco opened his mouth to accommodate.

"Now, Essence of Dittany," she said. "Follow the line I've sewn. Don't put it where the thread hasn't reached."

"Granger," he growled. "It hurts."

"You'll be fine," she said. "Stop whinging."

Lucius scowled, but was ignored.

Draco's response between groans of agony was to laugh incredulously. "You're - fuck - a b-bloody witch."

"No shite, Salazar," she said, smirking as she pierced another hole through his skin.

"Oh, my - fuuuuck," he groaned, and then he gave her a ferocious, bloodstained grin. "Don't act . . . L-Like you're - ngh - not enjoying . . . This. Both of y-you."

"After the trouble you've given me," Lucius said, "I cannot complain."

Together, Greeves, Hermione, and Lucius worked to sew Draco up and get the Essence of Dittany onto his wound. All the while, Draco clenched Hermione's thigh and she forced herself to ignore the pain of it.

When they were done, Greeves gave Draco the rest of the potions he had brought. For a moment, the pain potion settled his body down. He let one leg fall flat again, running his fingers through his bloodstained hair. The hand on Hermione's leg loosened its hold, but remained curved around her flesh. Hermione could feel its heat even through the fabric of her skirt.

She focused on inspecting the suturing to ensure it was tight.

"What happened, son?" Lucius asked, slightly breathless.

Draco took a deep breath, his face turned up to the ceiling. "The Dark Lord sent me, Rowle, and Nott Sr. to the vampire town of Metsa to see why there was so much pushback from the inhabitants. They don't approve of the way he took over. We were in talks all day, and things didn't look like they were going to go in our favor. After we went to bed, they attacked us."

He took another deep breath, a slight shiver rippling through his body. "We barely made it out of there, to the outskirts of town. Contacted the Dark Lord. He sent an infantry company of thirty. We went back to town and battled them."

Hermione glanced at his sword. The black substance that was congealing on the blade . . . It was vampire blood.

*So that's why he fences every day in the gym.*

"So why have you returned?" Lucius asked. "Did you ensure to stamp out the entirety of the rebellion?"

Hermione shot him a sidelong look. Draco was his son, and he was more interested in making sure the Dark Lord's task was completed first? The more she got to know Lucius, the more she understood why Draco was such a prat in school.
Draco exhaled through his nose and after a pause, continued. His arms looked like they were shaking.

"Yes, father, it's been quelled."

Lucius scoffed and began to lecture him, as if they hadn't just sewed a two-foot long gash in his son's chest. Hermione stared at him in thinly-veiled disgust, her scarred nose wrinkling.

Draco's gaze darted over to Hermione's, dropped to her necklace, and then lifted back to hers. She immediately felt the press of his mind against her own. His Legilimency.

She let him in.

_The vitals trace I put on that necklace, came his voice in her head. It alerted me to your distress. What happened?_

_Nothing, she said, thinking up a lie on the spot. I tripped coming down the stairs and had a tumble._

He stared at her, the drone of Lucius's voice going on in the background. The older wizard didn't seem to notice that Draco's eyes were on Hermione.

_I couldn't get here right when it happened because they attacked. Forgive me._

Hermione almost laughed. _Forgive you? Malfoy, you Apparated across two countries and a body of water just to get here. That's nothing that deserves forgiveness. Her right hand, which was on the floor beside her knee, inched forward. She touched the tips of her fingers to the part of his ribcage that met the floor and allowed the corners of her lips to twitch upward. That deserves gratitude._

She felt even worse for lying now.

He searched her eyes for a minute, still trembling, and then his gaze dropped lower. Something shifted in his eyes, like rainclouds turning stormy. Hermione didn't have to ask to know he was looking at the cut on her cheek. She didn't know how it appeared, but she could feel the bruise that surrounded the wound.

_A tumble down the stairs?_

She nodded, feeling guilt swirling in the pit of her stomach. She'd never been very fond of lying. That was more Harry and Ron's thing.

Suddenly, Hermione noticed his shaking seemed to be getting stronger.

"Is your pain coming back?" she asked aloud.

Draco's mind slipped from hers like droplets of water. He opened his mouth to speak and then clenched his teeth. He shuddered again. "_I - Nh - Yes._"

Hermione's frown deepened. His magical core was burning the potion off too fast. That wasn't possible for a Splinching.

Something was wrong.

"Why is there so much blood on your neck?" Lucius said, glaring at Draco's bloodstained throat.

Draco shivered and squeezed his eyes shut. "Vampire."
Hermione steeled herself. Whatever was going on inside of his body was coming back with a vengeance. The pain potion was wearing off, and it was happening quicker than was normal.

And if it had to do with a vampire . . .

"What?!" Lucius practically roared.

"B-Bit my neck." His mouth opened in a gasp. Hermione could see lucidity leaving his eyes.

"Fuck. It's burning again. It burns. It -"

And Draco was screaming again, his head thrown back as his body began to convulse with a violence.

When Hermione peered closer, she could see two raw, open circular wounds near his pulse point. The bite had been violent. The wounds were way larger than they should have been.

Lucius and Hermione exchanged horrified glances.

That was why he was in so much agony. Vampire venom was coursing through his system. He was going to turn.

Lucius snarled, picking up his wand and aiming it at Draco's throat. "No son of mine will turn to filth. Venenum siphonis!"

The veins in Draco's chest turned black, spiderwebbing all over his body in an intricate map of his system. His back arched higher and higher off of the ground, until Draco propped himself up on his elbows and kicked at the ground. It was like he was trying to escape whatever the impossible spell was doing to him, but there was nowhere to go.

Hermione's jaw dropped. She'd never heard of this spell, but judging by the fresh bout of anguish at the base of Draco's screams, it was not the type of spell that came from the light.

"Suck it out," Lucius hissed to her through gritted teeth. "I can't hold the venom in his throat forever."

Hermione gaped at him. The spell he'd used had pulled all of the vampire venom from Draco's body and brought it as close to the injection site as possible. The only way this spell could be possible was with Dark magic.

And Lucius just wanted her to suck the venom out like a snake wound.

There was a sudden gust of icy wind inside her head, nearly giving her a migraine on the spot. It was Draco. She could feel his frenzied, panicked emotions.

No, Granger! Just let me turn! Don't risk -

She blocked him out. She wasn't going to let him turn. Not when his father had seemed on the cusp of insanity when he was beating her downstairs.

Hermione leaned forward faster than she hoped Draco could anticipate, and latched her mouth to the wounds. She sucked as hard as she could, tasting the bitter, metallic flavor of blood as it filled her mouth to the brim. Her stomach roiled with nausea.

She turned and spat it out, coughing as she struggled to keep herself from being sick.
"Again," Lucius ordered.

"Granger, fucking _don't_!" Draco protested, leaning his weight on one elbow so he could grip her shoulder. His hold was weak, no doubt from everything his body had undergone that night. It was easy for her to brush him off.

She grabbed onto one side of his neck and suctioned out another mouthful. Then, she spat. She turned and did it again. And so on and so forth, four more times. It was on the fifth time that he finally stopped trying to push her away, and the sixth when his hand was on her thigh again. Squeezing. Just squeezing.

His screams faded to heavy breaths, and then he was quiet.

Hermione spat the last mouthful out onto the dark, bloodstained carpet, and then retched. She retched again and again, hurling up the contents of her stomach as the rank taste in her mouth lingered.

"Greeves," Lucius said, sounding exhausted. "Get her something for the nausea. I won't have her destroying my carpets."

Greeves disappeared.

"Now what happens?" Hermione's voice sounded and felt hoarse. She shuddered as her mouth seemed to tingle with the remnants of the venom and blood.

Greeves returned with a potion, which she drank greedily. Her nausea and the horrid flavor disappeared.

"The spell removes the venom," Lucius said in his familiar clipped tone, tucking his wand into his sleeve and reaching for Draco's. "But it does not remove the magic. He must go through the process."

"Will I turn?" Draco asked, wincing as he sat up fully.

"No," Lucius said, rising to his feet. His hands were red with Draco's blood. "But your magical core will endure the process of the change, and it will react as though you are turning. You will get very tired and will need medical care."

"All right," Draco said, and then he looked at Hermione.

Ice against her mind.

_You silly, barmy bint. You should have just let me turn._

Hermione allowed her lips to twitch upward. _I'm a Gryffindor._

His eyes softened.

Lucius cleared his throat. "I will be taking you to St. Mungo's. It's best that you have _proper_ care throughout this process." His disdainful glance fell upon Hermione. "Just because the purity of his blood stains your lips, does not mean yours will be any less muddy. Rejoice in the fortune you've had to taste the blood of a Malfoy."

Hermione gave him a dark look. "My blood isn't too muddy to care for your wife. I can take care of him." _Like he took care of me._
"He needs the best care to ensure that he doesn't become something . . ." Lucius looked down his nose at her. "Dirty."

Draco's head snapped up, glaring, but he had no time to say anything. In fact, Hermione had no time to react, either.

Lucius reached down to place his hand on his arm.

*Crack.*

Hermione was alone with a sword covered in the ichor of vampires, a carpet stained with the blood of the only living person she could say she cared about, and her whirlwind emotions.

She fell asleep right there on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE LEAVE A REVIEW!

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Chapter Eleven

Chapter Summary

This chapter as well as Chapter Twelve are EXTENSIVELY dedicated to my alpha, mayghaen17. She literally went above and beyond to help me get them to where they're at, and a lot of golden lines were directly attributed to her genius.

Also I have noticed some people disliking Hermione and I just want to point out that that is the curse of being a strong woman.

TRIGGER WARNING: A very complicated dub-con. This IS a dub-con. Hermione repeatedly goads him and tells him specifically to do what he does. The first moment she tells him OUT LOUD not to hurt her, he stops.

Do not comment on this chapter as though I, a person who has been raped TWICE, does not know what rape is. Your comment will be deleted, bro.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Counting the Stars

Chapter Eleven

When Darkness Falls - Secret Garden, Til the Light Goes Out - Lindsey Stirling, Xion - Moises
Draco did not return the following day.

He did not return then, nor the day after, and not the third day. On the dawn of the fourth day, Lucius returned but he avoided Hermione like the plague.

That didn't bother her one iota.

What did bother her, however, was the fact that Draco had been gone for so long. Had he turned into a vampire after all? Had Lucius hurt him?

She spent those days worried sick, with no energy to try and pretend she didn't care about Draco's well-being anymore. After spending a half-hour scrubbing his blood off of her hands at the sink in her loo, she knew he was the only friend she possessed. That meant that he was all she had.

If she saw him again, she would embrace him.

At the end of the fourth day, someone knocked on her door.

The lanterns were still lit, signifying that the head of house was still awake. She wore a pair of pink pyjama shorts and a large blue sleep shirt that nearly reached the hem of the shorts.

Lucius had said he was the one who selected the clothing that was stocked in the chiffarobe, but her pyjamas were from the dresser. The shirt seemed a little more "modern" than the skirts and dresses in the wardrobe, and the shorts were definitely not something a Pureblood society witch would wear.

She wondered who was the one to stock the dresser drawers?

She paused for a moment. What if it was Lucius at the door? There was no way he stocked the dresser. How would he react to seeing her bare legs? Would he strike her again and call her filth?

Then, through the door came, "Open up if you missed me."

It was Draco.

Confused as to what he'd just said, she opened the door wide.

"Hey!" he cheered. "You missed me!"

Hermione took a deep breath.

"Malfroy," she said, her gaze falling to the bottle of Firewhiskey in his right hand. "What are you doing?"

"What?" he asked, voice slightly monotone. "I can't come visit my favorite slave?"

She pursed her lips. "I'm not in the mood for tomfoolery."

"You're the Golden Girl with a stick up her arse," he said with a snort. He took a step toward her, swaying back when she lifted her hands in a defensive position. He fell against the doorframe,
shouldering it. "You've never seemed like the type to be in the mood."

Hermione wasn't quite sure what to do. She couldn't even recall the last time she'd been around an individual who was drunk. Did he need to be taken care of? Did he just want company?

The last time she'd seen him, he'd almost died on her floor. The House Elves were still working on trying to gradually vanish the blood from the carpet because there'd been so much of it clinging to the fibers. The sights and sounds of him shaking and screaming weren't exactly something she'd been able to scour from her mind. And now here he stood at her door, and he wanted to visit?

"You've been gone for four days," she said.

"Yeah. And?"

She frowned. With the time they'd been spending together, coupled with her capacity to care way too much about others' well-beings, she was upset. She considered him a friend. But did he consider her a friend?

The conflict was overwhelming.

What she did know was that he was a Death Eater. He worked and fought for Voldemort, and the proof was in the fact that he'd Apparated into her room with a sword covered in vampire blood four days ago. Hermione's friends were dead because of the people he fought alongside. There were countless others dead because of the Dark Lord and his army.

But what she didn't know was what role he had to play in her friends' deaths the day of the battle. Had he slung curses, or just ran to hide? Had he secretly helped anyone, and then just crossed the courtyard at the last minute because of his parents?

She didn't know.

She didn't know.

I don't know.

She didn't know why she considered him a friend, but he was. The more she tried to deny it, the more foolish she felt.

She felt foolish regardless.

"I was . . . Concerned," she said.

He tilted his head to the side, resting it against the wooden frame. Keeping his eyes on her, he took a swig from the bottle.

"Concerned," he said.

"Yes," she said, feeling a bit indignant. "Of course I was. Malfoy, you almost died."

He snorted and then lurched forward. His arm reached out above her head, curved around the edge of the door, and pulled it to slam shut behind him. Hermione was quick to move out of the way. Not because she wanted him to come in, but because she didn't want to find herself crushed flat beneath a toppled-over drunkard.

She crossed her arms over her chest, watching with a sour expression as he staggered over to her bed. He lifted himself on tip-toe and twirled around to face her, his arms held out at his sides in a
lofty manner.
"I wouldn't have died," he said with a flourishing bow.

Hermione pulled a perturbed expression. "Why are you bowing to me?"

Still bent at the waist, he fluttered his free hand. "For your excellent service in saving my sorry life."

He fell back onto his rump on the mattress and immediately hunched forward, elbows on his thighs and the bottle suspended between his hands. His hair fell forward and for some reason, it bothered Hermione.

"Just how pissed are you?" she asked, muttering more to herself than to him as she crossed the space between them. She hesitated before she ran her fingers through his hair and pulled his head back to look into his eyes. She inspected them. They were bloodshot, but not completely unfocused.

"How do I look, Healer Granger?" he asked, flashing his teeth in a slanted, mirthless grin.

"Don't be cheeky," she said, feeling irritated. His hair was just as soft as the last time she'd touched it. This touch felt intimate. But it was either grab him by the hair or the chin and while Draco didn't seem to have an issue grabbing her by the chin a few weeks ago, that wasn't something Hermione felt comfortable doing.

"I'm not that drunk," he said, and his voice was strained from the tilted-back angle of his head. Hermione felt one of his hands - the one not holding the bottle - running along her skin behind her knee.

"Not that drunk, hm?" A flush rising to the apples of her cheeks, Hermione snatched his wrist and held it away from her body.

She frowned. His entire arm was trembling. When she looked down, she could see that his fingers were twitching. "Wait . . . You were crucioed? At St. Mungo's?!"

He ripped his arm away from her, averting his eyes to the floor behind her. He took a drink of his whiskey. "Not at St. Mungo's."

Hermione's face scrunched in alarm. "But . . . When? Why?"

Draco let out a bitter laugh and threw one hand up. "Why not? I'm a fucking coward, so it stands to reason that sometimes, cowards need a little," he gestured with his fingers, "push in order to do what needs to be done."

Hermione put her hands on her hips. "Okay, first things first. You need water so you can sober up a little bit. Then, we can talk about this." He looked up at her, but she had already called for Teensy.

"Missus!" She gasped, her smile widening. "And Master!"

Draco raised two fingers to his temple and brought them outward in a salute. Hermione shot him a look, then gave her instructions to Teensy.
"We need water, please. And some tea, if you wouldn't mind. Oh, and don't forget -"

"Honeys, Missus." Teensy said. "Teensy knowses how much youse likes honeys."

"Lots of honey," Hermione said, smiling.

Pop. Teensy was gone.

"Lotsof honey?" Draco asked, his tone mocking. "No amount of honey is going to make you a sweet girl."

Hermione whirled back around to face him, her curls whipping behind her shoulder. "Come off it, you prat. If I have to stand here and take care of a sozzled Draco Malfoy, then I'm going to need lotsof honey to cope."

He grinned and held the bottle up to her.

"This is what you need in your tea. It's not nearly as sweet, but it'll make you a lot more agreeable to be around."

"And that's why you're the one drinking it." She glared at him. She didn't care what he thought of her. Hermione hadn't gotten through Hogwarts by being agreeable.

Pop. Teensy returned and delivered the drinks, setting them on the end table. She said her goodbyes, and then they were alone.

"Get me the damn glass," Draco said with a sigh. He took an extra drink of the whiskey, as though accepting the water meant he had to hurry and drink as fast as possible.

Hermione went to the table and got him his water glass, then brought it back.

"You're so lazy," she said with a wrinkled nose. "You could use your wand and bring it over yourself."

"And yet you still went and got it for me, so . . ." He took the glass and downed it in one go. Then, he set it on the carpet. "Gonna take a lot more than that to sober me up, though."

"So take a Sober-Up potion."

"That defeats the purpose of . . ." He stopped to drink more whiskey, smacking his lips with an obnoxious sound after he pulled the bottle away. ".- this."

"Oh, I'm sure." She rolled her eyes.

She glanced behind him, at her bed, and her thoughts began to spin.

What was he doing in here, anyway? Why had he shut the door? Did he think she was going to just let him sleep in her bed? He just kept drinking. Soon, he'd be completely sloshed, and then what was she supposed to do with him?

"Russia," he suddenly muttered. "Tch. Russia."

"Russia?" She relaxed one hip and crossed her arms. "What's in Russia?"

"I don't fucking know!" Draco knocked back some more of the bottle. "The Dark Lord's pretty adamant that we keep that end goal in mind. No matter what we do in the interim,
we're going to Russia in the end. What's in Russia? I have no fucking clue, but we're going." He passed a hand across his face. "As if we don't have lives? As if we don't have other things we'd rather be doing? Finland was a long-shot, and it's proving to be ridiculous. Absolutely ridiculous."

Hermione shifted to relax her other hip. This was more information about the Dark Lord than she'd had in years. It was common knowledge during the war that the Dark Lord wanted control of Britain. But she didn't think anyone had stopped to think about what he would do next if he'd won. Back then, Hermione couldn't have guessed which country he'd go for first.

Scotland made sense, so when he took over that country, she wasn't surprised. She knew he had Lithuania, France, and Ireland, too. And now Finland. What else did he have control over? If Lithuania had vampires, then what did the other countries have that he wanted? What could possibly be in Russia?

Draco stood up, the movement so abrupt that Hermione had to take a step back and lift her chin. He was glaring past her head.

"I'm such a fucking . . ." He growled at nothing and took another drink. "I'm such a coward, Granger. You have no idea."

Hermione eyed the bottle. This wasn't going to go anywhere. He was just going to work himself into a frenzy and drink too much. Then, he was either going to pass out here in her room and make things uncomfortable for her, or he was going to get sick. If he got sick, there'd be altogether too great a quantity of his bodily fluids staining her carpet.

"You're not a coward, Malfoy," she said.

He breathed a laugh and raised the bottle. Hermione's hand shot out and pressed downward on his forearm to stop him. They locked eyes and she raised her brows.

"You Apparated all the way from Finland at the end of a battle with vampires, wounded and poisoned with vampire venom. All because you thought I was hurt." Hermione bit her lower lip as she thought about her next words. She searched his face, as though the words were there, and saw his gaze drifting downward and lingering on her mouth. "You're not a coward. You've risked everything to give me safe harbour, even if I am essentially your mother's Healer. You . . . You protect me, and you're my friend."

The silence that stretched between them made her more uncomfortable than she'd been in a long time. She didn't know if it was because she had just admitted to Draco Malfoy that she, Hermione Granger, actually considered him her friend, or if it was because he was looking down at her so intently that it was making her skin crawl. Or maybe she just felt horrid for feeling the way she felt when her friends were six feet under.

She just wanted him to say something.

Suddenly, he whipped the bottle of Firewhiskey back and hurled it over her head, across the room. Hermione jumped at his sudden movement, his enraged facial expression filling her with confusion and terror. When the bottle smashed against the chifferobe, shattering into thousands of tiny shards, she let out an uncharacteristic shriek of alarm. Her shoulders shrugged upward and she held her hands up.

"I'm not your friend, Granger!" he roared, his hands in fists at his sides. "Are you really that damn ignorant that you can't see the world for what it is now? Are you so bloody imbecilic that you
mistake the things I do for you for kindness, and not charity?" His eyes blazed. "Four days ago, I slashed twenty vampires to ribbons. Twenty vampires who had done nothing wrong except to stand up to the Dark Lord's acquisition of the FWC. And tonight? Tonight, I just poisoned a table full of FWC members who dared to question his claim to leadership. Do you not grasp that? I killed over thirty living beings in less than one week, and you want to think that I'm your friend?"

As he shouted, he advanced on her, forcing her to take one step back at a time. She kept one hand out, desperate to keep him at a distance. The last time she'd seen him this angry, he'd nearly strangled her to death. Her heart pounded faster. The look on his face was worse than the fact that he was yelling.

She felt mortified. Ashamed of herself for allowing her sheltered mindset and denial of her circumstances to make her believe that Draco was anything like a friend should be.

Thirty.

He'd killed thirty living beings.

That wasn't someone she wanted as a friend. That wasn't someone with any redeeming qualities.

"Are you that starved for affection?" he hissed, giving her a revolted once-over. "Are you that pathetic?"

Hermione couldn't speak. There were so many words in her head, so many things she wanted to say to him, but she didn't know how to disentangle them from the slow feeling of anxiety that was crawling toward her. The fear she'd had since the beginning.

The moment Narcissa woke up, she would be killed or turned in.

Had she gone mental? Did she really consider him her friend, or was it some sort of strange syndrome where her mind was applying feelings to whoever was there?

"Salazar's fucking . . ." He turned away from her and scrubbed at his face with his hands. "I'm not a good enough friend to anyone, let alone to you. I have a shelf full of poisons that I just leave out where anyone can get to them. And I just trust that nothing will happen to anyone with them. So not only am I a coward, but I'm an idjit."

He walked back to the bed and sunk down onto it. Hermione stood staring at him, her chest heaving with anger and lingering terror at his prior outburst. He was definitely drunk, to go from shouting to self-destructing in less than two minutes, but she didn't care. It didn't excuse anything.

It didn't make her feel any better about humiliating herself.

"You are," she said.

"And I -" He stopped mid-sentence. "What?"

She glared at him. "You are a coward. You killed all those people . . . You've killed more people than I probably know of. Now you're sitting here, pissed off your arse, whinging about it like you deserve sympathy for it. Well, you don't. You're a coward, and you deserve to hate yourself for it."

The way he was looking at her could have melted flesh from the bone.

"You have no idea what you're talking about, Granger," he spat, "so I suggest you shut your trap."
"No," she said, finding her courage and squaring her shoulders. "I won't. You're a coward, Draco Malfoy, and you always have been. If you weren't, you wouldn't have to hide behind your poisons so you can come home every night and feel like you're still a good person. But hey, as long as your hands are free of blood, then you're not a murderer, are you?"

"I never said I was a good person!" he yelled, slicing his hand in the air across his throat. "I never said I was a good person, but the fact that you're still on that Gryffindor high horse is wholly unsurprising."

"That's the point of being a good person, Malfoy!" she yelled back. "You aren't supposed to tell everyone about it!"

"I was crucioed," he snapped, standing up. "It's not as if I had a choice in what I've done. I've never had any choice in any of the things I've done. My entire life has been me following orders, doing as I'm told, and living in fear of retribution. The only difference is that unlike my father, the Dark Lord has the power and the vindictiveness to follow through on what he promises. He -"

"You always have a choice," she replied in a cold voice, cutting him off. "If anyone knows what it's like to be crucioed and forced to make a choice, it's me. The only difference between you and I is that I chose to do the right thing."

Flashes of the night at the Manor, when she was torn apart by the Cruciatus at the tip of Bellatrix's gnarled wand flashed across the expanse of her mind. She didn't want to remember. She hadn't wanted to remember since the moment it had happened. Years later, she'd twisted off the lid of the jar that she'd kept it in.

Hermione was a fool. She'd fallen for the charm of the Devil, and now she was burning in the flames of Hell.

Draco turned his face away. She saw his left fist clenching. "That's not fair. It's not the -"

"Don't you dare," Hermione said, raising her voice. "Don't you dare say it's not the same. You have... No idea what that was like for me. None."

His expression was almost blinding in how full of white-hot ire it was. "You think you were the only one to suffer cruelty at the end of Bellatrix's wand?"

"No," she said, "but I was the one who didn't deserve it."

She knew that was cruel even as she thought it. She felt like she could see the words leaving her lips, soaring through the air like poison-tipped arrows, right to his heart.

He started toward her, his steps slow and sure like shadows moving across the grass in the sunlight.

"Didn't deserve it?" His words fell off of his tongue in a near-hiss. "The curse is unforgivable for a reason, Granger. No one deserves that kind of pain, especially none that have experienced it."

Hermione backed away further as he sped up, her feet stumbling over each other as she moved towards the window seat. When the edge of its cushion hit the backs of her knees, she was forced to stop.

He loomed over her like a sentinel of dark fury.

"Do you even know how old I was the first time I felt the curse wreaking havoc on my body?"
She shook her head out of reflex, but she continued to glare up at him. Her hands balled into fists again, struggling against the urge to run or scream. He leaned forward, dipping his head down until she felt his lips brush against her ear. She tried to cringe away, but his hand coming up to wrap tight around her upper arm stopped her.

"Perhaps if you and your arrogant friends had given me a fucking chance, then you would know. Just because you had it easy, doesn't mean it was easy for the rest of us. I made the choices that I had to make to survive. That's why I'm the one with the key and you're the one in chains."

Chains. Chains, like a prisoner or a slave. She should have known his little display with telling her she could just walk out the door was a farce. Impossible choices were not indicative of freedom. They were just captivity in disguise.

If that's how he saw her, why had he spent so much time taking her to see Calypso, involving her in such a large secret? Trusting in her the way a friend would?

*Because he knows it doesn't matter what you know.*

Her breath caught.

*Because you belong to him.*

Hermione felt her stomach twisting and churning with the discomfort of her acrimony. She belonged to no one, least of all to him. Nobody owned her. She wasn't up for sale, for grabs, or for the taking. She wasn't property.

*I'm not his.*

Hermione's anger levels shot through the roof of her head. She wasn't going to let him talk like this to her. If he was going to treat her like this - if he was going to bring up parts of the past that his poor choices had directly influenced - then she was going to give him a piece of her mind.

"You want to know why we never gave you a chance, Malfoy? You want to know why Harry, Ron, and I avoided you like you had Dragon Pox even before you revealed yourself to be a foul git?" she shouted. "It's because you act like it's the hardest thing in the world to do good things. You want to know how to do good things? You just do them. It's *not* hard. You do good things, you do the right thing by other people for the greater good of the wizarding world, and then you deal with the consequences as they come."

Her arm was beginning to ache, but he didn't loosen his hold. He scowled down at her, his silver eyes aflame with an intensity that she didn't care to dissect.

"The infamous Gryffindor privilege," he spat. "The mentality that doing the 'right' thing is easy because the consequences are less severe. Forgetting that there are people out there who don't get the luxury of surviving consequences."

"That's just it. I did the right thing, and I still got burned," she said, her hands pointing full-fingered at the center of her chest. She could almost hear Bellatrix's cackling laughter echoing in her head. "I didn't take the coward's path, and I'm dealing with the scars. It's just like you said. All my friends are dead."

He sneered. "And yet, here you are: living with those you swore were your enemies. Living with *a bad person* who makes *bad choices*. What would your precious Potter say if he knew you called the *evil* Draco Malfoy your friend? What would the Weaselbee say if he knew you came with me
of your own free will?" He took the final step. Their chests brushed. "Would it be easier for the Gryffindor Princess to sleep at night if I made her my slave?"

"I'm not your slave, Malfoy," she said, her heart slamming inside her chest. "No matter what role you like to play out in front of your Death Eater friends."

"No," he whispered, shaking his head slowly. "You're not. Because if you were?"

Hermione stifled a cry behind clenched teeth when he grabbed her other upper arm and pulled her up on tip-toe. She regretted initiating this fight, yet she didn't.

She could no longer wait to call him on his bluff. And here she was, finding out that she never should have paid attention to it in the first place.

"If you were, then I could do whatever I wanted." His voice swirled around her like Fiendfyre, scorching her skin and leaving her feeling desperate for reprieve. "I could make you do whatever I wanted, and there wouldn't be a damn thing you could do about it."

Hermione turned her face away, glaring down at the carpet at the foot of the window seat. She felt his breath against the side of her throat through her curls. She shivered.

Something pressed her heart into her stomach. He was right. There was no law in the Dark Lord's world to protect a Muggle-born witch. If Draco wanted her to belong to him, fully and completely, then she did. It wasn't as if she had the power to say no.

Why should she have to suffer the creeping dread? Why should she have to live her life waiting for him to take control over her, send her to the Dark Lord, or leave her to his father's wrath?

She was a Gryffindor. He had no control over her bravery.

Hermione turned her face up towards his, holding his still-angry gaze with hers. She took a deep breath, knowing that this might be her first and last mistake.

This was not the same situation as the day he put his hands around her throat. This time, he was drunk and he was upset and he was still twitching faintly with the Cruciatus' after-effects. This time, she knew she'd gone too far, and she had reached past his defensive barriers and ripped his insecurities out.

He was a wounded animal, and he was going to fight back.

So would she.

"Then," she breathed, "why don't you . . . Master?"

A moment passed.

He narrowed his eyes. There was a challenge in them. One that she was going to rise up to.

"Is that what you really want?" he said.

"Yes," she bit out. "Yes, that's what I really want. Go on and take what's yours, if you think you've got a claim to it."

In the wake of her words, she felt the calm before the storm pressing in on all sides, suffocating her with her foolhardiness. Her fingers began a slow tremble as his silent glare withered her petals until she was two seconds away from turning and running to . . . Where?
She had nowhere to go.

Because of course it was a lie. It was a bold-faced lie, because it would mean accepting this alternate universe where Voldemort won, Harry was dead, and she was a slave in the Malfoy Manor. However, if she didn't call him on his bluff and push him to the edge, then she would forever live in fear of the unknown and the nightmare of what he could do to her when she least expected it.

Impossible choices with consequences that scarred were not choices at all.

"Oh, look at you," he purred.

His hand shot up to curve around the underside of her jaw. She held back the urge to cry out from the shock of it, trying her best to stay strong. He cocked his head to the side and his gaze drifted up and down her face.

"Worth every galleon."

What?

Draco shoved her backward. Her knees buckled and she fell onto the window seat. Before she could even think to lash out at him, his knee was on the seat between her legs and he was pulling violently at her shirt.

This . . . This wasn't what she'd had in mind.

What did he mean?

What did she have in mind?

Worth every galleon?

The clouds cleared and panic took over. The will and desire to be away from him, as far as possible. Just like the night he'd choked her, she began to fight like a witch with a mission, writhing beneath him and flailing her arms. She tried to get her elbows into the circle of his arms, so she could try and slide down off of the seat, but he was too strong.

Hermione managed to get her foot on top of his thigh and when she did, she kicked him as hard as she could. He growled angrily and put his hands on her waist, dragging her back up against the window. She felt the glass, cold as ice against her back. He pinned her there, both of them panting for breath, and their eyes met for a brief moment.

"I'll fight," she whispered, a warning that held little weight.

"Good." A promise made of darkness.

Hermione screamed when he twisted her around and slammed her flat on the seat cushion, sitting heavy on her hips. His eyes were dark and fiery as he hooked his fingers into the collar of her sleep shirt. He was going to tear it. He'd already started pulling.

She needed to stop this. If she didn't fight, then they could never go back. They could never go back to the way things were before.

She bucked her hips and scratched at his forearms. She kicked her legs with wild abandon, the soles of her feet *thump, thump, thumping* against the inlet wall to the same tune as the beating of
her heart. Her fingernails dug into the backs of his hands as she worked to pry his fingers off of her shirt. She bared her teeth like the lioness she knew herself to be, and she made sure he could see her rage burning in her eyes.

"Isn't this what you wanted?" Draco taunted, fighting to try and push her hands away. "Didn't you want me to treat you like this?"

Hermione grunted and continued to struggle, pushing her arms against his hold even as it tightened around her wrists. He was trying to pin them by her head. She couldn't let him get the chance. Her right arm hurt, the one connected to the shoulder that Lucius had struck.

"I'm - not - yours!"

There was a series of slapping noises as their arms entangled.

He grunted.

She snarled.

And then he had both of her wrists twisted underneath her, pinned between her back and the seat. She squirmed, trying to wrestle out of his hold, but it was impossible. Her only saving grace was that he was on his knees above her, and she had enough space to wriggle her hips.

If she could just scoot up and get her knee where she wanted it . . .

"This is why you make bad choices," she said, voice strained as she fought. "You take too long to decide."

He gave her an almost incredulous look and then, to her surprise, he let go of her wrists. He sat up on her hips, his gaze scanning her torso with an unreadable expression on his face. She sat up, pulling her arms out and massaging her wrists. She glared up at him.

"That's really what you think?" He scoffed. "You think I take too long to decide what I want?"

"Clearly." She placed her hands flat on the seat by her hips and tried to pull herself out from under him. The strain was hard on her already tired muscles, but she wasn't going to stop trying to get away.

Even if this was to be her new life - even if this was what he had always intended - she wasn't going down without trying her damndest to escape.

She tried again to pull herself out, but froze.

His hand was around her throat.

"Granger. I know what I want."

Then, he took his other hand, grabbed her collar, and pulled so hard that the fabric dug into the back of her neck. At the same time, he pushed down on her throat, pinning her in place. She cried out, her hands lifting from the seat and slapping against his wrists.

She heard the shirt rip. She wasn't wearing a brassiere. Did he realize that -

The air in the room was cool against her bare flesh. She could feel heat flooding her entire body, concentrating in her cheeks.
The anger burned hot and bright in her eyes, but it wasn't hot enough to melt the ice in his.

His gaze never left hers even as he wrapped some of the fabric around his hand and tore it wider.

_No. This isn't right._

He couldn't possibly be about to do this.

She was so frightened and her heart was beating so fast. But she was also angry as Hell and wanted to claw his eyes out.

"What would Callie think if she could see you now?" she said, her voice shaking. She was taking a page out of Draco's book of low blows, thinking of how he'd used both Harry and Ron against her. "Bringing me out to see her, to bond with her, and then taking me home to use me like this?"

His eyes flashed. "Don't bring her into this. Don't you fucking bring her into this."

She grabbed onto his hand and slammed it down over one of her breasts. His skin was soft, uncalloused. His fingers, hot from the alcohol in his blood. A shiver rippled along her flesh, starting at her chest and working its way downward.

He tried to pull his hand away.

_Coward_, she said with the withering glare she gave him.

"What's wrong, Master?" she hissed through teeth that seemed fit to remain clenched together. "Don't know how to manage your slave?"

He curled his lip upward and squeezed her throat tighter. She sucked in a ragged, constricted breath. He seemed to be deciding something, or hesitating, or waiting.

Their eyes met again.

The ice melted, and the geyser erupted.

"Oh, _fuck_," he breathed.

And then he was on her, sliding his hand up the column of her throat to force her head to tilt back, his lips against her pulse. His hand kneaded her breast firmly. She felt him nuzzling into her neck in a gentle manner that contrasted the almost bruising way he was fondling her.

She pressed one foot flat on the wall and the palm of her hand on the other wall behind her head and continued to twist, turn, and fight beneath him.

She would struggle until the last second, even if she'd asked for this. She had to.

Draco's body was flush against hers, one knee on the seat and his other foot on the floor. His pelvis ground against hers and it was too much, too overwhelming.

Hermione tried to slip her hand underneath his arm, so she could push it away from her breast.

He began to kiss her neck.

She felt his tongue against her skin and the resulting feeling of it tore a sound from the depths of her throat.
This feels -

He did it again, flanking it with a heated kiss to the skin below her ear, and she moaned.

Why?!

She didn't like this. She didn't like the way this was making her feel. The confusion over why she was taunting him, making him go further and further was tearing her apart.

If she didn't want this, why did she grab his hand and make him touch her?

Do I want this? Do I actually want this?

His hips rolled against hers again and his mouth brushed her ear. Fingers still curved around the underside of her jaw, he used his thumb to turn her face towards the inside of the room. She felt like her vision was blurring. She didn't know if it was tears or exhaustion.

"I'm gonna fuck you like you belong to me," he growled, and then his teeth nipped her ear.

She felt it in her lower body, the way the sensitivity of her skin reacted, and it terrified her.

She couldn't let this happen. She didn't want this to happen, but her body didn't seem to comprehend her distress.

His left hand removed itself from her breast, leaving it cold and swollen. In one swift move, he'd moved his knee between her thighs and the hand was hooked around the back of her bare leg. It slid down towards her rear, the tips of his fingers brushing the hem of her pyjama shorts. She struggled harder, the panic reaching the heights of her mind.

He's drunk. He's drunk. I'm so stupid. He's drunk.

It was her temper. She'd let her temper get the best of her.

Everything was ruined. Whatever it was that they had was ruined. She didn't know whose fault it was. All she knew was that she'd asked for this.

Why hadn't she realized he'd actually go through with it?

Hermione's mind raced and whirled and leapt.

She had just wanted him to understand. She just wanted him to understand that everything was wrong, and that it wasn't fair that she was living in a world where her friends were dead and the Dark Lord had won. She just wanted him to understand that bad choices were cowardly, and that she wanted him to - He dragged his teeth down her throat and his tongue along her collarbone - understand that she hadn't meant any of it.

"You don't believe she's mine?"

She took her words back.

"What's mine is mine, for my eyes only."

He was kissing the peak of her breast now, and the feeling in her body was anything but opposing. He groaned and moved his fingers from her throat up into her hair. Her eyelids fluttered. She gasped. Her womb clenched and her hips jerked beneath his.
"Yes," he hissed. Another kiss to her breast, his fingers curved around the outside of it. "Mine. You're mine."

"W-Wait," she said, shaking so violently that her teeth clacked together. "Wait, I - ah!"

His tongue laved against her breast and she saw stars.

She would take it all back - everything she'd yelled at him - if only he would just let her go.

She let out a choked sob. The blur in her vision had turned out to be tears after all. She tried to hold them back, but she couldn't.

She couldn't be strong all the time.

Five years of running had led to this. Pinned beneath Draco Malfoy on the window seat in a room that didn't belong to her, in a world that didn't feel right.

Even lionesses mourned.

"Malfoy," she whispered when the hand that was on her leg started to slide into her shorts from the hem. She went limp beneath him, her breathing rapid and terrified. "Please."

"You asked for this," he moaned, open-mouth kisses fluttering along her ribcage under her chest.

Not this. Not this. Not this.

"You said you wouldn't hurt me," she whimpered in a voice meeker than was characteristic for her. "I'll stop fighting. Just . . . Don't hurt me."

At this, he froze.

Two seconds passed.

Hermione felt a tear trail down her temple and into her hair.

He sighed.

"I'm not . . . I'm not gonna hurt you."

She felt his hands leave her body. He moved back until he was able to stand up.

Hermione lay there, trembling and trying to gather the two sides of her torn shirt to hide her nude torso. She couldn't look at him. It was taking everything she had in her body to keep the remaining tears trapped in her lashlines from falling.

I don't know why I ever thought he was my friend.

I don't know how I could ever be so foolish.

Draco carded the fingers of both hands backward through his hair and then tangled in the strands.

"I see what you're doing," he said, eyes wide and full of an understanding that he seemed to have reached. "You're submitting to me because you feel guilty. If I treat you like a slave, it makes you feel like you don't have to feel so bad for surviving."

"Just go away," Hermione whispered, pulling her knees up to her chest in the seat.
His hand curved around her chin, pulling it upward. His facial expression was still dark, but something else seared in his eyes. She attempted to pull back, but he held on tighter. When he spoke, his voice sounded gentler than it had all night.

"I'm not going to be the person you want me to be just because you want me to. I'm not cruel. I'm not going to become a monster just so you can say you were right about me. I'm not a bad person. I'm not like the rest of the Death Eaters, and I never will be."

Their eyes met for a half of a heartbeat and in that second, Hermione knew that it wasn't just that he was angry. He was hurt.

Hermione had hurt him.

But he was a murderer, and that was not something she could overlook. He was a murderer. An assassin for the Dark Lord.

Her master.

Now, she saw the truth.

There was nothing she could do about it.

His hand cupped her cheek.

He was the only person she had leftover from the past, and it disturbed her to know that she had wanted to call him a friend. It distressed her to know that she had become so far removed from the witch she used to be at Hogwarts that she had actually goaded a Death Eater into using her body, pushing it to the limit of acceptability.

She leaned into his touch.

She leaned into his touch because it was the only thing she had to hold onto. He was the only source of comfort she had, even if he was the one who had caused the pain.

That was disturbing.

Draco's brows met as he pulled an expression that was almost anguished. Broken. Desperate.

She looked up at him with tears clinging to her lashes and knew right away that there was one thing that had shattered between them that night. One thing that she thought they never had in the first place. One thing that she now knew she regretted losing for the sake of calling a man a coward, even if she meant it.

Trust.

His thumb brushed her cheekbone.

"I'm sorry, Granger. But I'm not your fucking friend."

Crack.

In his absence, she felt the mortifyingly weak walls around her composure breaking apart.

She gasped and fell to the floor, curled up against the raging inferno that swirled within her body. She clutched the pearl pendant he'd given her and ripped it off. Feeling it hanging uselessly around her neck was suffocating.
She hadn't cried in years.

Tonight, she wept.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Summary

Please check out my website to see the playlist on Youtube for this story! You can play it on your computer in the background to set the tone while reading :) It is majority calm and instrumental music!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Counting the Stars

Chapter Twelve

Schala's Theme - Yasunori Mitsuda, Organization XIII - Project Destati, and Passion (Piano Duet) - Project Destati

They stood in complete silence.

Hermione's mind reeled. Narcissa Malfoy? Narcissa Malfoy was the one leading survivors of Dumbledore's Army to the sanctuary?

She thought back to the instructions. That they were to give the name Phoenix to the restaurant to
be taken to the table. Did that mean . . . ?

Narcissa Malfoy was a secret member of the Order of the Phoenix. She was not their enemy.

"The Dark Lord doesn't know," Hermione whispered, her eyes searching the ground as if for answers. She crossed her arms over her chest. "He couldn't know. He'd never allow her to live."

"This does not make sense," Luna said. "How could she be a member of the Order of the Phoenix?"

"I don't . . ." Hermione's eyes widened. It had to have something to do with her son, with Draco Malfoy. "Perhaps to save her son, she betrayed her king. Maybe she felt she had no other choice."

Neville rubbed the back of his neck. "She seemed sincere. Whatever's happened, she's changed. She's on our side."

"And she's leading us to sanctuary," Hermione said, sitting down on the couch in shock. She looked up at Neville. "When do we leave?"

"In three day's time. We have to take a train to Wiltshire," he said, walking into the sitting room to take a spot beside her on the couch. "Once there, we're to meet her at a pub she gave me the name of. She's going to give us a Portkey to the docks in Pembroke."

"She couldn't give us the Portkey now?"

Neville shook his head, lifting his arm to accommodate Luna, who had come to perch upon his lap with her legs across his thighs. He wrapped his arm around her waist. "She said that she can't get one for a few days, and then she might not have any way of coming to Glasgow without raising suspicion. We have to meet her in Wiltshire because it's close to the Malfoy Manor. Then, she can give us the Portkey as well as the documents we need for passage aboard the boat."

"The boat?" Luna asked.

"There's boats that take survivors across an undisclosed river. It's got a built-in Disillusionment charm. She swore we'd be safe."

They were quiet, each with their own thoughts.

Hermione didn't want to make any mistakes. So far, they'd been extremely lucky. Trusting Molly was easy, but the pixie? Mika? It was good fortune that had carried them this far, and extreme luck that Neville had made it to Glasgow and waited for them there.

Narcissa Malfoy wasn't just any follower of Lord Voldemort. She was the wife of one of his most loyal, trusted Death Eaters. To say Narcissa was playing a risky hand was an understatement.

What if they made the wrong choice?

Hermione, Harry, and Ron had almost succeeded in destroying the Dark Lord by trusting and taking chances. Narcissa was too big of a name. She was risking too much to do this. Hermione knew all too well the things a woman would do for her loved ones, and her parents were proof of that.

And what if it went well? What if they took the risk and made it out all right? What if their friends were at the sanctuary? Their professors? Ron?

It was a risk worth taking.
"Then we'll have to trust her," Hermione said with an air of finality about her. She nodded for good measure. "She's our only hope. Without her, there's no way we can make it all the way to Wales, get to Ireland, and then somehow manage to find the sanctuary without help."

"Yes, and I highly doubt that the sanctuary is not hidden," Luna said, playing with a strand of Neville's curly hair. He looked at her and she gave him a tiny smile. "You had a Derigimy. Sorry."

He lifted his other hand to her chin and tilted it down so he could kiss her. Hermione smiled. She'd grown used to their public displays of affection. They made her happy.

"Then we'll trust her," Neville said after he pulled away. He lifted his eyebrows. "If we want to get to the sanctuary."

"It's settled," Hermione said. "In three days, we leave the flat behind, get on the train, and go to Wiltshire."

"To Wiltshire," Luna and Neville agreed.

Hermione woke with a fever.

It was some sort of flu, maybe a cold. She didn't know. She was fairly certain that she'd gotten it from Draco, given how close he was to her on the window seat, but she was too ill to dwell on anything that had happened. Her entire body hurt.

She was weak on her feet for an entire day, unable to even get out of bed. It made her wonder how much of a struggle it was going to be to get Narcissa up and walking again when she woke. Hermione made a mental note to see about muscle strengthening herbs that she could infuse Narcissa's medicine with, and then fell into a feverish stupor for a few hours.

Teensy came in around supper to see what was the matter, saying that the "Young Master" had sent her. Hermione's heart had wrenched with anger at that.

Of course he sent Teensy, Hermione had thought with disdain. He's too cowardly to look me in the eyes after what he did. To get me sick on top of it? Tosser. Foul tosser.

The next day, when she was finally ready to be able to leave her bedroom, it took her almost an hour to get dressed. She hadn't even woken until after lunch. Hermione was able to open her mouth, but her tongue, mouth, and throat felt raw when she used them, but her muscles were weak and achy.

When she finally got her body into a high-waisted knee-length skirt and a tee shirt, she was made painfully aware of the fact that her stomach was sensitive. A violent nausea overcame her and she had to hurriedly pull the skirt back down to her ankles. She frowned. Her entire closet was full of skirts, trousers, and dresses that were tight at the waist or abdomen. She wasn't quite sure what to do.

She stood at the chiffarobe, staring at the clothing. She needed to figure something out, because she did not want to let another night go by with Draco handling Narcissa's potion. Not even for one more dose. Hermione had always preferred doing her own work. No one was better at her own brew than her.

After standing there for much too long, she realized there was no solution. Her best option was a dress. She pulled one on over her head, wincing as her arms lifted. Once it was on, she could already feel it pressing in on her delicate, vulnerable flesh. She left her hair loose and in a mass of
curled tangles, knowing that she just didn't have the energy to deal with it.

Draco had been right, though. Her nose was scarred. The area that Calypso had run her tongue over was a bit mottled. Nothing too serious, but it was noticeable. Hermione still adored that dragon, and she was certain there was nothing Calypso could do to make herself unlovable.

She paused in her thought process.

Who cared what Draco had to say anymore?

By the time she left her bedroom in her daily slippers, she was on the verge of tears.

How long was this healing process supposed to take? It was just a damn flu. If she was in this much pain and was this exhausted already, how was she supposed to get all the way down to the lab, make the brew, and then get all the way back up the staircase and down the hall to the room they were keeping Narcissa in?

She sighed, and her throat ached in response. She was going to have to get Draco to help her. At this point, she didn't care if he lifted her in his arms and carried her around. She was past the point of rational thought.

But where was he? He'd long since pulled out of her head and taken her memories of the poisoning with him, so there was no telekinetic connection between them anymore. By her count, it was still one day before he was due to go back to Buckingham to meet with the Dark Lord. It was evening - before supper, but way after lunch - so he wouldn't be in the gym. He might be in the lab, but it wasn't normal that he went there until after she arrived. That was typically after dinner.

That left his room or the library. His room was beside hers, but the door was charmed to only appear when he was entering or leaving. The library was all the way downstairs. His bedroom door wasn't even visible.

Memories of the night before last kept trying to break through, but she wouldn't let them. She could deal with them later, when she didn't feel like a giant baby in a skirt.

Did she really have a choice?

And so began the long trek down the stairs.

She may or may not have dissociated along the way.

By the time she reached the hallway that led to the library, she was crying silent tears of frustration. She jammed the backs of her hands across her eyes, wishing she could go back to that day and do everything differently. She didn't want to be looking for help from him. She didn't want him to touch her.

As she neared the library doors, she heard voices coming from the sitting room.

*Perfect, she thought with a bitter feeling in her heart. At least if it's Lucius, or something, he can tell me where Draco is. He can carry my arse to the lab and then to Narcissa's quarters from wherever I find him at.*

She walked up to the edge of the doorframe and then froze just shy of it.

There was a second voice.
"... Best that you keep quiet about this, Carrow."

That was Draco's voice. His tone was on the cusp of politeness, and steeped in warning.

Okay, so she'd found him. He was in the sitting room. With Amycus Carrow. Hermione was not interested in playing slave right now. Perhaps it would be best for her to turn and go to the library.

Carrow spoke, "Agreed. You're fortunate that I didn't decide to go to the Dark Lord with this information after all. However, I find this accord to be agreeable."

There was a rustling of fabric. Hermione knew she'd better start walking towards the library door now. In her sluggish state, she'd get caught. She turned.

"Then we shouldn't have any further issues between the two of us," Draco said, his voice getting louder. He was moving toward the doorway.

"We should not," came Carrow's clipped tone. It was nearing the door, too.

And then they were in the hall, and Hermione had only barely gotten her hands on the doorknobs. She froze in place, her blood chilling in her veins and heart pounding louder. Distress exploded throughout her body. She really did not have the capabilities to kneel right now.

"Mudblood."

Hermione turned at his snarling voice, trying to tell herself that he wasn't going to attack her in front of anyone. She gazed across the way at him, then at Carrow. Carrow was sneering as though she were the most repulsive thing he'd ever seen. She hurried to drop her gaze and didn't say anything, not wanting to exacerbate her symptoms.

Draco came up behind her and wrapped his hand around the back of her neck. She lifted her shoulders, but forced herself not to cringe. She felt his nose brushing her hair by her ear.

"What are you doing out of my quarters?" he growled, loud enough for Carrow to hear.

She turned her head to look up at him, letting him see the tears in her eyes and on her face. She said nothing.

His eyes widened a fraction, his metaphorical mask slipping. Then, he reached past her and ripped the library door open. He pushed on her neck a little rougher than what she could handle, but not so rough as to hurt her.

"Wait for me in there," he ordered. Then, he added, "Assume the position."

She turned to look at him with a disgusted expression on her face, but he had already shut the door. She heard the sounds of their voices, muffled as they walked away.

Sighing, she made her way towards the armchairs and hoped Lucius wasn't lurking about.

She had just reached the chair when the library door creaked back open. She heard his footsteps, rapid against the floor, and then a hand on her lower back. On reflex, she reached for his offered hand and leaned her weight on it.

"He's gone," Draco said, assisting her as she sat down in the chair. "I didn't know you were feeling ready to get up."

"I don't know if I am," she panted, relaxing back in the chair. "You got me sick."
She let the unspoken words hang in the air.

"I'm sorry," he said. He let his words hang unspoken, too.

Her stomach hurt. She winced.

He knelt down beside her chair. "I think I'm gonna take you back to bed."

"You could always levitate me," she said, her voice a croak. It hurt to talk.

"I could," he replied.

Draco wrapped his arm around her shoulders, hooked his arm under her knees, and hoisted her into the air. She was much too exhausted and in pain to marvel at the fact that she was allowing herself to be carried by him, instead choosing to rest her head on his shoulder. She could unpack the trauma later, when she didn't feel like she'd just run fifteen kilometers.

"Your mother," she whispered. "Her potion."

"Try not to talk too much," he said quietly, not looking at her as he toted her down the hall, towards the stairs. "I'll take care of it."

She wanted to retort, to tell him that she was the best person for the job - that that was the entire reason why she was here in the Manor. But even her tongue hurt. Everything hurt, and it hurt worse when she was jostled with every step up to the second floor.

He kicked her door open with one foot, which she found oddly amusing. Purebloods didn't seem like the type to kick doors open. She wondered if he was worried about scuffing from his boots.

The mattress was soft underneath her back, the coverlet heavy on top of her body as he pulled it over her. They'd gotten upstairs a lot faster than she'd thought they would.

When she was safely in bed, she narrowed her eyes at him and pulled a revolted face. "'Assume the position?'"

He scoffed and rolled his eyes. "I don't know what that tosser's looking for. I was playing the role."

"The role," she breathed, already too tired to keep her eyes open but trying her hardest anyway.

"Just close your eyes," he said, voice quiet.

She thought she felt his fingers against her jawline.

The day had come.

*Their train left at 8:00PM. It would travel south to London. They would then transfer to a second train to Wiltshire.*

*Hermione took a bag and cast the same expansion charm on it that she had used on the purse she'd lost in the river. Inside, she packed as much nonperishable food, water bottles, books, and plant-related potions that she'd managed to brew and amass living here at the Glasgow flat. When she was done, she took Neville's satchel and a box for his plants, and cast the charm.*

*Once he and his plants were packed and both bags had Feather Light charms cast upon them, there was nothing left to do. It was time to go.*
They decided to leave the furniture. None of it mattered, anyway. The sanctuary was bound to have the basic things they needed to live. Hell, even if they all sat on the ground, Hermione was sure they'd be happy. They just wanted to be amongst their friends.

Getting to the train station and on the train was a breeze. The trip was only four hours and fifty minutes or so, but they got a compartment anyway. That way, they could lock the door and be safe in case there was a trace on either or all of them.

They chatted in an amiable, excited manner as the train chugged its way out of the station, and talked about what they hoped the sanctuary was like. The entire time, Hermione could only think about Ron.

She hoped he was there.

After a few hours, they started to get sleepy from the rocking of the train car. Luna passed out with her head in Neville's lap and Neville dozed off with his head tilted back against the seat. Hermione felt sleepy herself, but she had a mighty need to use the loo. Getting up and tucking her wand into her sleeve just in case, she left the compartment.

In the small bathroom, she looked at herself in the mirror for a moment. Her hair had gotten quite a bit longer, now that she looked at it. She had a feeling it had something to do with Neville's Ribbonfern. She remembered reading about it for an extra credit Herbology assignment in her Fifth Year. She smiled to herself, fingering the curls that now fell to her breasts.

Did Ron miss her? Sometimes, Neville ran his fingers through Luna's wavy hair for what seemed like hours. Would Ron do the same for her?

Feeling on cloud nine at the thought that she was only days away from possibly seeing him again, she practically bounced out of the bathroom. In the process, she didn't see the person standing there.

"Oop - sorry!" she said brightly. "I wasn't looking . . ."

She trailed off and looked up into the face of her old classmate from Slytherin House, Blaise Zabini. His hair was kept shaved close to the scalp and his grin would have dazzled any other girl who didn't know he was wicked. He was clad in Death Eater robes, but he didn't have a mask or his hood up.

"Apparating onto a moving train isn't nearly as hard as I thought it would be." He smirked. "Long time, no see, Granger. How are your marks?"

His hand whipped up, his wand pointed directly at her as she stumbled backward in the narrow hall. He cast something silently and wandlessly, the jettison of purple sparks aimed straight for her chest. It hit her square in the sternum, sending her flying backward into a crumpled heap a few yards away.

Panic filled every vein in her body. She needed to get up. She needed to stun him and get back to the compartment.

There was no reason to dwell on the fact that they'd been found. It was foolish to think they could have made this trip away from the safety of the wards around Neville's flat without some sort of trouble.

Hermione rolled onto her back, catching sight of Blaise lunging toward her. Quick as a flash, she ripped her own wand out of her sleeve and aimed it at him.
“Stupefy!” she whispered, so as to not alert any Muggles in their compartments.

The spell landed before Blaise had the opportunity to block it, and he fell onto his back horizontally across the hallway floor.

Hermione scrambled to her feet and made a mad dash forward, leaping clear over his prone form and running as fast as she could back to their room. She slammed the door shut behind her, the loud schlack rousing Neville and Luna both instantly from sleep.

"Hermione?" Luna said, yawning.

"What's the matter?" Neville asked.

"They're here!" was all Hermione could manage to cry.

When the two of them saw Hermione’s disheveled appearance and wild eyes, they sprung to action. They got to their feet, Luna gathering up both of the bags, pulling the straps on over her head, and tightening them. Neville pulled out his wand and pushed both Hermione and Luna behind him, his immense height and the broadness of his muscular body filling the compartment. Both he and Hermione pointed their wands at the door.

"Who was it?" Neville asked, voice hard as flint.

"A Death Eater," Hermione said, breathless. "Blaise Zabini. He said he Apparated onto the train."

"He's probably not alone," Neville spat. "Death Eaters travel in packs. Like animals."

"Then we'll fight them like animals."

They didn't have to wait long.

The door blasted open from the outside, splinters and shards of wood rocketing toward them. Hermione whipped her wand in a tiny circle. A blue shield appeared in front of them like a splash of water, turning the wood into ash.

Two Death Eaters in masks stood there, already slinging wordless curses in their direction. Neville was a force to be reckoned with, sending bombardas toward them one after the other in quick succession. Working in tandem, Hermione slung protego once, twice, thrice, and when the third one fell, she cast incendio.

One of the Death Eaters cried out in rage as his robes caught fire and he stumbled to the side, smashing into his companion. The other Death Eater dropped their wand in the process, falling to the ground to try and get away from the flames.

“This means there's at least three of them,” Neville called.

Hermione looked up at Neville in desperation. They could not Apparate off of this train, not with a trace on them. They couldn't leave the train in the first place, or they'd never make it to London. They needed to make that connecting train. They couldn't stay and fight here, either. It was a wonder none of the Muggles had come out to see what the noise was.

Neville seemed to figure out a solution first. He made quick work of stunning the two Death Eaters, allowing the flames to continue to consume their robes. Hermione ignored the smell of burning flesh as she followed him and Luna out into the corridor. They looked to the left and then to the
Blaise was coming, and his wand was pointed directly at them. Behind him, the other two Death Eaters were now on their way toward them as well, Blaise having put out the flames on his way past them.

They had to do something.

"To the end of the train!" Neville cried, his hand wrapped tightly around Luna's. "We can try to hold them off there!"

Together, they ran down towards the southern end of the train. Ahead of her, Neville cast Transfiguration spells on the doors to turn them to random things and keep them from having to stop to open them. Hermione continued to look over her shoulder, casting alternating protection and attack spells. She just had to keep Blaise and the other Death Eaters occupied as they ran for their lives.

All spells were silent to keep the Muggles in the dark, though Hermione had a feeling a nosy Muggle would be nothing for the Death Eaters to decide to kill. She tried to maintain control of her magical core and the magic that flowed through her wand. She'd never had to cast so many silent spells so quickly, and she was already feeling exhaustion creeping along her veins. Spots danced in her vision.

You could kill them all, she thought with a chill in her bones as they ran. Just cast the killing curse, and this is all over.

She knew she could. She could kill all three of them within seconds. She hadn't cast any Unforgivables during the final battle at Hogwarts, but she knew that errant hexes she'd cast had caused rocks to fall and kill Death Eaters and werewolves. But even though it was war, to cast an Unforgivable curse . . . ?

She'd be no better than a Death Eater.

They made it to the end of the train. Neville vanished the door, leaving the back open to the chilly night air. As Hermione whipped around to face down their enemies, Neville shoved Luna into the nearest compartment. He didn't have time to slam the door shut to protect her.

Blaise reached them first, preparing to use force to try and bowl Hermione over. He bent low, arms outstretched and aimed for her waist.

She wasn't quick enough to dodge him.

She was punished by him brutally slamming her sideways, into the wall. She cried out in pain, momentarily stunned as she heard the shing of a blade being drawn.

Neville couldn't help her. He was preoccupied with hexing the other two Death Eaters and protecting himself from their onslaught. She was going to have to take care of this herself.

The moment she felt the tip of the knife starting to dig into her side, she began to fight.

She gripped her wand tightly in one hand and clenched her fists. Kicking her legs and flailing her arms, she began to beat Blaise about the head and shoulders where they pressed against her chest. She fought like the animal she thought they all were, gnashing her teeth and snarling.

Managing to jam her elbow in-between their chests, she shoved him back an inch. It was enough.
She rammed her knee upward, into his groin.

He roared in agony.

As he fell backward, one of the Death Eaters went soaring over their heads and out the back door of the moving train, having been levitated and thrown by Neville's wand.

Neville's back being turned was the first mistake.

Blaise, who was on the ground, rolled onto his side and curled his entire body around Neville's legs. Hermione lifted her wand to try and stop him, but a sudden flash of spell light coming from her right caused her to have to turn and aim a hex at the remaining Death Eater's mask.

He stumbled.

Blaise, with a tight hold around Neville's ankles, rolled sharply the other direction. Neville hollered as his knees buckled and he went crashing face-first onto the floor. He lay there, unmoving. Blaise rolled onto his back, catching his breath for a second.

"Neville!" Hermione cried, raising her wand.

At Hermione's voice, Luna came out of the compartment. Her blue eyes were wild and her hands were wrapped tightly around the straps of the bags. She started towards Neville and Blaise with a horrified expression on her face.

"No, Luna!" Hermione cried. "You don't have a wand!"

Around them, Muggles' compartment doors were beginning to slide open. The Death Eater was still shooting curses at Hermione, who was barely able to keep a protego up. Blaise was reaching for his wand between them. Luna had her back to the open door. Hermione stood in front of her.

It was chaos.

Suddenly, Neville rolled onto his back, too. He wrapped his legs around Blaise's neck and held him in a chokehold. The other Death Eater, who had just started to pass by him, was nowhere near fast enough to move out of the way of Neville's arms. He locked them around the man's calves.

"Go!" he screamed, face red from the exertion of holding both men. "Go, Hermione! Take Luna and go!"

"Neville, no!" Luna screeched, attempting to rush past Hermione. "Neville, please!"

"Luna, please, please go!" Neville roared, tightening his hold on the struggling men.

Blaise's face was twisted in rage, his hands scrambling for the wand and knife he'd dropped.

Hermione stepped in Luna's way, throwing her arms out and backing them both up as fast as she could. They were going to have to leave the train. The Muggles were coming out, some of them poking their heads into the hall.

They were close enough to London. They could walk.

But . . .

She hefted her wand, hesitating.
"Expelliarmus!" the Death Eater suddenly roared. At the same time, Luna let out a wild sob of defeat and acceptance.

Hermione felt the spell hitting her just as Luna dragged her out onto the back balcony of the train. She watched in dismay as her wand went spinning handle over end to land on the floor beside the gaggle of three wizards.

"We have to jump," Luna said, and she was weeping inconsolably. "We have to jump!

Spells flew past their heads. They could still hear Neville's roars. They were leaving Neville behind. They had to jump. They had to -

Hermione and Luna twined their fingers together, climbed over the railing to the side, and leapt.

Chapter End Notes

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They walked to London.

Neither Hermione nor Luna knew where they had landed after tucking and rolling in the grass. Luna was beside herself and lay there for a good ten minutes crying. Hermione knew that the Death Eater that Neville hurled out the back door could be anywhere, if he had survived the distance, but she didn't have the heart to rush her.

Eventually, Hermione's fear and determination to get to the sanctuary was enough to urge her onward. She helped Luna to her feet, assured the bags were still intact, and then they headed down the train tracks.

They walked for hours without stopping to even sleep. Luna eventually dissociated and walked with an almost-dreamy expression on her face. Hermione remained alert, keeping an eye out all around her.

She missed her wand already. She hadn't realized how much she relied on it until she had to go without it. It terrified her to think that they might be attacked and have no way of protecting
themselves. Hermione's skills in wandless magic were useless if she didn't have the wand on or near her person.

Hermione paused their trek at one point and reached down to pick up a large rock that fit in the palm of her hand. It was their best shot if they got attacked.

By the time they saw the lights of London, they were exhausted. There was no way they were going to make their train connection. And as they trudged forward, one step after the other, Hermione felt a sinking feeling in her chest.

What if it was all pointless? There were so many things that could go wrong. They could make it to Wiltshire, only to get lost and caught. They could somehow reach the meeting place with Narcissa Malfoy only to discover that it was a trap. The sanctuary could be a complete farce.

Still, they pressed on. Maybe it was naive. Maybe it was stupid. But the chance that they could make it to a place that had some of their friends waiting for them?

It was the only thing they had to hold onto.

Everything was different now.

Draco did not speak to Hermione, and Hermione did not speak to Draco.

Her body was covered in bruises. On her leg, arms, her right breast, and her neck. Her skin was marred with marks from the rings he wore on his fingers, supplemented by the contusions caused by his fingertips. She was still wounded from her encounter with Lucius as well, so her entire body felt steeped in aches and pains.

She didn't ask Teensy for any bruise cream. She felt like she needed to live with it, so that she never forgot how badly the Malfoy men had treated her in those moments. So that she never forgot the moments in her life that shaped her.

After Draco left the night of the incident, Hermione almost didn't leave her room. She considered wild, anxiety-induced ideas for Narcissa's potion, such as having Teensy bring the self-heating cauldron and ingredients jars up to her room. However, seeing as Lucius already hated her enough, she didn't think that would be a good idea.

After over one-and-a-half months, Narcissa didn't deserve half-hearted treatment.

Hermione dragged herself out of bed, into clothes, and down to the potions lab.

Draco was there, working. She hesitated at the doorway. Being near him sounded like the worst thing imaginable right now. What if he launched himself at her? He'd been drunk and the row had been out of the blue, but the things he'd said . . .

"I'm gonna fuck you like you belong to me."

Why did it sound so practised? Why did it sound so much like it was the easiest thing in the world to imagine doing? The press of his scorching-hot fingers to the sides of her throat. The rolling of his hips, firm against hers. His breathy groans melting into her ear.

Why did it sound like he wanted it?

Terrifying images of him approaching her from behind, bending her over the potions table while
she kicked and pleaded caused her stomach to churn. She almost turned around.

But then Narcissa would suffer. Hermione had never been able to put herself before another person in her entire life. It wasn't in her nature, and it never would be.

She walked into the room. It was lit by the early Spring morning, but the sun's rays shining in through the window panes did nothing to soothe her nerves and quell the ache in her heart.

Whether she'd briefly considered him a friend, or not . . . Whether she was a brave Gryffindor, or not . . . Whether she provoked him, or not . . . Hermione was not going to give herself to him as his slave without a fight.

But in the back of her mind, she knew that she did not have a choice. For all intents and purposes, she was his in name, and everything he said was true.

"*I could make you do whatever I wanted, and there wouldn't be a damn thing you could do about it.*"

He was right.

It was only a matter of time.

She sat down and began her brew.

In the uncomfortable silence, it became clear to Hermione that things were not going to go back to the way they were before all of this consternation. There would be no more bantering in the potions lab. There would be no more walks to the clearing with his hand around her own. No more playing in the glade with a happy, prancing Calypso, who she knew had to be getting bigger by the day. No more watching Draco exercise in the gymnasium, and no more excited talks about dragon lore.

The last connection to her past, to the world before Lord Voldemort took over, had plummeted from her fingers to shatter upon the floor.

She had to wonder, too. What had he meant by "worth every galleon?" He hadn't paid for her. She came to the Manor of her own free will, even if her choice was driven by desperation and necessity. Did he mean the galleons paid to keep her, by providing food and clothing? Or was he speaking metaphorically, because they were arguing about the dynamics of her situation in relation to him?

Something didn't sit right with her on that, but there was nothing she could do about it now.

---

*Narcissa found them.*

*Luckily, the train had almost reached London when they were forced to leap off of it, so it was only a few hours before they reached the outskirts.*

*They walked further and further, planning to go until they reached the station. They had most assuredly missed their connecting train and they were fortunate to have Muggle money in one of the bags; they had further plans to use it to repurchase more tickets on another train.*

*Going deeper into the city, exposing themselves to the possibility of attack? Not an option.*

*When they finally neared the station in the early morning, they could see figures standing on the platform. They stopped, wondering in whispers to one another what would happen if the figures on*
the platform were Death Eaters, waiting for them to arrive. They were lucky that no one had found
them on the tracks, even with them walking in a straight line in the open.

In their hesitation, they decided to stop, rest, and think. They stole off into the woods nearby and
stood behind a large tree. As they caught their breath and looked into one another's eyes, it
became clear. Unless a miracle happened, they were probably not going to make it to the
sanctuary.

It was at that very moment that a loud crack echoed through the trees. Birds rustled their feathers
and took flight. The two witches jumped and whirled around in a panic. They had no wands, and
all Hermione had was the rock. She brandished it.

Standing right behind them, clad in extravagant black dress robes underneath a hooded black
cloak, was Narcissa Malfoy.

"You are most fortunate that you reached the station without them usurping you," she said, her
tone tight and smile even tighter. Her black eyes pierced out at them, bouncing back and forth
between the wound-up Hermione and bedraggled Luna.

"How did you find us?" Hermione asked, suspicion clouding her mind and setting her entire body
on edge. "How did you know we were here?"

"The Dark Lord's Legilimency reaches far. Mine stretches farther. Come with me."

She held out her velvet-gloved hands, one for each of them.

Hermione and Luna exchanged glances, and then looked at her. This was the person they were on
their way to meet in the first place. She was a spy for the Order. She was their only ticket to
freedom.

If that were true.

"How do we know you're not going to betray us?" Hermione said, her brows low over her eyes.
"How can we trust you?"

Knowing who your son is and what he's done, she thought.

Narcissa's eyes locked with hers and then Hermione heard her voice in her head, showing her that
no thoughts were private in the Dark Lord's regime.

I know who my son is and what he has done. But your Harry Potter risked the entire war to nod and
tell me that he was alive. Narcissa offered her hands again, and there was a sincerity in her
eyes. And so I will risk mine for his friends. Please. Let me help you reach the sanctuary.

Hermione was confused. What did she mean? Harry nodded? When?

Her mind swirled with questions surrounding the mystery of how they'd lost the battle and the war,
but one thing remained clear.

They had no other options.

Hermione and Luna placed their hands in Narcissa's, and she DisApparated them away.

The days went by.
14 of them, to be exact.

He didn't talk to her. He didn't look at her. She was certain he didn't think about her.

She didn't talk to him. She tried not to look at him. She was powerless to keep him out of her head.

She locked her door at night and slept on the floor at the foot of it, curled up on her side in the fetal position. It was a useless notion, she knew. He could kick it open, use a hex or curse, or simply Apparate in if he wanted to.

If he wanted her.

Hermione often found herself near hyperventilation at the flip of a switch during the days and nights, thinking about the terror she had brought down upon herself with her foolish goading. She'd be calm and focused on whatever she was doing, only to have a random, fleeting thought or fear cross her mind.

Was he in the doorway behind her? Was he waiting down the hall to jump out at her? Was it safe in the library, between him and his wicked, violent father?

The stress was starting to get to her by the eighth day. She would lay awake at night, struggling to control her breathing and her urge to cry. She didn't want to cry. It was useless and time-wasting and it didn't solve anything.

But the anxiety was severe.

On the fourth day, she walked past the gymnasium after breakfast, not knowing where to go to feel safe. Her face had remained permanently screwed up in a near-anguished expression of terror for days. She could feel her heart beating an erratic pattern inside of her chest at all hours of the day, and it was starting to drain her spirit. She wasn't going to cry, but her body didn't seem to grasp that.

As she passed the open doorway, her gaze darted inside the room. At the same time, Draco had walked over to the bench, where his water glass was perched. The water glass that she usually offered to him because he never used his wand.

She stopped for a moment.

He was shirtless. His scar was so much darker and more prominent than it had been before, the consequences of his Apparition forever staining his skin.

Their gazes met.

His eye contact pinned her in place as he tipped the glass up to his lips. She felt like she couldn't move or breathe or think. In his eyes, she saw something indistinct, eddying like the tide in a vast, cold sea.

Memories.

His tongue against her throat. His fingers kneading her flesh. "Didn't you want me to treat you like this?"

No. No. No.

She hurried past. She couldn't take a deep breath until she was far, far away from the gym.
The next time she encountered him outside of the lab, it was during the afternoon on the tenth day.

Hermione was sitting on the floor in front of one of the armchairs, every book that she could possibly find that contained moonflower information spread out on the floor in front of her. She was tired of foraging and she was ready to figure out how to use them for Narcissa's potion.

None of them definitively said how to prepare them, but by cross-referencing with other texts, she was starting to piece together properties and functions. She had skipped lunch because she could feel how close she was to an answer.

The only way she could get her mind off of her fears was to focus on learning, and that had been her mantra for twenty-three years.

Lucius had walked past her earlier, but when their eyes met - Hermione on the floor and him standing - the only thing he did was sneer. Hermione's bruises from her encounter with him still ached, but she wasn't going to let him see it. He'd gone to his study and hadn't come out in hours.

When Draco walked in, Hermione was poring over a book that detailed a specific use for the moonflower in a restorative potion for crops in the 1200's. If it could restore living things like plants and food, then Hermione was hopeful that it could be compounded with something else and used for a human being.

As he walked by, Hermione glanced up with reflexive fear, but he was already walking past. He was wearing his Death Eater robes. She blinked. Had she really been so lost in the cage of her mind these past days that she forgot that he still needed to go to Buckingham to give the Dark Lord his potion?

She worried she was beginning to finally lose herself to the aftermath of war.

A few moments later, she heard the murmuring tenor of his voice entering the study. With a sigh, she returned to her work. When he left twenty minutes later or so, she thought she heard him say something that sounded suspiciously like an order.

"Eat."

Confused, she watched the library doors swing shut. That didn't make any sense. She'd probably thought she heard it.

*Pop.*

Teensy set a plate of food down on the floor in front of her. The elf opened her mouth to say something, but then shook her head and slapped her hand over her lips.

Hermione's brow furrowed. "Teensy, what's this for? I wasn't ready to come down to the tea room yet."

Teensy dropped her hand, looking nervous. She grimaced and then, without so much as a single world, she left with a second *pop.*

Hermione stared down at the food. Why would Teensy bring her food to the library when she'd never taken lunch in here before?

"Eat."

Hermione's heartbeat fluttered and she glanced up at the library doors, as though he were standing
on the other side of them. Which he could be and she would never know.

That was why he terrified her.

Had he asked Teensy to send her lunch? Had he then ordered Teensy not to say that it was him? Why else would Teensy look so pained and cover her mouth?

For someone who wasn't her friend, that seemed like an awfully friendly thing for him to do.

She didn't know how to feel about it, but she reached for the sandwich anyway. Then, she paused.

*What if this is part of it all? What if he laced it with poison?*

She pulled her hand back. The thoughts were wild and fanatical, but they were present and now she wasn't sure she was hungry.

When she was done with her research, she took the plate and brought it to the tearoom. It was there that she called Teensy, asked her to take the plate, and then requested a new one.

Even if he wanted to go back to the way things were, Hermione couldn't.

She was scared of him.

The next day, she went down to the tearoom for breakfast and halted in the doorway.

A massive jar of honey sat in the center of the circular table.

She ate breakfast without touching it, staring at it while she chewed with a contemplative expression. Something was becoming clear to her.

This was part of Draco's pattern.

His temper flared and he lashed out, and then he gave gifts to make it right. He didn't seem to know how to apologize. He only seemed to know how to try and cover things up with items he thought she would like. A self-heating cauldron, a jar of mushrooms, a new table and stool, a pile of books. Saying, "Forgive me," but never saying, "Sorry."

Except that that wasn't true. He'd apologized to her one time.

*I'm sorry, Granger, but I'm not your fucking friend."

It was his pattern. He hurt her, then he gave her a gift. And then he did it all over again.

He wasn't her friend at all.

When she was done eating, she left the honey on the table. In the entryway, she hesitated.

She really did love honey. There couldn't be any harm in taking it. She could accept the gift without having to forgive.

Casting a couple of surreptitious glances about, she trotted back into the room, grabbed the jar, and high-tailed it up to her room to stash it on her vanity.

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*They popped into a Muggle motel room.*

*Narcissa assured them it was surrounded by wards strong enough to keep even Poseidon trapped*
in or kept out. After giving them some money to order Muggle room service, she told them she had
to get back before she was missed. She left them that night, promising to come the following
morning.

Hermione and Luna spent the majority of the night in silence, pretending to watch the telly.

Luna was so forlorn over the loss of Neville that she just lay on her side, facing the wall, and
breathed. Hermione stared at the flickering, colorful images on the screen until nearly 4:00AM,
when her eyelids fell shut from pure exhaustion. She still didn’t trust Narcissa fully, but she was just
too tired to keep her eyes open.

When Narcissa returned the following morning, the girls were sitting bleary-eyed on the edge of
the bed beside one another. She provided them with clothes, food, and a Portkey to a specific
location in Ireland that would have a boat waiting for them. It was there that they were to travel up
the Kings River to what was to become their new home.

As they stood up to go, bags stocked full of provisions and hearts light with hope, Narcissa had
some parting words for them.

"No matter what happened between us in the past, Miss Granger," she said while holding
Hermione's hand in her own, "I want you to know that I have many regrets. If I were given the
option to do everything over again, I would. With my husband, with the war . . . And with my son."

Hermione had looked at her, then, and realized that it did not matter whether she trusted her or
not. All that mattered was that she trusted herself. And her heart was telling her to forgive
Narcissa.

"Thank you, Narcissa," she said, smiling up at her. "Thank you for what you're doing."

"No," Narcissa said, and then she'd cupped Hermione's cheek with her other hand. "I am the one
who thanks you. As much as I love my son, I regret allowing Lucius to steer his path. I regret
allowing Draco to be a slave to the old ways. And I thank you for being a friend to Harry Potter,
and for keeping him situated firmly in the light. Even though we are in this place right now - this
place where you have lost so much - you must keep fighting. Keep fighting, even when there's no
one left to fight for. Until the only one left to fight for is yourself."

Hermione vowed right then there with all of her heart and all of her magic that she would never
stop fighting for what was good and right in the world, even if that world belonged to Lord
Voldemort. She would count the stars and raise her wand for each and every one in the sky.

The day she would stop fighting was the day she counted the last one.

The last image she had of Narcissa was her smiling face and one gloved hand raised in good-bye.

April 2004

It had been two weeks and one day since what little stability Hermione possessed had fallen apart.

When she walked into the potions lab in the morning on the fifteenth day, Draco glanced up briefly
from his note-taking with the expression of a person who was so deep in their studies that it was
disorienting to come up out of the water. She found that her feet felt rooted to unsteady ground.

Why hadn't she noticed it before?
He looked at her as though she belonged to him.

In this world? she thought as she lowered her gaze in resolution. I do.

She looked back at him, not knowing if he saw how terrified she was of him now. Not knowing if he knew how much he'd changed her in just one night. The expression on her face was neither happy nor sad, accusatory nor forgiving. It was blank, like the flat expanse of her spirit. It was like with his bruising touch, he'd cleared out all of the walls that she'd built to protect the buildings she housed her memories in.

Harry, gone.

Ron, gone.

Her parents, gone.

Her friends, gone.

It was all gone.

She felt like she didn't know who she was anymore. She didn't know if it was because she was humiliated for goading him, or if it was because she could still feel the outline of his lips on her breast at night.

Her dreams, her nightmares, and her every waking moment were now completely eclipsed by him.

They worked in silence for a while before she felt his presence approaching her from behind.

Panic exploded within her body and she scrambled off of her stool, to the side. She kept the paring knife at her side, holding him at bay with a wary look in her eyes. Chest heaving, she spoke to him for the first time in days.

"What do you want?"

He ran his hand through his hair. He seemed angry, or troubled. Maybe a bit of both. He was looking at her neck, rubbing his chin in an almost anxious manner.

Could he see the bruises his fingers had left behind on her flesh?

"Where is your necklace?" he asked.

"It was supposed to protect me," she said, holding her head high, "but it didn't protect me from you, so why bother?"

He looked confused, then angry. "You asked me to - to do what I did."

Hermione could feel the panic tangling with her own anger inside of her heart. "Not that. I didn't ask for that."

"You told me to treat you like a slave." He placed one hand on the tabletop, fingers steepled atop it. He lifted it and brought it back down again to emphasize his next words. He spoke them slow and clear. "You pushed and you pushed and you pushed . . . For me to go that far with you."

Hermione looked away. She knew he was right. She'd asked for it. Specifically. She'd taunted him into it.
"The issue that I'm seeing . . ." he said. His voice was quiet and his eyes searched the air. He seemed to be choosing his words with a careful mind. " . . . Is that you bit off more than you could chew. You feel whatever it is that you feel about the war, and about the things that happened to your friends. You feel whatever it is that you feel about me and that caused you to - to goad me or to provoke me into losing control of myself."

She could barely hear him. It almost felt like he was talking to himself.

"So I can only surmise," he said, "That you are not as strong or as brave as you think you are."

He was looking at her now.

And he was right.

"It would seem that the Gryffindor lioness you have inside of you is not a lion at all," he said, his gaze falling to her neck once again and then drifting back up. He tilted his head to the side, studying her. "She's a kitten. A small kitten who needs to be taken care of because if it were left up to her, she would get hurt."

Hermione glared at him. She was not a kitten. She was a lioness.

She just happened to be caged.

"Don't insult my -"

"Be quiet," he snapped, and his tone was so much like Lucius's that it wove through her skin and sewed her lips shut tight. He then crossed his arms over his chest and said, "When you're done here in the lab, go bring my mother her potion. Then, I want you to march your little arse upstairs and put that necklace around your neck. And if I ever see you take it off again, I will give you a reason to put it on. Do you understand me?"

Hermione's nostrils flared as she struggled to reign in her anger. She could feel that her magic - which rarely ever woke up anymore since she didn't have a wand - was crackling along her veins. She wanted to claw his eyes out for doing what he did and then having the gall to insinuate that she was weak.

I fought my arse off, she thought, the distress expanding within her. I fought, and he's acting as though I just laid there.

"I said, do you fucking understand me?" A low, sinister command.

Hermione wondered if he knew how badly his bowels would be eviscerated right now if she had a wand.

"I understand, Master," she ground out.

Something dark flashed in his eyes. "Watch the attitude."

He went back to his stool.

Hermione fumed as she stirred the potion. The ladle clacking against the sides of the cauldron was a direct indicator of her anger. She hoped he knew how livid she was. She knew that she had a major role in what happened, but for him to place all of the blame on her? He could have done anything, anything other than what he'd done. She knew the exact moment when it had gone from a challenge to a conquest. When he'd gone from being Draco and devolved into being just a man
with two legs and a need to be inside of something.

They'd danced around it for too long. She'd pushed him too far by accusing him of something that they both knew to be true. He'd taken it to the edge by attempting to claim what he thought truly belonged to him.

The question was, why?

Once the potion was bottled, she hurried for the door.

"Granger."

She stopped, but that wasn't enough for him. He placed his hand on her shoulder and pulled her around to face him. She wanted to run away.

"What?" she whispered.

"I do what I have to do," he said. "Everything that I have ever done, I've done because someone else needed me to protect them. My friends, my family, myself. And now you. Put the necklace on. Please."

Hermione's heart pounded and her emotions tripped all over themselves, but one thing was clear to her.

If he thought she wanted his protection anymore, he was sorely mistaken.

She took a step closer to him, tilting her head back as far as she needed to to be able to hold his gaze upon her. She saw his brows twitch a fraction when she reached up to place her hand against his cheek where the cuts from her fingernails were. She was glad they were still there, and that he hadn't healed them.

After what he'd done, he didn't deserve to heal quickly.

His skin was soft and warm, but this was a face that she wanted to remember. This was the face not of her friend, but of her captor.

And she wanted him to remember what she had to say.

"I will put the necklace on," she breathed, her thumb caressing the cuts so she could watch him fight the urge to wince, "but you need to understand something, Draco Malfoy. If you ever lay your hands on me like that again, I will show you how much damage a kitten can do with her claws."

She didn't have to look over her shoulder to know that he hadn't followed her.

Narcissa spoke to Hermione during her evening dose.

When it was time, Hermione went to Narcissa's room. She tipped half of the dose to Narcissa's lips, like she always did. Then, she pulled back to give her body time to swallow it.

Narcissa's glassy, clouded eyes had looked right through her. Her chapped lips curved up into a euphoric smile. A droplet of the purple potion remained on the swell of her lower lip.

"You look like the spitting image of Hermione Granger," she said in a dreamy tone that reminded Hermione of Luna. "My son talks about you."
Hermione had never felt so faint.

It wasn't recommended - from what she remembered reading in books about Healing at Hogwarts - to speak to a witch or wizard who was in a magical coma. Their thoughts were floating freely, bouncing around in a labyrinth while they waited for recovery or death. If those thoughts were pulled off their aimless path and into another, they might be misplaced forever.

But she had to know.

"He does?" Hermione whispered. "What does - did - does he say?"

"He wrote to me and said you're made of fire," Narcissa said, and then her smile faded. "He said you're made of fire, but that if he goes near you, he's afraid he'll smother the flames."

Hermione knew she was pushing it, but she needed to know more.

"When . . . When did he say that?"

Narcissa let out a sigh and something glowed dark in the depths of her black eyes. She stared up at the ceiling.

"My son is the best Seeker on the Slytherin team," she sang, and then she looked at Hermione again.

Hermione's mind worked through the years. 1991, 1992, 1993 . . . It could have been any of those years. But why would he have anything like that to say about her? It was too . . . Studious. It was like he knew her, or had watched her, or . . .

It was quite possibly the most romantic thing anyone had ever said about her in her entire life.

Narcissa sighed again and her face fell. "But he's asked that Harper boy to take over for him this year."


It was all over the school that year. Draco was stepping down; Harper was taking his place. No one knew if he'd asked Harper, or if he'd paid him.

The numbers were screaming inside of her head.

Draco was writing to his mother about Hermione in their Sixth Year.

"He has a job to do this year, my dragon does, you know," Narcissa said, her wistful voice slipping in past Hermione's astonished thoughts. "Lucius is proud of him, but I'm worried. So very, very worried. So very . . . Very . . ."

She trailed off and fell silent.

Hermione's hands shook as she gave her the last of the potion and left the room.

She kept repeating her memories from Sixth Year, going over them with a fine-tooth comb, trying to find answers. Moments. Experiences. Which classes were they in together? Where had he sat in the Great Hall? Had they passed one another in the corridor?

He'd been watching her. He had to be.
He must have followed the smoke to see the flames.

But why? What did it mean?

Did he care about her back then?

Having been walking with her head down, she nearly collided with someone. She stumbled backward, gasping and looking up with startled eyes.

Lucius.

His cane thwacked against the side of one of her legs in response. His gaze scoured up and down her body, as though he wanted to clean the Earth of her existence.

"Your clumsiness will be the death of us all."

"I'm sorry," Hermione said, feeling like she was floating outside of her body. "I wasn't -"

"Looking where you were going?" He raised one eyebrow. "Naturally. Walking the halls of my home, spreading your filth. It seems you have yet to learn your lesson about your place."

She looked down at the floor, but not because she couldn't look at him. She looked down at the floor because she was afraid that if he looked into her eyes, he would know that he'd just spoken to Narcissa against Healers' Code. She wasn't technically a Healer, but the Code was the guidelines set in place to protect patients in distress. Prying memories out of a patient in a magical coma was wrong.

Still. Lucius, with his cane and his arrogance. She had accepted that this was Voldemort's world, but there was nothing that infuriated her more than the knowledge that Lucius Malfoy was on the side that won.

"I guess I'd better be more careful," Hermione said. "I wouldn't want you to have beat the lesson into me."

Lucius let out a dark, quiet laugh. "I'm afraid a beating just might not be enough to do the trick, Miss Granger. You're quite resilient. Believing that you could be beaten into submission would be no more foolish than paying 150,000 galleons to keep a secret about an old classmate from school."

Hermione felt like they were circling one another, a lioness against a serpent.

"Of course," she said. "You wouldn't want to underestimate the help in your own home."

"I'm not the sort of wizard who likes to turn a blind eye when something is out of place in his household." His eyes glittered in the dim lantern light. "I'm the sort of wizard who prefers his household to be in order."

Hermione felt her temper snapping.

"You'll find it rewarding, then, to know that you and your son are the same in that regard. Bitter, entitled, and violent. Anything to get your way, even if it means striking a woman with your hands. Family always was so important to you Malfoys."

"If I were you, I would show a little more respect to your master," he said, his lips curving into a tight smirk. "Speaking about him with such disdain. If it weren't for him, you might have found yourself in the Floo, on your way to the Dark Lord. Thank Grindelwald my dear friend Amycus is
agreeable to secret-keeping. For a price."

He sauntered past her, into Narcissa’s room.

Hermione scowled. He was so vile. Everything he said was foul, and every step he took radiated darkness.

She moved forward, fully ready to go to her bedroom and think about everything that had happened that day. And then something stopped her, clicking into place in her mind like the inner workings of an old clock. The memories and thoughts slammed into her, one right after the other, leaving her breathless.

"No more foolish than paying 150,000 galleons to keep a secret." 150,000 galleons was just a euphemism . . . Wasn't it?

"Agreeable to secret-keeping." What secret would need to be kept? The fact that she was in the Manor was the only thing that made sense . . .

"150,000 galleons."

Carrow in the sitting room. "Provided you keep my secret, yours is safe with me until such a time as we can speak again."

The conversation Hermione had overheard Draco and Carrow having afterward. "Best that you keep quiet about this, Carrow." Keep quiet about what? Keep quiet about what?

"Secret-keeping."

Hermione was the secret.

"She's under my care," Draco had said to Lucius in his study. "I promised her protection, so no one will touch her but me."

"Agreeable to secret-keeping."

Hermione couldn't breathe.

"I find this accord to be agreeable."

"For a price."

Hermione gasped. It felt like the world was spinning too fast one direction, and the sky was spinning too slow in the other. She dropped the empty potion bottle and held her hands to her mouth as the horror rocketed through her body like a lightning storm.

"No more foolish than paying 150,000 galleons to keep a secret."

The clouds of confusion cleared and in the aftermath, there was clarity. Everything that had not made sense suddenly made all the sense in the world.

And she was livid.

Leaving the dropped bottle, she took off running. Her slippers slapped against the stone stairs, rage propelling her forward as fast as possible. Her curls fluttered behind her, as listless as any thoughts she had remaining in her head that did not belong to her pure and all-encompassing fury.
She heard him in the gymnasium. He was fencing with one of his dummies, which had been charmed to life in order to exchange fierce blows with him and his sabre. She dashed into the room and marched up to him, mindless of the swinging blades.

Draco whirled around, eyes widening upon seeing her. Holding his blade with both hands, he twisted it up at the last minute to parry a rather vicious blow from the dummy. Hermione jumped away when he spun to put his back to her. The foils whistled through the air as he blocked another blow and then threw his left hand out at his side. He silently accioed his wand and the moment it was in his hand, he nixed the charm on the dummy.

It went rigid and froze in place. Its sabre clattered to the ground.

Draco's hair lifted as he whipped in an about-face to glare down at her.

"What the fuck are you doing? Are you mental?"

Hermione ignored him. "Did you pay Amycus Carrow to keep quiet about me?"

She saw the cocktail of emotions and feelings flitting over his face like the flicker of a campfire, and then they disappeared. His expression was hard. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Did - you - pay," she screamed, clapping her hands to punctuate each word, "Amycus - Carrow?! Did you pay him?!"

"Yes, but -"

"How much," she shouted, "did you pay?!"

He pushed his hand back through his hair, sweeping it away from his face. "Granger -"

"How much did you pay him?" she said, and her tone was like ice held over the flames of her rage.

He stared at her with a deadpan expression. "It would seem that you've been talking to my father. So, I think you already know. You're more trouble than you're worth sometimes, you know that?"

Hermione felt speechless for a moment. Her mind was blown. He'd offered her protection, yet somehow, it had become something else. He'd paid 150,000 galleons for her, in a way, and now he acted like she truly belonged to him. If this was his intention all along, then she was a fool. She was a fool for believing that he just wanted help with his mother. She was a fool for trusting a murderer.

She was a fool for believing there was even a smidgeon of good in him.

"Then why pay the money if I'm not worth it?" she asked, hands in fists at her sides. "Why not just turn me over?"

Draco's jaw clenched and she saw something click as he ground his teeth. "Why are you reacting this way? I had no other choice. Do you not understand that?"

Hermione's jaw dropped and her eyes widened. Was he dense? "You could have turned me over, Malfoy!"

He stared at her in incredulity. "You have a death wish. You have... A death wish. First you ask me to treat you like a bloody slave." He slammed the side of his hand against the opposite palm. "Then, you fight me like a maniac when I do it. Now, you're upset with me for spending a
small *fortune* to keep you fucking safe!" He held two fingers to his temple. "Have you gone completely barmy?! Do you hear yourself when you talk?!"

Some of the things he said . . . They made so much sense that Hermione could feel her heart wrenching in her chest. She'd asked him to hurt her, and then fought him tooth and nail when he did. That much was true.

But she was not livestock. And the way he'd reacted when she goaded him was *wrong*. She may have provoked him, but that didn't mean he'd be out of control of his faculties. He could have stopped himself.

He could have made a better choice, but instead, he'd followed his pattern.

Bad choices were all that Draco Malfoy seemed to know.

"I am not property to be bought and sold!" she cried, throwing her hands up into the air. "I'm not an animal, Malfoy! If you think you have the right to pay for my safety, and then take what you want from me just because I told you to, *you're* the nutter! Did you ever think about the fact that I've lost *everything*? Did you ever stop to think that maybe you shouldn't rise to every challenge just because it's presented to you?"

"I have thought about that," he hissed. "I have. But when you start an argument and provoke me and say things like *yes, this is what I really want* and *do it*, all because you want me to say no? That's fucked! You -"

Hermione was aware that they were arguing about two separate things, but she was too angry to try and tackle them one at a time.

She cut him off by screaming, "You should have made the right choice! *You should have told me no!*"

He stared at her, and she stared at him.

There was a second that passed where they were trying to catch their breath, and then a loud *clang* as Draco dropped his sabre.

"You said I was a bad person as though it was a throne that only one of us could sit on," he said, still sounding impassioned with ire. "And yet you asked me to fuck you like a Salazar-damned slave because you were hoping I would say no. Then, when I actually call your bluff, you're surprised? Typical Gryffindor superiority. Anyone who does the opposite of what you planned for them to do is the worst person you've ever met."

Hermione almost took a step back at that.

He'd called her bluff? That wasn't how she saw it. That wasn't how she'd *seen* it.

No. He was wrong. He was a murderer. He'd killed - He was - He *had* to be wrong.

If he was right, then that meant that she would have to go all the way back to the person that she was in the war. She would have to go back and face the fact that she didn't make the right choices. She would have to admit that she didn't do enough to save Harry, and that she didn't deserve to be the one who survived.

She would have to let it all in and feel.

"And now," she said, inhaling the consternation and holding it inside with the rest of the things she
kept locked up, "you've paid a man to keep me a secret. You've paid him so much money, that there's no way to dance around the truth. Whether you call me your slave, your witch, or your Mudblood, I'm yours. I have no choice. You have taken away my choice."

Draco's eyes flashed. "I told you that I do what I have to do. I will do whatever the fuck I have to do to provide you with the protection I offered when I first found you. If that means paying a year's salary, then so be it. Would you rather I have sent you over to Carrow so he could fuck you until you shut your pretentious mouth?"

Hermione's wrath blazed to life like a loop of plasma on the surface of the sun.

She would rather be dead than breathe each day with the knowledge that someone had paid 150,000 galleons for any part of her, even if that part was just her whereabouts. She didn't want his protection.

She wanted a choice.

Hermione slapped him, the resounding crack of her palm against his cheek echoing around the tall room. She slapped him and it was wrong, but it felt good. It felt really good. Just like in Third Year, she was the one lashing out physically. Just like in Third Year, it felt liberating.

But unlike then, there was no elation. There was no elation because it didn't solve anything. He had still paid 150,000 galleons to Carrow in order to get him to keep her a secret. She still couldn't sleep without having nightmares that Draco was going to creep into her room and violate her. Neither of them could look at the other without seeing memories of the past.

Voldemort had still won, and Harry was dead.

"I hate you," she said.

He opened his mouth to respond, and then she saw his vexation falter for the tiniest of moments. He looked taken aback. Confused. Shocked.

Hermione didn't stay to waste another second.

There was no one left for her to fight for but herself.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Fourteen

Chapter Summary

What . . . Is the point . . . Of me putting a trigger warning . . . If you're still gonna read it . . . After it says trigger warning?

There's a wild as fuck blowjob in Chapter 19, bro.

This entire chapter is an extremely important flashback.

PRONUNCIATION: Aodhan is pronounced Aiden. It is Irish.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Horai: Town with a Distant Wish - Yasunori Mitsuda, Song of the World's Demise - Shunsuke Tsuchiya, Pompeii - Clinton Shorter, Song of Durin - Eurielle, I See Fire - Jasmine Thompson, and
When they landed, it was exactly as Narcissa had promised.

They twisted into existence on the bank of the Kings River, with thick trees at their back and a deep, wide river at their front. A boat rested there, and apart from it having two oars, there were runes for "to reveal" and "safety" carved into the hull that Hermione recognized from Ancient Runes class.

They were to get in, use the oars, and go north. Neither of them had paddled a boat before, but if there was one thing about Hermione, it was that she was a fast learner.

Without wasting time, they clambered into the boat and set off.

It took some finagling, but eventually, they got the hang of the oar motions. It took three hours from where they were, the river winding through mountains taller than any Hermione had ever seen. There were some places on their journey where the mountains were so close together, they had to duck their heads. Overall, the journey was quite possibly the least stressful, least terrifying experience they'd had in years of traveling together.

Towards the end of the three hour boat trip, they could see that the river let out into a small lake. Across the lake, there was a single horizontal dock with multiple boats that looked just like theirs. None were tied there; they just floated in place. As they steered their boat into an open section, Hermione saw that all of the boats had runes.

It was as they were climbing out onto the rickety wooden slats of the dock, that they heard a familiar voice calling to them.

"Oi! Took you long enough, didn't it, then?"

Hermione and Luna exchanged excited, wide-eyed glances and whirled around.

There, standing near the bottom of a hill that stretched up into a cliff that had to be at least fifty feet high over the water, was Seamus Finnegan.

The girls ran.

Seamus caught them with open arms, Luna against his right side and Hermione against his left, and he laughed a merry laugh. He gave each witch a ferocious kiss on their foreheads, and then all three of them began to jump up and down in pure joy.

"Seamus, we're so glad," was all Hermione could say, over and over until her voice was hoarse. She held him around the waist as tight as possible, afraid that he would disappear if she let him go. "We're so, so glad."

"I didn't know it would be you," Luna said, wrinkling her nose in her happiness. "We hoped you would be here. Who else is here?"

Seamus finally let them go, standing there with a wide grin on his face as the wind whipped through his thick, brown waves. "A lot of people. Most of the First and Second Years, for starters. Though they're quite a bit older now. A few hundred witches and wizards from Scotland and
Britain. Some Irish."

"Any of ours?" Hermione asked, eyeing him.

Seamus' smile faltered. "You two are the first."

Hermione felt her heart sink and when she looked at Luna, she saw Neville reflected back at her.

"That means there's still hope," Hermione said after a moment, smiling at Seamus. "If we made it, then there's hope."

Seamus grinned again. "Ace attitude, Hermione. Some old Ministry officials made it here and -"

"And me," someone yelled from right behind Seamus, just out of view over the hump of the hill they stood on.

The ground began to shake and quiver, trembling in four-second intervals. Luna cried out in surprise and grabbed hold of Hermione's arm, who looked to Seamus for the source. He was still grinning.

What was going on? Was it an earthquake of some sort?

_Boom._

_Boom._

_Boom._

They saw the dragon's head first, long and thin, covered in sharp armored spikes. Its pointed jaw housed hundreds of razor-sharp teeth the length of Hermione's hand that jutted out from its lips like a crocodile's teeth. It had a mixture of silver, dark grey, and black scales, and pointed ridges that stretched the length of its back. The tip of its tail was adorned with dagger-like barbs that looked like they could run Hermione through the middle. Curiously, in the center of its chest was a small purple jewel.

Hermione knew this dragon on sight from her Fourth Year studies.

This was a Hebridean Black. Native to Scotland, but common all over Ireland. Highly aggressive. Territorial. She'd never seen one have a crystal in its chest before, but she didn't know much about dragons intimately.

When it was standing right behind Seamus, it threw its head back, spread its grey leathery wings to their full span, and roared.

Hermione and Luna slapped their hands over their ears as everything around them quaked from the volume of its cry. They exchanged awed glances. There was a dragon here, and it was standing right beside Seamus as though it didn't want to eat him for lunch.

And there was someone on its back.

"Don't worry," Hannah Abbott called, smirking from her place behind the base of its neck. "You get used to it."

Hermione watched in pure astonishment as the dragon folded its wings, and then stretched one out into a slide for Hannah to cruise down to the ground on. When she moved, Hermione could see that the space behind its neck was fleshy and without spikes.
Hannah landed on one knee, one hand placed on the grass to steady herself, and then flipped her hair back over her head.

"Afternoon, ladies. Long time no see."

Hermione and Luna took one look at each other before they made a dash towards their friend. There was another round of greetings and hugs, and then Seamus came to join their group. He put his arm around Hannah's neck and dipped his head down to plant a kiss on her lips.

"And Hannah's here," he said while looking into her green eyes.

She gave him a roguish grin, the wind sweeping her tousled blonde hair back away from her face. "Hannah's here."

"Now what do you say, Hermione, Luna?" Seamus said, turning to address them. "Want to come home with us?"

Luna and Hermione stared up at the dragon. It bent its neck until its head was parallel to the group and fixed its large, violet eye on Hermione. Hermione swallowed hard against her fear, clenching her hands into fists.

"He's harmless," Hannah said, stepping away from Seamus to pat the creature on the cheek. His eyes closed and it made a low humming sound.

Hermione had never felt so fascinated in her life.

"His name is Aodhan," Hannah said, and she sounded full to the brim with pride. "Born of fire."

Hermione didn't want to know how he got that name.

Aodhan opened his eye and looked at Hermione again. It stared at her for a long moment and then suddenly swung its head around the other direction to nip at the joint of the wing on the other side.

"This flock of Hebrideans protects us," Seamus said. "Because my family protected them. This valley is Unplottable and exists behind a veil of dragon magic, and has been hidden since the first Finnegan. It's the safest place on Earth right now."

Hermione studied the dragon, watched as he brought his head back around to brush his snout against Hannah's back, and she found herself more fascinated than she'd ever been in her entire life.

"I'm going to have a lot of questions," she said.

Hannah and Seamus looked at one another and then burst out laughing.

"We knew you'd say that," Hannah said.

"Same as you always were, aren't you, Hermione?" Seamus added.

Luna giggled. It was the first time Hermione had seen her happy since they left Neville behind. "She hasn't changed a bit."

After a few more laughs were shared, they decided to head towards the sanctuary. They walked over the crest of the hill, starting to trundle down the other side. Hermione stopped at the top.

A miles or so away, in the distance, she could see a sprawling town made of different-sized wooden cabins and fields full of crops. There were small splotches moving about that Hermione
could tell were other people and animals. The way the sun hit it made it look like a Shangri-La made of gold.

Their people were down there. Students and witches and wizards who believed in Dumbledore. People who believed in Harry and what he stood for. People who had survived in spite of Hermione's failure.

Both relief and grief were starting to spread through her body, tingling in her veins and choking her throat with emotion.

"I forgot to tell you the one last thing that we have here," Seamus said before they ascended the hill.

"What?" Luna and Hermione said at the same time.

Hannah was the one who replied, all the way from the back of Aodhan. Hermione hadn't noticed that she'd climbed back up.

"Dragons!"

Hermione felt her heart leaping into her throat when Aodhan made a high leap off of the front of its great clawed front legs. He spread his wings and soared off into the sky. They could hear Hannah letting out a scream of laughter, one of her hands gripping one of his spikes, and the other flinging into the air with wild abandon. And then they were gone, flying to the east across the plains.

It was then that shadows of all shapes and gargantuan sizes appeared over them from just south of the hill. Hermione and Luna both looked up and gasped simultaneously.

Dragons. Black dragons. Silver dragons. Grey dragons. Dragons with all three colors. Covered in spikes and scales that shone in the sunlight, all with amethyst eyes and spiky teeth. They roared and hummed and snarled and screeched, flying at one unit across the valley towards the mountains on the opposite side.

Seamus put his hands on his hips and spoke to them over the thundering sounds above, telling them all about what he called Wicklow Sanctuary.

The sanctuary was located in the depths of the Wicklow Mountains, heavily guarded by old, ancient magic that had been there since before the great continent split into smaller parts. The valley they were to live in was full of rolling grass hills, tall rock spires covered in moss, and expansive plains littered with colorful flowers of all kinds. The sun painted it yellow then orange from one side to another during the day, and the moon painted it blue at night.

It was beautiful, it was safe, and it was home.

They'd made it.

"Are you coming with me?" Luna said, holding out her hand from her space between Seamus and Hermione.

Hermione gazed into Luna's eyes. Her best friend. Her sister. The last one she had left.

She took her hand.

"Always."
The sanctuary wasn't everything they'd hoped for, but it was more than they'd dreamed.

"My family has watched over this valley for generations," Seamus had told Hermione the first day, when they were walking down the hill. "As long as we help keep wizards out of the wards, so they don't discover it, the dragons bless our family with their magic. Success, happiness, that sort-of thing. I'm not sure how the first Finnegan found it, but it's ours."

There were a total of 324 people living in the sanctuary town, which was about the size of Hogsmeade. Most were Scottish witches and wizards, but about 20% of the sanctuary's population was made up of Hogwarts students. Some had arrived via Narcissa's help over the course of the months, but unfortunately, none from Hermione's Year. This worried her, of course, but she kept her hopes up that they were with their families, safe and in hiding in some other country.

She couldn't think of the alternative without getting misty-eyed and needed to go to the outhouse for a break.

The first night they'd arrived, Seamus and Hannah had told them what happened to the students who couldn't get away at first after Harry died.

There had been a mad dash to the Great Hall for the Portkeys that the Order had brought, but there weren't enough for everyone. The Death Eaters were pressing in faster and faster, and there hadn't been many options.

So Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick, the only professors left on campus or alive at the time, gathered up as many students as they could, including Seamus and Hannah. Most were First and Second Years, so it was up to the two professors, Hannah, Seamus, Dean Thomas, and some Seventh Years to defend while they tried to get to the safety of Dumbledore's office.

"And when we got there, they beat us back," Seamus had said while staring into a campfire they'd built outside his and Hannah's cabin. "There was about thirty of us, crammed in, trying to get out through the Floo because it was our only option. Wasn't enough Floo powder, though. We held the lines while McGonagall searched for more, and then Dean went down. McGonagall found the powder, but they were advancing into the room. She gave it to Hannah to start dividing it, and the rest of us who could duel kept holding the line some more.

"I don't know what happened. Kids started going out through the Floo, but then someone - one of the Death Eaters - got physical with Flitwick. He wasn't expecting it. He went down, and then it was just me, Hannah, and McGonagall. I remember the Seventh Years were helping get the kids out as fast as they could . . . Someone got McGonagall. I don't know who. She was . . . She was gone, and then we kind-of lost our spirit for a moment. It might have been a few, I dunno . . ."

Seamus paused and then continued, "And then Narcissa Malfoy burst in. She killed every Death Eater. I don't know where her husband was, or that Malfoy tosser, but she helped us. We don't know why and we didn't know if we could trust her, but if it weren't for her . . . We wouldn't have made it. I knew about this place - Wicklow Valley - but I just needed some help to get started. She's the one that got us a wand, and the help with the cabins, and then my family helped with the rest. It's been a long, long time, but I miss McGonagall and Flitwick every single day."

Everyone cried for a long time after that.

Life in Wicklow Sanctuary was simple.

The people did not use magic unless it was necessary, because they only had one wand that
Narcissa had given to Seamus, and it was Untethered. That meant that there was no Trace on it with the Ministry.

The town was mostly made up of one-room cabins, and up to five people slept in each cabin on cots. They used outhouses for loos and utilized the wand to vanish the waste, fresh water came from the river, and they ate a vegetarian lifestyle via farming.

Narcissa had found a way to procure them the seeds they would need, and some of the Muggleborn and Halfblood students' parents had taken care of the farming so they wouldn't disturb any of the wildlife that the Hebridean Blacks ate to survive.

As long as they treated the land well, the dragons left them alone. It seemed that Hannah was the only one who had formed any sort of relationship with one, and no one really knew why - even her. She spent an unholy amount of time with Aodhan. So much so that she began to look more and more rugged as the days went on.

Soon, she stopped wearing more than a pair of shorts and a cropped top, and she never wore shoes. Granted, the grass in this valley was so soft underfoot that shoes weren't entirely necessary, but most of the people wanted to live as normally as possible and made sure to wear shoes. Hannah preferred flying.

There was only one time that Luna had gone flying with Hannah, but she preferred to spend most of her time with the children. There were two cabins designated for them: a large one for schooling, and a larger one for sleeping. There was a group of three witches who handled the schooling, but for some reason, Luna loved taking care of the younger children in all other things. There were about twenty children under the age of ten who all needed someone to spend time with them.

Luna smiled a lot more when she was around them.

Hannah tried repeatedly to get Hermione to go flying with her, but Hermione wasn't interested. She was terrified, really. Of Aodhan, of being suspended in the air. She loved magical creatures and found dragons beautiful and majestic, but she preferred to spend her free time walking the plains.

If she left the town on the eastern side and walked diagonally across the plains for about fifteen minutes, eventually she came to a copse of trees that led to a moss-covered rock spire she liked to sit at the base of. There were books in a makeshift library cabin that Narcissa had been able to slowly smuggle to them over time, and Hermione liked to read them in peace and watch the dragons flying about every once in a while.

Sometimes, three baby dragons would play with one another on the valley floor while their mother watched from atop the other rock spires. There were many points in time where they strayed close to Hermione, staring up at her with eager, expectant eyes, but their mother would croon to call them back.

Hermione had cried a lot when she first got to the Wicklow Sanctuary.

She had been disturbed by the amount of emotion she had at first, having not been the type to cry unless she was really hurt by something. However as time went on, she began to realize that after every weeping session, she felt a little better. Happier. More apt to smile and laugh.

Hermione was healing.

She woke up in the early mornings and helped with the crops and fields. She assisted the older witches and wizards who liked to cook with the mealtimes. In the early afternoons, she foraged for
potions ingredients for the rudimentary potion making that she did every so often just in case they needed it. In the late afternoons and early evenings after dinner, she walked to her spire and sat at the foot of it. At night, she and Luna slept in a cabin with Hannah and Seamus and went to sleep with smiles on their faces.

Life was simple, but it was home.

July 2002

They came in the shadows of the night.

Like denizens of the wrath of Heaven, they fell from the skies and bathed Wicklow Sanctuary in fire. With tattered wings of black leather and razor-sharp teeth that glittered with menace, they razed cabins to the ground. The people inside burned. They burned and they screamed in agony, and it was their screams that woke Hermione, Luna, Seamus, and Hannah from their peace-deepened sleep.

And as they sat up to greet the orange glow of destruction through the window hole cut into the cabin wall, a bloodcurdling series of screams rent the night air.

"Wyverns!"

Hermione knew what wyverns were. She knew what they were, and she knew that they were death. They were born of the mountain's depths and lived for the chase. The kill. Predators.

Voldemort had Wales. She knew that he had Wales. It was impossible and imbecilic to take over England without absorbing Wales, too.

She just hadn't realized that the wyverns could be controlled.

"Everyone up!" Seamus roared, ripping the blankets off of he and Hannah and stumbling over to his boots. His hair was tousled from sleep and he was frantic in his efforts to yank the loose-fitting white jerkin he always wore over his head. "Hannah, round as many people up as you can! Luna and Hermione, you need to get to the children!"

Hermione was disoriented, but this was something she knew inside and out. Battle. War. Escaping. The entire hunt for Horcruxes had been going to sleep with a weary heart and waking up in the middle of the night with terror pulsing through her veins so they could run as fast as possible.

Seamus was right. The children. The children were all the way across town, in their cabin.

They dressed quickly. Hannah, who was sitting on the edge of the bed and shoving her feet into her own boots, flipped her hair back as she turned to look at Seamus.

"Shame, you've got to sound the alarm."

"No," Seamus said, brandishing the wand as though he were going to hex her. His eyes were wild. "This is our home. We can't leave. We've got to get across to the plains to the caves."

Hannah stood and looked to Hermione and a dazed Luna. All three witches knew Hannah was right.

A sudden screeching roar sounded and then the Earth beneath them began to rumble.
"There's no time," Seamus said. "We need to get as many people out as possible."

"You can't send Hermione and Luna out there with no defense!" Hannah cried, stumbling about as the ground continued to shake. "You take Luna to get everyone out. Hermione and I can get the children."

"I should be there for the children!" Luna suddenly cried. "They're all I have left . . ."

She trailed off at a sympathetic look from Hermione. Luna wasn't equipped for the distance and the speed needed to run across the town. She'd only slow Hannah down. And Hannah had Aodhan, who could carry a lot of weight. Luna needed to go with Seamus.

"You can guide as many people as you can to the docks," Hermione said. "It'll be okay."

Luna surprised Hermione by crossing over to her and gripping her cheeks. "You promise me you'll meet me by the docks. Save the children, and meet me by the docks, Hermione Granger."

Hermione felt her chin quiver. She pulled Luna into a ferocious hug even as a bright flash of orange followed by a crash and a screeeeech from a wyvern sounded nearby. They had no time, but Hermione would make time for this.

"I promise you, Luna Lovegood," Hermione whispered. "Always."

"Always."

"Time to go," Seamus said, holding his hand out. "She's safe with me."

Luna took it, and then Hannah stood beside Hermione.

"We meet by the docks in thirty minutes," Seamus said, and his tone had gone gruff and serious. His eyes lingered on Hannah. "Thirty, do you hear me? No matter what."

Hermione heard the unspoken words behind the devastated tinge to his voice.

Even if you can't save them all.

Another crash. A roar.

It was time to go.

When they burst out of the cabin door, they were greeted by a blast of scorching hot air.

Chaos.

People were screaming, running. Tripping in tangles of sheets or rolling nude on the grass. And the wyverns. They were everywhere. It looked like hundreds of them, swooping down from the sky, hopping on their two powerful legs after teenagers and adults who were trying to escape.

Hermione looked to her left and saw flames and wyverns.

To her right, she saw flames and wyverns.

Above, flames and wyverns.

There was no reprieve.
"Sound the alarm," Hannah cried to Seamus. "You're the one who's in charge. Make the decision!"

Seamus looked horrified and indecisive. "But if we leave -"

Hannah grabbed the front of his jerkin and yanked him down to her eye level. There was already soot gathering in her blonde hair.

"Sound the fucking alarm, Seamus!"

Seamus looked into her eyes for one split second before he did as she bid, lifting his wand to his throat and casting sonorous.

"MAKE FOR THE DOCKS!" his voice thundered out, alerting more than a few wyverns to their presence. "THE SANCTUARY HAS FALLEN! THE SANCTUARY HAS FALLEN! QUICKLY! MAKE FOR THE DOCKS!"

The wyverns nearby slunk towards them.

And then Seamus was shouting, "Incendio! Incendiooooo!"

But fire against flame was a fool's errand.

Hermione knew there was an ice spell, but it had been so long. She couldn't remember it.

Seamus had his hand on Luna's arm and was dragging her to the south. Hannah was already running to the north, towards the children's cabin. People were screaming, sobbing in agony. Two wyverns across the way were toying, tearing the limbs from a girl Hermione had eaten supper across the floor from in the meal cabin two days ago.

Everything was on fire and the skies were glowing orange with the color of annihilation.

Hermione couldn't breathe. She froze.

Warm wind lifted her hair and the skin on her back prickled. She whirled around and started to scream.

A wyvern was coming right for her, its golden eyes glimmering as they reflected the flames of the cabins around theirs. The thin membranes, which she could see backlit by fire, were torn in multiple places. Its arms stretched through them, ending in four vicious, curved claws. It looked enraged. It looked like it wanted to destroy her.

It opened his maw. She could see right down into its throat.

It was glowing.

Screeeeeee!

Hermione fell onto her back just as a Hebridean Black came shooting from the east. It slammed into the wyvern's side and took it down to the ground.

She scrambled backward as claws tore through flesh. Snarls came from each of their throats and their reptilian bodies smashed into the side of a burning cabin. She held up an arm to protect herself from the explosion of heat. The dragon who had just come to her rescue suddenly pinned the wyvern down on its back. It reared its head back to inhale.

The wyvern fought.
The Hebridean's amethyst eyes shimmered.

It exhaled a storm of Hellfire, and the wyvern was consumed.

And then someone nearby - a wizard Hermione had had a few experiences with learning about crops on the fields - burst out of one of the few unlit cabins. He was crying, but his face was split wide in a relief-filled expression. He pointed to the sky.

"The dragons!" he cried. "The dragons are protecting us!"

More screeching. Roars. Roars that filled Hermione up and set her teeth on edge.

The Hebrideans were coming.

From the mountains and spires they soared, babies and adults alike, all coming to the rescue of the sanctuary. The sounds that filled Hermione's ears were unholy as the wyverns rose to meet them. They looked like spiked shadows swirling about in tornadoes of flame as they fought each other above the town. Hermione had never seen anything like it before.

"Hermione! What are you doing?!"

Hannah was there, face darkened with soot and her expression concerned. She hauled the dazed Hermione to her feet and patted her hard on the cheek. The sting rocked her out of her stupor.

"I'm sorry," she stammered. "I-I'm sorry, I -"

"Get it together, witch!" Hannah screamed over the roaring of the flames around them. "The children are waiting for us!"

Hermione felt Hannah gripping her hand and then they were running.

Hermione slowly got her bearings, realizing that there was nothing they could do about anyone around them. It was every man, woman, witch, and wizard for themself. The wyverns were everywhere, tearing and gnawing. Blood was spraying through the air, splattering the sides of their bodies with ichor and gore, but they couldn't stop. Her thoughts raced.

Luna's counting on you. They're all counting on you.

Run faster.

Hermione felt her fear snapping and her Gryffindor bravery slapping into place. She let go of Hannah's hand and pushed her legs harder.

The children were counting on them.

Luna was counting on her.

There was smoke everywhere, filling their lungs, but Hermione knew they could not stop.

They ran and they ran, dodging balls of fire whenever they could and ducking behind any cabin that wasn't on fire. The wyverns seemed bent on causing as much demise as possible, without even stopping to eat their kills. It all but confirmed Hermione's theory that Voldemort had found them.

But if that were true . . . Were the wyverns alone?

Unless they weren't.
"How could this have happened?" Hermione yelled when they stopped to take a breath and hide from a wyvern. "How could they have found us?"

"Narcissa was the only one who knew," Hannah said, and she sounded a lot calmer than Hermione felt. Their backs were to the cabin wall, and Hannah kept peeking around the edge. "If they're here, then she either betrayed us or -"

"She got caught," Hermione said, her heart sinking.

Narcissa couldn't possibly have known. She'd led them to the sanctuary with her good intentions, unknowingly paving the way to slaughter. If she was caught, then all was lost. The sanctuary was no longer safe. Once they left on the boats, they could not come back. They might not even survive that.

*We have to try. We have the Hebrideans. It'll be enough.*

*It has to be.*

There was about a quarter of a mile to go until they reached the children's cabin, and at this rate, they were never going to make it. They needed a distraction, so Hannah could get to the cabin.

"Where's Aodhan?" Hermione asked, breathless.

Hannah turned her face up to the skies, which were dark and smoky with flashes of what looked like lightning within the orange haze. Within each flash, Hermione could see glimpses of spiked heads and wings. She heard inhuman roars, like eldritch cries in the distance.

It sent a chill down her spine.

"He's somewhere up there," Hannah said.

"Will he come?"

Hannah shot her a sharp look. "He'll find me anywhere."

Hermione nodded. "Then go."

Determined, Hermione shot out around the edge of the cabin and stood in the center of the alleyway. She threw her hands up into the air and waved them about, screaming at the top of her lungs. She exchanged one last lingering look with her friend, and then Hannah took off like a shot, around the other side of the cabin.

Three wyverns were crowding the alley. Two were on the ground, sinking their sharp teeth into a mangled, bloodied body that Hermione didn't even want to try and recognize. One was atop a cabin, its clawed wings hooked under the edge of the roof as it watched with its fangs bared.

At Hermione's appearance, all three sets of golden eyes whipped around to face her.

Hermione felt fear blooming in her chest, but she put up a barrier against it. She turned and held her arms at her sides, preparing to turn around and run the opposite direction. She was going to holler and try to draw as many of them as she could away.

Even if it meant her death.

A series of small *screeching* noises rang out and then, from the midst of the smoke and fire around them came three young dragons the sizes of horses.
Their wings were held high, lofty above them in a threatening stance. Their heads were much smaller than the full-grown Hebrideans, and the silver scales seemed to be glowing. But it was in their purple eyes that Hermione saw what was going on.

They were here to attack.

Hermione whirled around to watch as two of the babies launched themselves forward like hissing cats. They slammed into the bodies of the two wyverns and slid across the grass. The third dragon planted itself on all fours in front of Hermione like a protective dog, its wings and shoulder high, head and neck low. As it hissed, its tail wrapped around the back of Hermione's legs. It remained there.

*Three of them . . .*

*Protecting me?*

*But -*

*I know these babies!*

She recognized these dragons.

They were the baby dragons she would watch in the plains while she read, the ones who continued to try to come near her.

But if they were here . . .

Where was their mother?

Across the way, the wyverns were wrestling with the other two babies, and they were faring a lot better than the young dragons were. One wyvern had the smallest pinned under its two great feet.

It was preparing to bite.

The other baby dragon had its jaws clamped around the joint of the other wyvern's wing, but that wyvern's feet were continuing to scrape at the dragon's soft underbelly.

The sanctuary continued to burn.

The skies screamed with dragon and wyvern battle.

The air was rank with the smell of blood and death.

The bowels of the baby dragon were suddenly ripped apart by the wyvern's back claws. Hermione's hands flew to her mouth to stifle her gasp of horror. The dragon who was protecting her lowered its wings and crooned in its pain at watching its sibling die.

The second baby's wings unfurled rapidly in vengeance and rage. Its long neck whipped around to gnaw at the base of the killing wyvern's tail. With two jerking movements, it tore it clean off, sending a spray of dark blood out across the dragon's face.

The wounded wyvern fell backwards, roaring in agony. It pitched into the wyvern that had the second baby pinned. The dragon was able to roll away and hop up on all fours. The moment it did, it sunk its teeth into the wing of its dead sibling and pulled it backward. It dragged until it as well as the body were by Hermione's side.
Together, the two dragons took a protective, defensive stance.

Above them, the third wyvern had turned its attention onto Hermione and the dragons, and it was beginning to inhale.

Hermione wasn't sure what to do. The babies weren't big enough to breathe fire in defense.

A low, rumbling growl echoed in Hermione's ears, rattling her to the bone.

From the west, slinking out of the flames of two cabins, came the mother. Her lips were pulled back, revealing every single pointed tooth she had in her jaws. Hermione had never seen such an angry beast before, and it took every fiber she possessed in her being not to back away.

The mother spread her wings, shattering the burning shells of the cabins that flanked her and her neck lifted high into the air.

The baby dragon that had protected Hermione screeched. Its tail tightened around her knees and yanked her forward. The moment she hit the ground with a cry, she felt the dragon's wing unfolding and curving around her. The scales were warm against her side as it dragged her close and shielded her from the heat of its mother's flames.

By the time that the onslaught had stopped, Hermione was disoriented and coughing from the smoke.

She lifted herself up on her hands and knees and looked up.

The mother's head was there, fixing its huge violet eyes on her and staring.

The babies nudged the tips of their snouts under Hermione's arms and brought her up to her feet. One of them made a pitiful whining noise, looking from the dead sibling to the mother. The mother hummed as if to say, *I know.*

Hermione's heart broke.

"Thank you," she said, even though she had no idea if they could understand her. "Thank you, but I have to go."

With one last lingering look to the Hebrideans, she dashed under the mother's neck and made for the children's cabin. She didn't know what state it was in, but as the smoke got thicker and the air hotter to breathe, Hermione realized something horrible.

The wyverns had come from the north. The children's cabin would have been the first part of the sanctuary they encountered.

If they had survived, it would be a miracle.

When she got there, Hannah was on her knees on the ground. The cabin was engulfed in flames. There were no sounds coming from within.

They were too late.

Hermione fell to the ground beside her friend, wrapping her arms around her shaking shoulders.

"We were too late," Hannah sobbed. "Too late."

"They came in from this way, Hannah," Hermione said, trying to soothe her but keeping an eye on
their backs. It seemed the wyverns were working their way south, towards the docks, but they couldn't be too careful. "There's no way we could have predicted it, or gotten here fast enough."

"Narcissa didn't betray us!" Hannah suddenly shouted, pulling her hands into clawlike shapes by her tear-stained face. "It's been years. She's been helping us for years. Why would she suddenly betray us?!

Hermione started to shake her head, unsure of how to respond, when a voice came out of the shadows of the plains. The juxtaposition of the calm, moonlit sky above the valley contrasted with the orange haze above the town. It added to the nightmare of the moment.

"Because she didn't. She was caught."

Hermione felt a chill run down her spine and she let go of Hannah. Both girls scrambled to their feet and backed away.

Blaise Zabini.

He wore his Death Eater robes and his mask was in his right hand. In his left, he held his wand in a jaunty manner. As if he wasn't standing to watch the Hell he had wrought. The smirk on his face was enough to show Hermione that their former classmate was and always had been reprehensible.

"Blaise," she said in a dark tone. "I'm not surprised to see you."

"And I'm not surprised to see you, Hermione," he cajoled, his eyes seeming darker than usual. "Last I saw you, you and Loonie Lovegood were leaping off the back of that train. Left your little boyfriend behind, you did."

Hermione's blood boiled. "What did you do with Neville? Did you kill him like you've killed everyone else we went to school with?"

"Hmm," Blaise hummed. "I left him at Buckingham with the Dark Lord. I believe he said goodbye. Or was he crying for his parents, begging for death? I can't remember which."

"You're foul!" Hannah shouted. "Don't think for even a second that you don't deserve to burn in Hell for what you've done!"

"Oh, don't worry," Blaise said, tutting as he raised his wand to them. "When I get there, I'll ask the children what they think."

Hermione felt her emotions swirling in a thundering tornado within her heart. The thought of her friend, being tortured by the Dark Lord, pleading for the mercy of death. And the children had been in the cabin. Blaise knew that they were in there, burning.

Scorched.

Dead.

"You'll be there soon enough," Hannah said, and she was laughing through her tears.

Blaise looked confused.

Hermione looked up.

BOOM!
Aodhan landed atop the burning cabin, all four sets of claws on his legs gouging into the grass and dirt of the Earth. He crushed the charred wood as the flames rose around him, unburning. His wings spread to their full span, eclipsing the moon from sight behind him as he stretched his neck to its full height.

Blaise's head tilted back and he let out a terrified scream.

It didn't last long.

Aodhan snarled and his head darted forward. His jaws and teeth closed around Blaise's neck, his head disappearing into the maw of the beast. With a vicious wrenching motion, Aodhan separated his traitorous skull from his body and began to chew. Blood seeped from his lips as his eyes blazed with dragonian fury.

Blaise's headless body fell to its knees and then collapsed on its side.

Dead.

Aodhan's head dipped down and Hermione watched in mild astonishment as Hannah wrapped her arms around his snout and embraced him. He closed his eyes briefly and then looked at Hermione.

Hermione lifted her chin, hesitating for only one moment. Then, she reached out and touched the patch of grey scales between his nostrils.

Suddenly, a new series of noises made themselves heard.

The sound of spells.

They turned.

Hermione felt the horror viscerally in her soul when she saw that there were more Death Eaters. They were flooding the streets, working in tandem with the wyverns to destroy every cabin and kill any survivor they saw.

The children's cabin was a little ways away, separated the smallest bit by the schoolhouse, and Aodhan had stomped out the flames with the great girth of his body. The Death Eaters hadn't noticed them yet.

Aodhan growled, low in his chest.

"He wants to fight," Hannah said. "But we -"

Three wyverns landed right behind them. A fourth one descended from the sky and took Aodhan down, catching the larger dragon in the side and sending him rolling down the hill with a great roar.

"Run, Hermione!" Hannah screamed, and then she went after her dragon.

Hermione had no choice. It was either into the inferno, or across the plains. It would take her away from the docks, but her options were nil.

The wyverns were coming after her.

She ran.

Across the plains she went, her fear and will to live pushing her legs forward. One foot after the
other, she flew.

_She flew._

Her curls tore away from her shoulders and fluttered behind her as she soared across the plains, hearing the _snap, snap, snapping_ of the wyverns' jaws as they tried to catch her. She didn't need to look behind her to know that they were chasing her.

Three wyverns.

One witch.

A great valley flanked by mile-high mountains and mossy rock spires that reached for the stars.

This place was supposed to be their home. Her sanctuary.

But there was no place that the Dark Lord's shadows could not touch.

Tears sprang to her eyes. Her lungs were straining. Her heart felt like it would burst.

Everything that they had done to try to stop Voldemort, and then to survive. All that they had lost. The sacrifices that the professors had made. Ron. Harry.

And she was just going to die at the jaws of a wyvern?

Hermione saw the hill dipping down ahead of her. The city burned in the distance behind her. The valley stretched out before her, the luminescence of the moon paving her way.

_Be brave, Gryffindor,_ she thought. _Be brave._

She threw herself down, hearing the snarls of the wyverns as they all went tumbling sideways down the massive hill. Hermione felt herself picking up speed as she rolled. She felt rocks and hard bumps in the Earth beating her flesh along the way. But she remained strong.

She had to stay strong.

The wyverns howled and screeched as their wings tangled around themselves and kept them from stopping their descent.

Hermione made it to the bottom last. In the wyverns' dazed confusion, she was able to haul herself to her feet and keep running. She heard their growls and felt the heat of their breath as she went.

They were on the chase again.

The roaring of the burning sanctuary was so far behind her that the only sounds she could hear now were that of the wyverns' rage and her desperate intakes of breath.

_Rooooooooar!_

Flames burst out of the darkness from above, cutting a pathway between Hermione and two of the wyverns that had pulled ahead.

Still running, she took off at a tangent.

The grass burned.
Aodhan landed next to where Hermione was, to the east. His tail whipped around and the barb at the end slashed across the wing of one wyvern. Hannah was on his back, yelling as Aodhan let loose another great stream of fire from his mandibles, blasting the wyverns and cooking them to a crisp.

Hermione did not stop running, even as Aodhan's powerful legs propelled him forward at a fast pace.

He leapt clear over her head, spreading his wings to slow himself down. He slammed down with his claws out, sinking them deep into the body of the third wyvern, so close to Hermione that the shaking of the ground threw Hermione onto her rear.

When she was on her back, the fourth wyvern pounced. Hermione rolled out of the way, hearing the grass ripping up at the roots. She kept rolling. Screams of panic left her throat as the creature came after her, scrabbling for purchase with claws and teeth.

"Hermione, get out of the way!" Hannah shouted.

Aodhan breathed his fire.

Hermione didn't think, she just kept rolling. She didn't know what else to do. She could feel Aodhan's flames chasing her. She heard the remaining wyvern shrieking in agony as it was consumed.

In the chaos, she barely registered that she was lying prone in the grass, still screaming even as Hannah slid down Aodhan's wing and ran to her. She helped Hermione to sit up, shaking her by the shoulders.

"We have to get to the docks!" she was saying, over and over. "We have to get to the docks!"

Hermione shoved her off of her and started running back towards the hill and up it. She heard the whoosh of Aodhan's wings as he pushed himself off the ground and took flight. Hermione reached the top of the hill, gasping for air.

The skies were on fire.

And then she was in the air.

Hermione screamed in terror. Was it a wyvern? Had she been taken?

There were claws wrapped around her upper arms, toting her across the plains and back towards the town.

But as they went, as the air rushed past her face, she realized.

The claws were around her arms, not inside her flesh. Something was carrying her.

She looked up.

Aodhan's wings pushed down and then up, taking them faster and faster. Hannah grinned down at her, even though the mirth didn't quite reach her eyes.

"You'll be fine!" she hollered. "Just . . . Hang in there!"

She laughed like a maniac as Hermione looked ahead of her with wide eyes.
They were headed right into the fray.

Into the darkness of the clouds and smoke they went, Aodhan trying his best to keep them out of the way of the battle. Dragons claws were here, wyvern's teeth were there. Wings. Wings and flames everywhere. The flames engulfed both wyverns and dragons alike. The roars were like thunder. And it was hot, too hot. Hermione choked for breath.

But she could see the docks and the sparkle of the river stretching out away from it. As they began to descend, Hermione saw that there were people being chased by wyverns towards the boats. The boats, which were so few and far between, that were not going to be able to save everyone. Boats that were powered by oars and hands.

The townspeople weren't going to make it.

All-of-a-sudden, before Hermione could register her dismay, she felt herself being jostled. There was an unearthly shrieking noise.

A wyvern came from the east and crashed into Aodhan's right wing, sending them off course.

Aodhan listed over to the left, towards the cliff that overlooked the river. He let go of Hermione halfway up the hill, and then he, Hannah, and the wyvern went rolling towards the edge. Were they going to go over it?

Hermione crawled, scrambling to her feet and crying Hannah's name.

But what happened was much worse.

The wyvern went over the edge, roaring. Hannah and Aodhan did not. However, as Aodhan rolled onto his back from the force of his fall, Hannah fell. Aodhan rolled past Hermione and further down the hill.

Then . . .

Aodhan let out an anguished cry and staggered up onto his four paws.

His spikes had impaled Hannah.

The dragon pulled her body to his underbelly and crooning his grief to the sky. His wings spread high and wide. Hermione burst out into tears as the sight overwhelmed her.

Hannah was dead. It was an accident, but Hannah was dead.

Hermione heard a cry behind her and whirled around, tears streaming down her face. Luna was coming towards her up the hill, looking bloody and bruised. She was crying, too.

"How did you know to come up here?" Hermione asked, vision blurred.

"I didn't think you made it," Luna said. "And it's hard to breathe down there."

They both looked towards the docks. The smoke was so thick it was hard to make out the sights of the wyverns picking the survivors off.

"Seamus?" Hermione said.

Luna shook her head. "Hannah?"
Hermione shook her head, too. "What of the wand?"

"Lost."

They stared at each other for a second. Then, the girls clung to one another, because there was no point in doing anything else.

The sanctuary was lost.

Hannah and Seamus were dead.

It was over.

Skreeeeee!

At the sound, Hermione and Luna whipped around.

The wyvern that had gone over the edge was back, its wings flapping as it slowly rose above the cliff's edge. It's face was gnarled and grizzled, spiky and full of the same teeth that had been tearing apart the people of the sanctuary all night. Its eyes were like molten gold.

Roooooar!

Aodhan launched himself over Hermione and Luna's heads, the black-and-grey scales glinting under the light of the stars as he wrapped his wings around the wyvern and sunk his teeth into its neck. The wyvern did the same to him, locking them together. They went plummeting to the river below.

Silence.

Hermione took several deep breaths. Hannah was dead, and so was Seamus. The sanctuary was lost. Aodhan was gone.

But they had not gone through the Battle of Hogwarts, traveled across Scotland, England, and Ireland just to give up and let the fire consume them.

She grabbed Luna's hand and took off running, pulling her along as she went.

They went to the closest edge of the docks. Wyverns were still picking people off, but Hermione just focused on the boat closest to them. As much as her heart wanted to save everyone, she knew that the days of protecting everyone had long past.

It was their job to protect those closest to them.

Luna climbed in first, heading to the stern, and then Hermione used her foot to kick it away. She took a few steps back, got a running start, and then leapt into the front. Luna handed her an oar and they began to paddle with all of their might.

Suddenly, Luna looked up, behind Hermione, and gasped.

Hermione felt herself being shoved backward. She looked up, perplexed as to why Luna was standing over her.

NO!

Wyvern claws slashed across Luna's throat and chest as it flew overhead and then went higher,
circling around to come back. Blood spurted from the garish wounds on her person. Hermione stared in horror.

Luna smiled.

"Neville . . ." she whispered.

Her eyes did not see anything as her lifeless body went softly over the edge of the boat, the water barely making a sound as she sank beneath the surface.

Hermione screamed. It felt like her soul was breaking, shattering, becoming nothing. She wanted to die.

Luna was dead, and so she wanted to be dead, too.

The wyvern was coming back, and she didn't care. She just didn't care. She hoped it killed her.

And then Aodhan cleaved the water in two, shooting up with his wings tucked to his side. He was covered in grievous wounds, blood mixing with the water on his sides, but he was roaring.

Just before the wyvern could swoop far enough down to attack Hermione, Aodhan's jaws snapped shut around its neck.

He yanked himself and the wyvern's body to the left. They thrashed about in the water. Then, they sank below the surface. Even though there was chaos and death on the docks and no other boats were leaving, Hermione felt that the air was still.

Her heart ached for Luna.

One second went by.

Two.

Three.

Aodhan's tail burst out of the water behind her back, slapping against the hull of the boat and twisting it around to face the right direction. Hermione placed her hands on the walls to steady herself, her back to the passage between the mountains.

The water exploded upward as Aodhan's wings pulled him out of the river and into the air. He was so hurt that Hermione knew he wouldn't make it through the night. His jaw hung open as the great reptile panted for breath.

His amethyst eyes looked into Hermione's. It was there that she saw his sadness.

"Aodhan," she said, and she didn't know what else to say.

His response was a low bellow that rippled the surface of his wounded belly.

Then, he hovered higher and placed his back paws on the stern. Hermione gasped and held onto the hull again as the front of the boat lifted out of the water.

What was he going to do?

His wings slammed downward through the air. Coupled with a powerful kick, the force of the downblast sent the boat hurtling downriver. It hit the current within seconds.
With a mighty roar, Aodhan turned to face the wyverns that were taking flight from the docks. His flames lit the air above the water as he took them all on.

One last sacrifice in loyalty of Hannah.

One last sacrifice.

Hermione kept her back to the future and she faced her past. She glued her eyes to the sanctuary. Where once there had been green, she saw only fire.

The empty sky burned.

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE LEAVE A REVIEW!

Want to connect with me?

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I won't be posting in the FB groups anymore. Apparently, it's something about my name and face that incites eternal eldritch rage in others. (--the people who wanted me to stop posting on FB are stroking themselves with glee rn) Oh well.

If you want to be able to keep up with my updates, you'll have to join my person FB group, HoneySweetWriting. We're at 400 members, so you will be welcome!

Thank you to everyone who has been so supportive and kind in your reviews. There's going to be 47 chapters in this story. Please make yourself aware now that this story will have a lot of dub-con and non-con, but the plot is packed. (trust me, there's a multi-headed dragon, it's gonna be wild)

Avoid this story if you can't handle it.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.
Hermione dreamt of burning skies every night for a month.

The anniversary of the Battle of Hogwarts was drawing closer. It felt like every time Hermione closed her eyes, she saw the courtyard. She saw the flash of green light before Harry and Hagrid both succumbed to the Killing Curse. She saw the back of Draco's blood-stained platinum hair as he crossed to join his mother. His mother, who Hermione had no idea would be her eventual savior, and who she would become the savior for in return.

Hermione would always wonder what Narcissa meant when she'd said that Harry "nodded." She would always wonder how the Dark Lord had known that the stone was in Harry's pocket. She would always wonder what Luna's last thoughts were as she went sliding into the water. She would -

Stop thinking about it.

Hermione's eyelids snapped open.

Draco stood there, one arm crossed over his chest, hand tucked underneath the other arm. His left hand held a glass of water out to her. His hair was a tousled disaster, sticking up in every direction with some falling into his eyes. He was wearing nothing but a pair of black loose-fitting boxer pants. Legs bare. Chest bare, save for the gnarled scar she would see in the moonlight.

Under-dressed.

Hermione froze. What was he doing? Why wasn't he dressed?

Her eyes darted across the dark room, where she could see that her bedroom door was still shut. Locked.

Her heart skipped a beat and she clutched the coverlet close, as though a blanket would be enough to protect her from him if he wanted something from her.

It had been a month since they'd last had a conversation. He said things to her here and there, usually reminders about him going to Buckingham and to watch for the black windows, but other than that, they did not speak. Seeing him here was startling, and not just because he'd Apparated in.

"What time is it?"

"2:36AM, if you want the exact time," he said. "On May 1st. And you're in the Malfoy Manor, in a bedroom full of things more expensive than you can imagine."

Cheeky ponce. "What are you doing here?"

He re-offered the water glass, raising his brows. "You were screaming."

She did not take the glass. Her gaze fell. Her mind cleared a bit. Memories of her nightmares rushed in. The sanctuary. Seamus and Hannah. Aodhan and the wyvern attack.

Luna.

A sadness settled over her body.

She hadn't thought of them in so long, having locked that part of her life away in the deepest parts of her heart. And then after the things that had happened to her at Cillian O'Connell's . . .

Panic.
No. Don't remember. Don't remember, she thought.

Draco's brows twitched together and her panic increased. Had he seen it in her memories?

After she left Wicklow Sanctuary, she hadn't been able to cope with it all any longer. The moment her boat pulled up to the banks of the river was the moment she chose to forget.

It seemed that her heart remembered.

"I said, don't think about it," Draco said, his tone gentle. "Any of it."

She looked up from the floor. "How is it that you can get inside my head when my eyes are closed? Don't you need eye contact for Legilimency?"

"You do," he said, his lips twitching. "I don't."

Hermione felt her heart jump past a second beat. A Legilimens that could get inside your mind when you were asleep was a powerful wizard. The only other wizard who had ever that strong of an ability was Lord Voldemort.

And now, Draco.

"You survived," he said, still holding the water out to her. "Therein lies the need to practise acceptance."

_Easy for you to say_, Hermione thought, knowing he could hear her bitter thoughts. _You survived off of the backs of our peers._

He tilted his head to the side and studied her, showing no indication that he heard them, or cared. "Why won't you take the water?"

"Because," she said, "you might have poisoned it. You could poison anything I eat or drink."

"If I wanted you dead, why would I have nursed you back to health for an entire week?"

Hermione's words died in her throat. He did have a point. If he truly wanted her dead he could have just let the acidic brew melt her flesh.

*But I didn't*, came his voice in her head. *Now, drink this.*

"What is it?"

"What does it look like, smart one?" He scowled and then took a sip. He swallowed. "It's just water."

Hermione hesitated and then rose up on one elbow, her hair falling back away from her body. With some reluctance, she reached over and took the glass from him. She drank from the opposite side as him, wondering if that's what he wanted. What if the glass had poison on the rim?

"If I wanted to hurt you," he said suddenly, "then I would. There's no one to stop me, Granger. You know that."

She eyed him over the top of the glass and finished the rest of the water. Then, she said, *Predators like you enjoy the chase. The more terrified I am, the more rewarding the kill.*

"You weren't the only one who lost people that day," he said when she handed the empty cup back
to him. Their fingertips brushed. She felt her stomach flip and she yanked her hand back.

"But I am the one who lost the most," she said, feeling her anger rising. "You can leave now."

"I'm not contesting that," he said. "I just want you to remember that you're not completely alone."

She didn't like that line of thinking. Not when it came to him. She'd rather be alone than have anything in common with him.

"What's water supposed to do for me, anyway?" she asked, upper lip curling as she laid back down.

"Nothing," he murmured, looking down at her. "It's just something my mother used to do for me when I had nightmares."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "What, the great prat had nightmares?"

"Yes," he said. "I still do."

Hermione swallowed, feeling uncomfortable. Now that he said that, it made her think back to when they were in school, which then made her think about what Narcissa had said.

She wondered for a second - just a second - if Draco still thought she was made of flames.

But the last thing she wanted to do was let him know that she had unethically spoken to his mother, so she hurried to slam a wall up in front of the memory before he could see it.

She pulled the blanket up, shooting a glance toward the door. She hoped he got the hint that it was time for him to leave.

He turned to go.

"Wait," she said, stopping him as he reached the door. "How did you get in here? The deadbolt is still locked."

"Like I said," he said as he pulled the latch and opened the door. He glanced over his shoulder at her. She couldn't make out his expression. "You were screaming."

The moment the door closed behind him, she threw the covers off of her body and dashed to throw the latch again.

The small comfort was necessary.

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When Hermione awoke a second time, she felt sick to her stomach.

Tomorrow was the anniversary of the worst day of her entire life. May 2nd 1998. The day when everything she was as a girl had died, and the numb, bitter excuse for Hermione Granger as a woman was born. Every year, the anniversary came and every year, she spent it in a different place. Rumple, Glasgow, Wicklow Sanctuary . . . Now, she was in the Malfoy Manor. And she was still miserable.

Things hadn't gotten any better with Malfoy since she told him that she hated him. She didn't regret it, per se, but she did know that she didn't truly hate him. And now, waking up on the day he had Apparated into her room at 2:36AM because she was screaming?

She didn't know how to feel.
What she did know was that she was sad. She missed her friends, she missed her life, and she missed the life that she could have had if the Dark Lord had lost.

She liked to imagine that she would have been an Auror, or perhaps even the Minister of Magic. Wouldn't that be something?

Wouldn't that be *something*?

Hermione hugged her pillow tight and gazed into the air as if she could see all the individual molecules. She wondered what that would have been like, or looked like. Hermione Granger, British Minister of Magic. Sitting behind her desk, signing bills into law and making things better for magical creatures, beings, spirits, witches, and wizards. Improving Muggle-wizarding relations. Having the power to make things better for everyone.

When she sighed, it felt like the entire weight of the world was pressing down on her chest and suffocating her.

Twenty minutes into her normal breakfast time, Hermione realized her stomach was too upset to eat anything. She was going to skip breakfast and go down to the potions lab. Perhaps after she gave Narcissa her medicine, she would go to the tearoom and have brunch.

Hermione stared into her chiffarobe. She didn't have the energy to put anything on. She felt guilty for even having them at her fingertips, guilty for being alive to enjoy the feeling of expensive silks when no one else was.

What she wouldn't give for a pair of tracksuit and a hooded jumper.

*Pop.*

Teensy appeared in the hall the moment Hermione walked out of her room.

"Hello, Teensy," Hermione said, managing a faint smile. "Is something the matter?"

Teensy gave her a small wave before twisting her tiny fingers in the hem of her rucksack dress. "Good mornings, Missus. Teensy mades youse some breakfastses."

"Oh, thank you, Teensy," Hermione said, holding one hand to her cheek. "I'm not quite feeling hungry just yet, though. Do you think you could save it for me for later?"

Teensy grimaced. When Hermione peered at her, the grimace brightened into a smile.

"Yes, Missus. Teensy will does it." *Pop.*

Hermione frowned. Okay. That was odd.

She made her way through the house and down to the lab. Her mood soured the closer she got to the room. It downright rotted when she saw Draco there already. Always working on that potion.

Getting to work was easy. What was hard was dealing with the fact that she could feel his eyes on her multiple times over the course of the hour it took her to make the medicine.

"Can I assist you?" she said when it started to feel like she was baking under the sun.

"Did you eat?" he asked in a monotone.

Hermione shot him a look over her shoulder and almost dropped her handful of dandelion shoots.
He was looking right at her, and he looked . . . Concerned?

"No," she said.

"Why not?"

Her upper lip curled a bit. "Because I'm not hungry. Why does it matter?"

"Because I said so. You -" He flinched and clutched his arm. "Fuck. Fuck."

Hermione couldn't help but be surprised. The way he dropped his quill and snatched his wand out of his cauldron, it was clear that he was being continuously called. Draco shot her one last look, which she could only describe as troubled.

Crack.

Well, that handled that.

Hermione brought Narcissa her medicine and when she was done, she went to the tearoom.

She asked Teensy to bring her the breakfast that she'd saved for her. However, when it was laid out in front of her, Hermione just didn't want any of it. She didn't know if it was because she was depressed, or just worried about tomorrow being tougher than today. She sighed and told Teensy to take it back.

Teensy grimaced again, but did as she asked.

After her brunch attempt, she vowed to at least try to eat lunch later. For now, she just wanted to sit here and watch Lucius's white peacocks trundle on by outside the windows.

She wandered to her bedroom after awhile, deciding to skip foraging since she still had mushrooms in her jar. She knew that soon, she'd have to work a little harder to finally nail down what she needed to know for the moonflowers, but for now, she was just going to read one of her historical romance novels in her room.

And of course, she napped.

When she woke, the sun was starting to lower in the sky and it was nearing 6:00PM. She sighed. Naps had never been friendly to her. She slept too deep and too long. Now, she felt even more unwell.

*Maybe I should just eat first thing tomorrow morning,* she thought as she lay on her side and stared at the blue sky outside of the window. *It's not a big deal.*

Apparently, Draco thought it was a big deal, because he was waiting for her in the hallway when she finally went down to the lab. He was wearing a jumper and slim black trousers, much like the day they'd first went to the moonlit glade. When he saw her, he dragged his hands backward through his hair. His grey eyes pierced down into her.

"Teensy told me you didn't eat all day," he said. She couldn't comprehend his mood; his tone was blank. "Why not?"

"Does it matter?" Hermione tried to pass him, but his hand shot out to the side. It touched the wall, his rings *clinking* against the stone. It barred her way by.
"It matters," he growled, his eyes flashing. "I want you to eat."

Hermione's anger flared and she fixed him with a false smile. "Good. It's good to want things."

His jaw clicked. "Why won't you eat?"

"I'm not hungry." She ducked underneath his arm and went into the lab to prepare his mother's nightly dose.

He followed.

Draco placed his hands on the table beside her. His smell washed over her, filling her nostrils with the spiced scent of sandalwood. She lifted her shoulder, leaning away. She didn't like being near him like this, not when he could reach out and grab her.

"What's the purpose of not eating? It's not going to make anything different," he said, his voice harsh.

"I'm aware," Hermione bit out, her knife slamming hard on the cutting board as she chopped the mushrooms. "You don't need to remind me."

"Apparently I need to remind you to eat, though," he shot back.

Hermione's face snapped to glare up at him. He was close enough to where if she lifted onto her tip-toes, her nose would brush against his lips.

That was too close.

"You know what? Stop." She dropped the knife and flapped her hands, frustrated. "Stop asking me questions about my life! This is the umpteenth time you have asked me that!"

"I've asked you twice, directly."

"And a million times, indirectly."

"Don't over exaggerate," Draco snapped. "I have told you before, and I'll tell you again: you're under my protection. That means protecting you from dying of hunger."

"Oh, my -" Hermione scowled and resumed chopping. "Dramatic Malfoy, and his wild ideas that I'm going to die of starvation after only one day."

"It's not just about today. What about tomorrow? The next day?" Then, as an afterthought, he said, "And if you die or fall ill, then my mother is at risk because when I use your recipe, my brew isn't as potent."

Hermione clenched her teeth. "I will eat tomorrow. I'm just not hungry today."

"And I'm supposed to believe the witch who said she hated me?" Draco scoffed. "How am I supposed to trust that you will?"

Why is he so on top of this? Why does he care so much?

Hermione dropped the knife a second time. "If you were really my Master, then you would just command me to eat. That way, you would know if I ate or not wouldn't you?"

They held each other's gazes, glaring at one another.
Without looking away from her, he snapped the fingers of his left hand.

*Pop.*

They looked down at Teensy, who offered them both a tentative smile.

"Teensy, please bring supper to the tea room. We're going to stop to eat."

Hermione scowled again. "But your mother -"

Draco's withering glare stopped her. "It's not even 7:00, Granger. My mother needs her dose by 8:00. You have fifteen minutes to eat."

The challenge stretched between them for a good ten or fifteen seconds after Teensy left. Hermione tapped her foot anxiously. It wasn't a matter of if she was hungry or not. It was a matter of pride. She didn't want him to feel right or be right. She wanted him to leave her alone.

She wanted him to stop caring.

Draco then placed his hand on her shoulder. She gasped, already wanting to move away, but there wasn't enough time. She felt the pull of Apparition behind her navel, and then they were in the tea room. She stumbled from the spinning feeling. Draco lifted two fingers and pressed them against the center of her forehead to keep her from pitching forward.

"Tch," he said. "Sit down."

"No!" Hermione cried, moving away from him, indignant. "I told you I wasn't hungry, and I meant it."

He took a step toward her, hands on his hips. "*I said* . . . Sit down."

Hermione ran her tongue along her teeth and nodded slowly. So, this was where he was going to take it. Fine. She couldn't say she was surprised. After the things that he'd said the night they'd argued in her room, it stood to reason he'd start controlling her in some way at some point. Why not with food?

"Of course," she hissed. "*Master.*"

With a lingering glare, she ripped her chair out and plopped down. It screeched loudly against the stone floor.

"Don't act like a brat," he said. "My father's home, and the last thing we need is him coming in here and causing more problems than you already are."

Hermione was about to reply, but then with a *pop*, Teensy appeared with two plates of sliced roasted chicken and salad. It smelled heavenly. Hermione felt her mouth watering and stomach grumbling.

She was pretty hungry, now that it was in front of her . . .

She was two seconds away from giving in of her own accord, when Draco pulled one of the other chairs around to sit right beside her. Some of his hair fell forward as he picked up her fork and speared some of the chicken with it.

*No, he is not,* she thought, incredulous. *He is not. He wouldn't dare.*
"Open your mouth," he said, and then the fork was in front of her face.

Hermione hadn't felt this angry in a long, long time. She glared daggers - no, swords at him and hoped he knew exactly how much she despised him at this moment. She wanted to take the other fork and use it to stab him in the eye.

His face was the face of an unbothered man. A man who knew he was in complete control of this moment.

The worst part?

She was too scared to defy him for too much longer. There were so many things that could go wrong, especially after the incident in the window seat.

She could only be defiant for so long.

She opened her mouth and he slid the fork inside. She chewed slowly, glaring at him the entire time. Unperturbed, he picked up some more chicken.

"What's your favorite food?" he asked.

"Why?" she hissed. "Are you going to lace it with poison?"

"Yeah," he said, and then he fed her a second bite. "What is it?"

She chewed and swallowed, wishing the food didn't taste so delicious. "Pumpkin pasties."

His eyebrows twitched up, but instead of replying to her words, he spoke with a voice that dripped sarcasm. "You would like something sweet. Pumpkin pasties, your obsession with honey. It's a wonder you've got such a nasty attitude."

When Hermione had swallowed her bite, she snapped, "Bite me, Malfoy."

"You're such a sweet girl, aren't you?" he cooed with dripping sarcasm. The fork loomed closer. "Open up for the Nimbus."

You fucking arsehole, she thought. You fucking arsehole.

She refused to speak for the rest of the time that it took her to eat what was on the plate. She wanted to just grab the stupid fork and eat it herself, but she felt like it would mean admitting defeat. Somehow, she knew that he knew that. And so she continued the battle of wills, humiliating herself and letting Draco Malfoy feed her.

When her plate was empty, he turned to start on his.

She shoved her chair back from the table, gave him one last glare, and then stormed back to the lab. She seethed the entire time she finished her brew, and fumed while she was giving Narcissa her medicine. She growled under her breath as she went to her room, stomping around as she ripped her dress off and shoved herself into a camisole to sleep in.

Because why the fuck not? Why not just sleep in her knickers when he could Apparate into her locked room and force feed her at the table?

She was just pulling the coverlet back when someone knocked at the door.

She answered it, not caring if it was Draco or Lucius. She was their 150,000 galleon slave, so why.
The. Fuck. Not?

It was Draco.

"Good evening," she said brightly, raising her arm and propping it on the doorframe. She placed her other hand on her hip and relaxed it, smirking up at him. "Did you need something? My cunt perhaps?"

"Granger, shut the fuck up," Draco snarled, and there was a sudden ire that sprung to life in his eyes. It made her feel embarrassed.

But she wasn't going to let him see it.

As much as she wanted to go throw a bag over her head, she forced herself to remain exactly as she was: half-nude and nonchalant. She tossed her head to move her elbow-length curls back. She saw that he was wearing a double-breasted black jacket that fell to mid-thigh. It did not have a hood, but the collar was lined with long, grey fur. It wasn't so thick as to be a Winter coat, but it definitely looked posh.

"What do you want?" she huffed.

"I'm going to Scotland," he said, his gaze traveling down the length of her body once before locking with her own. "I'll be back tomorrow."

"Lovely," she said. "I don't care."

He sneered. "Not such a sweet girl after all, are you?"

"Oh, fuck you, Malfoy." Without another word, she moved away from the doorframe so she could shut the door.

His eyes narrowed into slits and then she saw his fingers carding backward through his hair. He seemed to debate something.

And then crack, he was gone.

Too wound up with irritation, she spent most of the night reading the rest of *Wuthering Heights* in the window seat, straining her eyes by the moonlight until she reached the last page.

It wasn't until a few moments before she nodded off in the seat in her camisole and knickers that she realized that she hadn't seen Callie in ages.

It made her sad.

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**May 2nd, 2004**

On May 2nd, 2004, Hermione woke up in the window seat.

The skies outside were grey. She could see raindrops on the window panes. The first rain of the year. She saw the clouds drifting by, heavy and dark, just like they had the day of the battle. This was the same sky that had seen so many of her friends die over the years.

Hermione wondered.

Did it see her, too?
She put on a dress and went downstairs to the lab. Draco was not there, but she didn't mind that. Especially after last night. As much as she detested him, she didn't know why she'd thought it was a good idea to open the door in knickers and a camisole.

Hermione didn't understand why her way of combating fear was to antagonize the people she feared. She'd been this way forever. Professor Snape, the Dark Lord, Lucius Malfoy, and now Draco.

And what if Draco snapped on her again, and did worse? Hermione was tough, but she wasn't so sure she was tough enough mentally to cope with belonging to anyone, regardless of if she had the power to say no or not.

Not again.

She wondered if maybe it would be a good idea to rethink some things, especially on a day like today.

There was no reason to provoke Draco. She could keep her emotional distance and still not trust him, without needing to go out of her way to let him know how she felt.

For now.

After she finished giving Narcissa her medicine for the morning, Hermione decided to go to her room. When she got there, she called for Teensy and asked her to bring her lunch to her there, and then she settled in the window seat with her next book, *Pride & Prejudice*. With the book in one hand and a sandwich in the other, she curled up against the window to read.

Sometime around 3:00PM, a knock came at her door.

Hermione turned the book over on the cushion and then went to answer it. Now was as good a time as ever to start practising her new, distant behavior. She pulled the door open, schooling her facial expression into one of indifference. Whether it was Lucius or Draco.

It was Draco again, and he was still wearing what he'd worn yesterday. She could see that there were raindrops gathered in the fur around his collar. His hair was wet, scraped back from an equally-wet forehead.

"I see that it rained in Scotland," Hermione said.

"Yes."

There was an awkward silence. It was mostly Hermione's fault, because she didn't know how to talk to him when she wasn't being snarky. It seemed that he noticed the change as well, because he averted his eyes.

"Did you need something?" Hermione said.

"Uh . . . Yes. Yes, I have something for you."

Hermione tilted her head to the side. "Another apology gift?"

He shot her a look, one that she could compare to blanching. Then, he said, "Of sorts."

Hermione knew the gift was probably more attempts to make amends for the bedroom incident, but she didn't want to accept any gifts from him. That would undermine everything she'd said to
him the month before.

*But he's very good at giving gifts,* her thoughts whispered to her with guilt. *Excellent, really.*

"All right. Where is it?"

He jerked his head and headed across the hall, towards the stairs. Hermione put her slippers on and followed him down to the entryway. They walked to the right, towards where Hermione knew the sitting room with the Floo was, and the Drawing Room.

Her palms began to sweat. "Is it . . . In the -"

"Of course not," he said, his tone sharpening into a point. He whirled around, and she nearly ran into his chest. He was glaring down at her. "I wouldn't take you there today, of all days."

Hermione opened her mouth to retort, but then remembered her "new leaf." She inhaled deeply, willing herself to calm down.

"In here," he said, and then he turned to lead her into the family room.

Hermione saw the Floo there, dark and almost ominous in the way it loomed taller than Draco's full height. She stood in the center of the carpet, surrounded by finery and furniture, and waited while Draco walked over to grab something to the left.

He brought it back over and, with a slight grunt, set down a wooden chest.

"For you," he said.

Hermione knelt down, hyper-aware of the fact that Malfoy was standing right across from her. His arms were crossed over his chest and by the way he was chewing on his lower lip, she could tell he seemed anxious about what was inside. She reached a tentative hand for the latch, her eyes scanning the red chipped paint and tarnished bronze filigree.

Why did this box look so familiar?

She opened the lid, gazing at the things inside. Her hands trembled as she lifted a dark blue velvet fabric from the inside and pulled it out. When she unfolded it, she frowned. This looked familiar, too. She set it down on the carpet beside her.

The pace of her breathing picked up as she saw the veritable treasure trove that lay beneath. A bit of folded parchment. A spare pair of round, horn-rimmed glasses. A Christmas jumper with the letter "H" emblazoned on the front. The faint scent of treacle tart, as though someone had been hiding one inside the box at intervals for years.

Hermione's heart stuttered in her chest. She knew why this chest looked so familiar.

She'd seen it at the Burrow. It was an old box that Molly Weasley had given Harry when he asked for something to keep his things in at his dorm. Hermione had been there when she gave it to him.

These were Harry's things.

"How did you get into the common room?" she whispered, her mind spinning with memories of days past, evenings spent by the Gryffindor common room fire, laughing and studying. Ron's freckles. Harry's grin. Seamus and Dean playing exploding snap on the floor. Percy brooding judgmentally in the corner. Ginny painting her nails at a coffee table in front of the fireplace.
"The portraits are all empty by now," Draco said. "I just walked in."

She felt it coming up from deep inside of her, grief and guilt swirling together into a raging inferno. It didn't matter that Draco was there. It didn't matter that she didn't trust him, was cautious around him, or that he'd hurt her.

All that mattered was that these things belonged to Harry, and she and Draco were the only ones left.

She burst into tears.

Hermione clutched Harry's spare glasses against her chest and let it all pour out. She allowed herself to cry not only for Harry, but for everything that they had lost after his death. For all the pain that their classmates had experienced, the ones she'd seen in the sanctuary, the ones she'd never see again, and the ones who never made it past the day of the battle. For Seamus, Hannah, Aodhan, Neville. For Luna.

For Luna.

And then she wept for herself. For the girl she used to be, who set out to defeat the Dark Lord with determination and strength. For the woman she was now, who felt like a kitten in a lioness' skin. She wept for the person she would never get the chance to be.

Draco took a step toward her. He knelt down.

"I never cried," he said in a quiet voice, "but that doesn't mean I won't. It's okay to mourn later than everyone wants you to."

Hermione turned her tear-streaked face up to face his, surprised at how close he was. "Why were you in Scotland?"

"Because you needed this."

Hermione's brow furrowed and she studied his face. It seemed sincere. He'd just gone to Scotland to walk the ruins of Hogwarts castle to search for Harry's things in the old Gryffindor dorms. That was something a friend would do.

He'd done this, even after she told him she hated him.

*Why?*

She felt frost spreading along the edges of her mind. He was listening.

"I know what day it is, Granger," he said, and his eyes were like reflections of starlight. "Just because you hate me, doesn't mean that I do."

Hermione glared down at Harry's things, at his glasses and cloak and his jumper, and she realized that as beautiful as this was . . . It didn't erase anything. It didn't erase what Draco had done to her, nor what he had done during the war.

"If you had made the right choice in the first place," she whispered, "then maybe you wouldn't have to bring my best friend's things to me in a box."

And then, as the emotion washed over her again, she became overwhelmed. Sobbing, she pushed herself to her feet and ran all the way back up the stairs and into her room.
He didn't follow her.

Teensy brought her a plate of three treats before dinner.

Pumpkin pasties.

It made Hermione cry all over again. The guilt of living to get to experience the privilege of eating her favorite food was all-encompassing. The guilt of not eating them when her friends couldn't eat their favorite foods ever again was gut-wrenching.

So she ate the pasties, but she cried while doing it.

The guilt turned to anger.

Who was Draco to play with her emotions like this? Who was he to bring her something that she could have only dreamed of having, and then use it as a way of implying that she was somehow "wrong" for hating him just because he didn't hate her?

Hermione didn't like having her emotions influenced or regulated. She had told him she hated him for a reason, and she would leave Harry's things in that chest, in the sitting room to make her point known.

Hermione Granger was not one to be controlled.

When she went down to brew Narcissa's nightly dose, Draco was there at his table. He was ladling his potion into a bottle. He looked up when she entered, but she ignored him. She went straight to her own table and began her work.

Before he left the room, he spoke to her.

"I left it in the sitting room, and my father knows not to touch it. Take your time."

By the time she glanced over her shoulder, he was gone.

Hermione clenched her teeth and stirred her potion with renewed vigor. All these gifts. All this control. The table she was using, the stool she was perched upon, the self-heating cauldron she was brewing in. The books she read, the clothes she wore, the food she ate. The 150,000 galleons paid to Carrow to keep the Dark Lord from finding out she was here. Her safety. Her life.

Everything was given to her by him, and therefore belonged to him.

Hermione felt like a fool.

How could she say she belonged to no one when everything she owned belonged to Draco Malfoy?

After Narcissa was taken care of, Hermione took supper in her room. It was almost 8:00PM. The sun had gone down rather early today, and the moon was barely visible through the rain clouds. It looked haunting, barely glowing past the smoky grey. There would be no moonlit reading tonight, but she sat in the window seat to eat anyway.

Why did it matter where she ate when everything belonged to him? The tea room, her bedroom, the Dining Hall. It didn't matter.

He could simply walk or Apparate into every part of this bloody house.
"Speak of the damn Devil," she muttered as she speared bites of her dinner with force.

Draco stood in the center of her room. When Hermione glanced up at him, her heart stilled for a second. He was wearing his full Death Eater garb: black dress robes embroidered with silver filigree, his platinum blonde hair slicked back away from his forehead in a slight pompadour, and black leather boots and gloves. His jawline appeared sharper than usual amongst all that black. As her gaze roved the length of his tall form, she saw that his mask was hanging from the fingers of one hand, as though he didn't want to wear it unless it was absolutely necessary.

"Lucky me," she said, tone cautious. "A visit from my favorite person."

His eyes, dark in the dim lighting of the lanterns, narrowed. "Enjoy your treats earlier?"

"Immensely," she said, taking a bite of her food. "They were delicious. Thank you, Master."

"Granger, stop calling me that!" His voice had taken on a loud, sharp tone. The suddenness of the volume change alarmed Hermione. She drew back against the wall of the seat and eyed him warily. He took a breath and said, "I don't have time for your cheek. Tonight is not the night."

Hermione frowned. Now that she was looking at him - really looking - she could see that something was wrong. Different somehow. It was in the air, shifting and swirling around them like darkness.

"Fine," she said. "What do you want?"

"Do you plan on leaving this room tonight?"

She shrugged. "Maybe. Yeah."

"Do you remember what I said about the windows?" he asked. "About how they'll turn black . . . ?"

"Yes." She looked down at her plate, picking her fork back up.

Three seconds of silence passed, and then he was right beside her. She felt his knuckles underneath her chin, the leather cold against her skin as he forced her to look up at him.

"If the windows turn black, do not dally. Into your room, immediately. Do you understand?"

". . . Yes," she said. Why did this seem so important to him? He went to Buckingham all the time. "What about your father?"

"We'll be back later."

His gaze fell for a moment. She couldn't tell if he was looking at the floor or her lips.

"Here," he said, and then he stepped back.

Hermione watched as he lifted the hem of his robes, knelt down, and pulled something out of the side of his boot. It was a dagger that glinted as he dragged it out. He held it pommel-side out to her.

"A dagger?" she said, gulping.

He nodded, and his brows were knitted together. "You never know when you might need it."
Hermione took it, inspecting the red jewel, the leather-wrapped hilt, and the scraggly blade. It looked vaguely familiar, but then she couldn't figure out why a dagger would look familiar to her at all. Still, she would take it.

"Keep your necklace on," he said. "The lights are charmed to stay on all night tonight, since we might not come back."

She started to ask why, but the crack of Apparition left her feeling somewhat empty.

Confused, she stuffed the knife underneath her pillow. Then, she went back to the window seat, one knee pulled up to her chest and the other foot trailing on the floor.

Why would tonight be different? He'd said, "we'll be back," so that meant that Lucius was going with him. Draco had been wearing his robes and held his mask, so perhaps something -

Robes. Mask.

May 2nd.

Hermione dropped her fork with a loud clatter.

The Dark Lord was and always had been a wizard who suffered from delusions of grandeur. Delusions of grandeur that had come true like wishes upon stars. Dark stars that burned for eons and eons.

And it was May 2nd.

"If the windows turn black, do not dally. Into your room, immediately. Do you understand?"

Tonight, the Dark Lord was hosting a Revel.

Chapter End Notes

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Message to myself: Hang in there.

Revels.

What were Revels?

Hermione lay stretched out across the top of her coverlet, staring at the ceiling. She wracked her brain as deep as she could, trying to remember the limited amount of material that she’d read on the Dark Lord during the First Wizarding War.

His Revels were notorious, infamous for the ways that they celebrated the glory of their king. Muggles and Muggle-borns had been used as pure entertainment. The Dark Lord's Revels had resulted in hundreds of deaths from 1971 to 1980, when the final Revel was held.

But as to what exactly occurred at a Revel, Hermione hadn't the slightest clue. Unforgivables, most likely. Murder, of course. The Killing Curse was not a spell that the Dark Lord and his Death
Eaters feared.

She placed a hand over her stomach. It was roiling, churning with unease. There was no doubt in her mind that Lucius and Draco attended Revels. She had no idea what happened when they left the Manor or got called to Buckingham. They could have been attending Revels for the entire time that Hermione had been here.

Something deep inside of Hermione told her that while Lucius may enjoy that sort of thing, Draco was not the type. In theory, if he was crucioed because he resisted the Dark Lord's requests to assassinate Koskinen, then it stood to reason that he would not be the sort of wizard who enjoyed reveling in the Dark Lord's "glory," let alone killing Muggles and Muggle-borns for fun.

*If he can kill innocent wizards in office, then why would he be above killing for sport?*

Hermione only knew what he'd let her know. Maybe he hadn't been crucioed for the reasons she thought. Maybe he'd been cursed for other inane reasons.

Maybe her view of the outside world was curated by Draco himself.

She sat up, her long hair a disheveled mess about her head. She tangled her fingers in it, pulling her knees onto the mattress so she could bury her face in her kneecaps.

What proof did she have that they were even attending a Revel? What proof did she have that the Dark Lord was still hosting them? As far as she remembered from History of Magic class, Voldemort would host them to gain and foster support during the first war. But then he'd won the Second Wizarding War. So, why would he need to gain and foster support for a cause that he had already succeeded in?

*All gods require worship to prosper.*

Hermione lifted her head to gaze out the window at the stars.

Out here on the estate, away from the lights of any nearby towns and cities, it felt like she could see the entire universe. It spread out for all of eternity, sparkles intertwined with clouds of dust that marked the beginning of the end. Here she was, just a small fleck in the expanse of time, lost amongst trillions of years of destruction. Up there, it wasn't just cold. It was Hellfire lighting up the lonely darkness. A lonely sheet of ice spotted with flames.

It was so quiet down here.

It was 8:20PM.

Hermione had had enough of her thoughts. She was tired of thinking about the past, wondering what had happened to Neville. She was tired of worrying about the possibility of a Revel, and why Draco was so adamant that she keep an eye on the windows. She had grown fed up with thinking about her arguments with Draco and how their situation had taken such a dark turn.

Because no matter how she looked at it, things were irreparably damaged. She still couldn't go to sleep without making sure her door was locked at least three times. She couldn't walk down the hall without looking over her shoulders to ensure that he wasn't coming.

She knew she wasn't his slave in name, but when all the signs named it as such, what was she supposed to do?
It made her angry. So, so angry. She hadn't agreed to any such thing. She'd agreed to help Narcissa in exchange for safety. Even though Hermione was now seeing that she had made a foolish decision in a rash moment to come here to the Manor, she was no man's slave.

Least of all Draco Malfoy's.

Hermione wandered through the halls of the Manor, going downstairs and avoiding the corridor that led to the Drawing Room. Years later, that box was one that she couldn't seem to keep closed. It was best to stay away from the memories altogether.

She went as far as the sitting room, stepping into it and walking to the chest. She was surprised that Draco had actually left it there and even more surprised that Lucius had agreed to do the same. It was exactly where she'd left it, the cloak beside it, lid open, and the other things inside.

Looking down at it, Hermione could already feel the lid on that box in her heart and mind starting to rattle. It was like Harry was knocking on the walls, desperate to escape. But she couldn't let him out. He had to stay put. They all did.

But if you do that, you have to admit it to yourself.

Hermione took one step closer.

She wanted to take it with her to her room. She wanted to sleep with the cloak stuffed underneath her pillow so she could dream of things like Butterbeer, laughter, and owl feathers, instead of fire in the skies and the razor-sharp teeth of wyverns. She wanted to put the glasses on and wear them, even if they made her dizzy because she didn't need them. She wanted to wear the jumper every day, even if it was itchy or hot or ugly.

But if you do that, you have to admit it to yourself.

Hermione closed her eyes. She didn't want to think it, but her mind didn't seem to care.

You have to admit that you're his.

A fissure ran through her already-damaged heart as she turned around and left the room.

8:34PM, and Hermione was in the library.

She was doing some more research on Kinning and dragons. It had been so long since she'd been able to focus on it, what with everything that had been going on, and it was nice to be able to read without the pressure of watching the doors for Lucius the Tyrant to come storming in.

For now.

She grabbed the book that she'd originally found the information from, Dragons and their Kin, and she spent a good twenty minutes or so looking for whichever books she could find on dragons in the stacks. She was usually grateful that the Malfoys had such an extensive library, but in this instance, it was somewhat failing her.

For a family with a son named the Latin equivalent for the word 'dragon,' you would think they'd have more books on them.

There were only about five books in the entire library that had "dragons" or some variation on the word on their spines. Thirty minutes after she started skimming them in one of the armchairs by the
fireplace, it became clear as crystal that *Dragons and their Kin* was going to be their only option for discovering -

Her.

*Her* only option.

She felt heat rising to her cheeks. There was no we. No us. No their, them, or they. No plural forms at all, whatsoever. They were not acquaintances, and neither were they friends.

He'd seen to that, even before she had made the decision herself.

Hermione decided to just read *Dragons and their Kin* from back to front so she could have as much information as possible. She knew she'd read it before, but she had been in a different state of mind then. She felt a little more focused now. It was clearly a book that was written only to touch on the subject. It wasn't in-depth. But it was all she had to use to learn about such a fascinating topic.

It was when she reached the 43rd page that it hit her full-force.

She was arms-deep in the chapter on crystals and their properties with an apple in her hand that Teensy had brought for her. So far, she'd learned that each crystal held an elemental power such as fire, earth, water, lightning, etcetera. The color of the crystal influenced the color of the dragon's scales, but not much was known in detail about the intensity of the enhancement in power and connection that the crystals gave. Since Calypso was blue, Hermione could discern that this must mean her element was ice.

When she turned to the 43rd page and saw the picture of the Common Welsh Green that was decidedly *not* green due to a tourmaline crystal in his chest, the expanse of her mind opened. A box in her mind flew open.

Hannah.

*Aodhan*.

She dropped her apple to her lap.

Hermione's jaw dropped as she stared at the book. Why hadn't she remembered before?

Aodhan had had that exact same crystal in his chest, only it had been a different color. There was no possible way that Hannah had known what it was, or known about the Drakin. Because if she had, then the enhanced abilities and magic would have been apparent.

Hermione looked up at the doors, as though Hannah were standing before her, waiting for her to tell her the news.

Hannah was one of the Drakin. A dragon rider.

She had to be. That explained why she'd been so connected to Aodhan emotionally, why she'd known exactly what Aodhan wanted. It explained everything.

*Perhaps it isn't as rare as I thought...*

But it raised a few important questions.

How were the Drakin "chosen?" Via magical core compatibility, blood status, or ancestry? How many witches and wizards were living on the Earth right this very second that were compatible to
Kin? Did the amount of dragons born with crystals in any given decade directly correspond with how many people had the ability? Was Kinning an ability? Or was it a birthright?

So many questions, but no way to answer them without further research in a world where that seemed impossible. Hermione sighed in defeat. It was times like these where she really missed the past. There had never been a time in her entire life where she wanted to research something, and simply couldn’t.

One thing was clear. The only way Draco was going to learn how to harness his abilities as a rider was in practise.

The last thing she wanted to do right now was be in the forest alone with him.

After 9:00PM was Hermione's favorite time of the night.

Typically, everyone in the house was asleep except for her. When the moon was full, she could sit in the window seat and read by the moonlight that shone on the pages. Sometimes, she just sat on the cushion and gazed out at the forest and the grass.

Tonight, aside from Narcissa in her sickbed, Hermione had the entire Manor to herself. She could do whatever she wanted. She could dance or skip down the hallways. She could lift up the sheets on the portraits and stick her tongue out at them. She could wander into the kitchens and visit with Teensy. She could slide down the banister.

There was so much she could do.

She chose to lay on the floor of the Library to read and listen to the radio. One call to Teensy had told her that one of the few Muggle things that the Malfoys owned was an FM radio and for Hermione, it was the jackpot. She set it on the armchair and put it on a station that was playing punchy rock music. She hadn't heard a note of a single song since she was in the motel with Luna and a commercial on the telly had played a jingle. She was ready to have something better to remember.

Hermione laid down on the carpet by the fireplace, finding the contrast between the heat on her left side and the cool air on her right side comforting. Her curls cascaded along the ground away from her head and she held her book above her.

Pulling her knees up, she swung them back and forth to the tune of the music, occasionally kicking her leg up into the air because the Manor was hers. The Manor was hers tonight, and if she wanted to lay on the floor, sing, read Pride & Prejudice, and kick her legs in a dress, then by Merlin, she was going to do it.

She did hope Draco didn't come home and see her like this. Or worse. Lucius.

At 10:00PM, her bubble of fun shattered.

SLAM.

Hermione jumped with fright at the sound of the library doors bursting open. She dropped her book on her chest and rolled to lift herself up by the hands, to see who it was.

Lucius Malfoy was storming directly toward her, his white hair loose and his eyes blazing with pure rage. His mask was not on his person.
Hermione cried out in shock when she felt herself being lifted into the air by an invisible hand around her throat. When Lucius jerked his head towards the shelves, she went flying against a stack. Her back exploded with pain as she slammed into the edge and crumpled to the floor.

"You stupid, stupid Mudblood bitch!" he snarled, and then his hands were around her throat.

Hermione's mind was wild with confusion and terror as he dragged her upright and pinned her to the side of the stack. His face was the depiction of fury. She tried to say something, to protest that she didn't know what she had done, but all that came out was a tiny squeak. Her lungs burned. The radio continued to play. The chaos of it all made her heart race faster than it ever had before.

Where was Draco? What was going on? Why was Lucius so angry?

"Will you ever be able to follow the rules?!" Lucius shouted, causing Hermione's ears to ring. "Is it inherent within you to break them all?! Do you understand the consequences of what you have done?!"

Hermione could only squeak twice more, squeezing her eyes shut and popping them open again as the struggle to take in breath overcame her. Her fingers clawed at his. Her feet kicked weakly against his calves, dangling over one foot off of the ground.

What was he talking about?

"Do you know what will happen if someone else finds out you're here, you stupid little insect?!" he yelled, his teeth bared like fangs. "Do you not grasp what would happen if Carrow told your secret to the Dark Lord?!"

What? What?!

Lucius pushed his face up close to hers. "When my son asked me for the money to keep your presence a secret, I was not aware that Carrow had already seen your face."

He finally let her go and she collapsed in a heap on the carpet, gasping violently for air. Her heart couldn't seem to slow. Where was Draco? Why wasn't he home? She wished she had a weapon. She didn't care if he was Draco's father. She had no way of defending herself. She had nothing to -

His hand fisted in her hair and yanked her up to her feet again. She couldn't help it.

She apologized.

"I'm sorry! I'm s-sorry!" She was on the verge of hyperventilation, her eyes searching his desperately. "I don't k-know - I w-wasn't part of it, I swear!"

Lucius narrowed his eyes and twisted his hand, straining her scalp further. "Your mere existence makes you a part of it." In the next moment, she felt the tip of his wand at her pulse. "I had thought that my son was playing with fire already. I had thought that Carrow was asking for the funds to keep the unknown slave he'd seen a secret. I hadn't realized that Carrow was asking for the funds to keep Hermione Granger a secret."

Hermione closed her eyes. She hadn't realized that Draco had asked his father for the money. It hadn't even crossed her mind that he didn't have access to his own money. She hadn't realized that Draco hadn't told his father how much Carrow knew.

Why was he letting Lucius attack her like this?
"Where’s Draco?" she asked, her voice hoarse as she viewed Lucius through lidded eyes.

"With the Dark Lord. Where he belongs. And you?" Another wrench to her scalp that made her knees go weak from the pain. "You're here with me."

He swung her around by the curls and she stumbled to her hands and knees. Before she could get her bearings, his magic was flinging her through the air again. She shrieked as she nearly went headfirst into the fire. Terror turned her blood to ice as the magic looped around her neck and sent her soaring back to another stack.

She screamed in agony as the backs of her thighs, her lower back, shoulder blades, and the base of her skull collided with the front edges of the shelves. Lucius stood before her, his magic pinning her high and squeezing around her throat again. She struggled, her legs kicking out, but it was no use. She was so exhausted already. Her vision was beginning to swim.

"Do you know what would become of you if the Dark Lord found out you were here?" Lucius said, brows drawn together in his ire as he looked up at her. He looked haunted, beleaguered. "Do you know how you would make my entire family suffer for the spell you've cast upon my son?!"

Hermione forced her voice past the suffocation. It came out as a raw whisper.

"I didn't ask to be here."

Lucius stared at her for a long moment. Then, something in his eyes flashed and his magic lowered her until she was at eye level with him. It loosened enough to allow her the tiniest bit of air. She wheezed.

"What did you ask for?" he said. "What did you ask of my son? Food? Clothing? The skin on his back? No. You asked for a small fortune to risk my livelihood. My wife. I told him, and now I will tell you: the moment my wife comes at risk is the moment your value decreases."

"I didn't -" She coughed and tried to lift her hands, but the magic held them to her sides. "- didn't ask him for the money. I had no -"

"Silence, witch," Lucius hissed. "I think perhaps . . . It's time for a little lesson in humility."

Before Hermione could blink, she felt the icy fingers of Legilimency sinking deep into the forefront of her mind. Her entire head burst into flames of pain. She could hear herself screaming, but it was like she wasn't inside of her body. The agony had caused her to transcend her own self, and she was floating within a space of emptiness and fire.

And then they were connected.

She could feel his thoughts like images impressed upon her magical core. Dark images full of misery and woe. Worry, anxiety, and fear. All the emotions that encompassed everything that Lucius Malfoy was.

As soon as she recognized that she could feel him, she had clarity.

She was sinking.

Into the darkness. Into his fear and his misery and his pain. Everything was upside-down. Everything was spinning.
It came into focus.

A memory.

Something he wanted her to see.

Buckingham Palace.

An extravagant dining hall in a castle made of white marble. Three massive chandeliers made of clear crystal. A long table. More than twenty chairs on either side.

Each one seated a masked Death Eater. The plates in front of them were full, but no one was eating yet. The center of the table was chock-full of gourmet food that practically spilled out into everyone's places.

This was a feast. A celebratory feast.

Lucius blinked.

He looked to the right, and Hermione could see that there were two people between him and the head of the table. They both had on gloves and robes, so she could not see their skin or discern who they could have been.

There was one person in the head chair, and he was not wearing a mask. In fact, he wasn't wearing robes at all. He was wearing a three-piece all-black suit and tie. His face was pale and sharp underneath a familiar shock of dark brown curls that fell across his forehead and into his eyes.

He was sitting in the high-backed chair in a nonchalant manner, with one leg pulled up into the seat and an arm slung across his knee. His other elbow rested on the arm of the chair, and he was twirling the Elder Wand around his fingers as though it were a quill or a Muggle pencil. His piercing blue eyes seemed to charge the very air with electricity. There was something menacing about the way he was sitting, with his head tilted back and a faint smirk on his face. Like he was a teenager, bored in class. Like he didn't care about anything in the room.

Hermione knew who he was within seconds.

Tom Riddle.

Lord Voldemort.

The Dark Lord.

Lucius blinked.

"Now that everyone is seated," Tom said, and his voice was deep. It rumbled out across the table, spreading like silken darkness amongst his ranks. "I would like to shed light on what is perhaps the most important element to the foundation of my regime."

His gaze slid to his left, to the person who sat to Lucius' right.

"Loyalty," he said, his brows lifting.

Lucius looked at the person beside him. He blinked.

"Because as you all know," Tom said, lowering his leg to the floor and leaning forward, "and as
I've stated multiple times... The only way this works is if I can have trust in those that surround me. In those that I place the building blocks for everything that I have ever worked for, and for everything that will come to be mine."

No one moved.

"And I believe it's high time to remind each and every one of you why it is of the utmost importance to me to be surrounded by disciples that I can trust," Tom went on, curving his hands around the fronts of the chair arms and pushing himself to his feet. He towered over the table, tall and statuesque. Dangerous. "I think that some of you may need a lesson in fealty..."

He looked at the person beside Lucius again.

"...And the punishment for allegiance that is broken."

Lucius blinked.

Tom slipped his hand into the pocket of his trousers and began to walk towards Lucius' side of the table. He twirled his wand with his other hand. Each step seemed deliberate.

Slow.

Prowling.

"Without trust, there can only be lies," he said.

He stopped behind the chair beside Lucius's and placed his hands on the shoulders of the Death Eater who sat there. He rubbed them, like he was giving a friend or lover a massage.

"And when there are lies," he said, leaning down to look at the masked Death Eater. He smiled, and though he had a near-perfect set of white teeth, it was chilling. "There can only be failure."

Lucius blinked. Twice. Rapidly.

Tom's hands slid sensually down the chest of the Death Eater, and then moved back up. Over and over. As he did, he called out, "Greyback, if you would. Please."

A series of noises near an entrance behind the high-backed chair. In walked a familiar face, grizzled and lined with hair.

Fenrir Greyback.

Behind him, he dragged someone by the hair. It was a young man. He was so weak and beaten that he was limp. He wore only a pair of tattered trousers. His torso was mottled and stained with blood. He was tossed on the floor near the chairs, where he collapsed forward on his knees with his head down.

Tom stepped away from the chair and brandished his wand in that strange way that he always had, like it was difficult to hold onto. He whispered something, and then the bruised man floated up into the air as though someone were lifting him under the arms. Tom moved him until he was floating over the table itself, his dirty bare feet trailing through a food dish. The young man hung there like he was already dead.

Lucius blinked.

Tom glanced around the room and then began to speak.
"Six years ago today, this boy was the one that stepped forward. He said he didn't need Harry Potter." Tom stopped to let out a mirthless laugh. "It would seem that you did, because the Boy Who Lived . . . Lives no more."

Lucius blinked.

Tom stepped close to the table, twirling his wand around his fingers again.

"Isn't that right, Neville Longbottom?"

Hermione's heart screamed and she began to panic. Neville was there, in the Dark Lord's clutches, and he was alive? Her mind struggled to break the connection with Lucius' memory of this moment, but it was impossible.

The young man lifted his head, and Hermione felt her entire being vibrating with despair. His eyes were the only part of him that seemed alive.

He was broken.

"Finally gonna kill me, then?" he whispered, taking a couple deep breaths. "Or are we just here to listen to you stroking yourself to the sound of your own voice?"

Lucius blinked more times than Hermione could count.

Tom laughed. Instead of cursing Neville on the spot like Hermione would have thought, he actually laughed.

"You're right on one count," Tom said through his laughter, covering his mouth with the back of his hand. "Today, you will meet the same fate as Harry Potter. And we'll see how much good humor you have left within you in the end."

Lucius blinked.

The image faded.

The table was in disarray.

Neville was lying sprawled out in a disastrous mess of food and dishes. He was shivering with a violence. There was blood everywhere. On his body. In the food. Splattered across the silver of the Death Eaters' masks.

There was a Death Eater standing by the head chair, with his wand pointed at Neville. His hand was shaking. Tom stood behind him, smirking.

"Again," he said.

The masked Death Eater hesitated, his wand quivering.

"Again," Tom repeated.

The Death Eater whispered, "Sectumsempra."

Neville moaned, but otherwise did not seem to flinch when a gash bloomed open on his side. Blood leaked out onto the food dishes beneath him. He was obviously on the edge of death.
Hermione was desperate, so desperate for the chance to scream. To cry. To do anything. To save her friend. To not have to watch yet another friend die.

_Neville . . . Oh, Neville . . ._

The Death Eaters in their seats simply watched.

And the chair beside Lucius' was empty.

Lucius blinked.

"For those of you who are confused as to why I would ask him to do this to his own classmate, I want you to understand something," Tom said. He began to pace behind the Death Eater. "I want you to understand that those who seek to defy me, to - to _betray_ me - must be punished to the full extent of my hurt. Because you must know that it hurts me."

He stopped beside the Death Eater with the trembling hand, bending forward and looking up into his masked face.

"It _hurts_ me when my disciples betray me. When they lie to me and move around in the shadows where I can't see them. Like God's children, sinning and hurting themselves as they deny His existence. As though He hasn't given them the air they breathe."

He stood up straight and looked at the table.

"Do you not appreciate the air I have granted you to breathe?"

The Death Eaters didn't move.

Lucius was blinking, repeatedly.

Tom's wand suddenly shot out and he hissed, "_Crucio!_"

It wasn't Neville that began to scream.

It was the Death Eater with the trembling hand.

He howled in agony, pitching forward with his elbows on the table as the curse attacked his body. He was convulsing with the force of it, but Hermione could tell that whoever it was was clenching their teeth. He was trying to bear it.

"This hurts me to do to you," Tom said, his eyes glinting with malice as he held the curse on the Death Eater. "This hurts me to have to punish you this way, Draco."

Hermione felt every part of her mind stop functioning.

Draco. The person in the mask with the trembling hand was Draco. And he was being punished. Punished for betrayal.

What did he do?

Tom finally lifted his wand to stop the curse. The masked Death Eater that Hermione now knew to be Draco gasped. He lifted himself on shaky arms, his gloved hands flat on the table and his wand discarded on the tabletop. Other than the gasp, he made no further sound.

*What did he do?*
"This will be the fate of anyone who chooses to keep anything of importance from me. Any disciple who seeks to betray me will be punished," Tom said, and then he walked to Draco's side. In one fluid moment, he removed his hood and mask. He combed his fingers through Draco's hair and pulled his face up, cupping his jaw on both sides. "You have angered your God, Draco. And now He weeps."

Draco's eyes were red-rimmed, full of pain. His face was pale.

Then, still gripping one side of Draco's jaw, Tom used his other hand to push the tip of his wand against his temple. A look of desperation - of remorse, or something else - contorted Draco's face, but Tom paid it no mind.

"Crucio," he hissed.

When Draco's body tried to bow backward, Tom's hand slid to grip his throat and hold him in place. Draco whimpered, his eyes squinting and brow furrowing. He dropped his wand and his hands clenched into tight fists at his sides. He was sweating.

"Stop," he managed to bite out between clenched teeth, his voice a high-pitched whine. "Stop."

"No," Tom cajoled. He twisted his wand against Draco's skin, as though he were trying to pull out a memory for a Pensieve. "Crucio."

The third casting had Draco's eyes rolling up into his head. Hermione wanted to look away. The screaming was unearthly. There were tears coursing down his cheeks. His teeth were bared in anguish.

It was hard to remember that she hated him when he sounded like that.

"This is what you deserve," Tom said, as if it made all the sense to him in the world. "Punishment for your sins."

*What did he do?!!*

Lucius blinked, and Hermione realized that it was the first time he'd blinked since Draco had been *crucioed*.

"Now," Tom said, finally letting go of Draco's throat. He watched with a calm demeanor as Draco leaned over the table again to catch his breath. "I want you to kill your former classmate. I want you to bleed him until not a single drop remains. And then, when he is dry, I want you to ask for my forgiveness."

Hermione knew Draco well enough by now to know by the look in his eyes that he didn't want to do it.

She felt panic in her chest. Neville was so close, and so far. She'd thought he was gone for so long, and now he was right there. Alive.

If he killed Neville, Hermione wouldn't even be able to look Draco in the eyes.

Lucius blinked.

"Your God requires a sacrifice. He requires worship and then perhaps . . . " Tom combed Draco's hair back to fix it. He brushed imaginary dust off of Draco's robes. "Perhaps He may forgive your transgressions."
"No," Draco said, and it came out like a growl. He stood up straight. "I won't."

"Sing my praises, Draco." Tom, who was the exact same height as Draco, looked him directly in the eyes. "Or else I shall make her sing them."

The moment Draco's eyes widened, the image faded.

Hermione came slamming back into her body.

"And now you see," Lucius hissed, and there were angry tears glittering in his silver eyes. "Now you see what you have wrought upon my son."

_Crack._

He was gone.

The magic left her, and it felt like her mind was covered in a thick frost. Fear and anxiety warred inside of her as she struggled to make sense of what she'd just seen. But amongst all of the consternation in her heart, one thing had become clear.

_He knows._
Chapter Seventeen

Chapter Summary

Thank you for the influx of new members to my private group. You guys are all so kind and supportive in your reviews and comments. Today was a tough day, but damn, did we power through it. T.T Enjoy the extra update!

I will be posting in my private group and Granger Enchanted Survivors only, who have an amazing admin team that has welcomed me with open arms! Definitely check them out!

TRIGGER WARNING: no spoilers but there is a chase scene with the intent to non-con, but Hermione fights her arse off. No non-con occurs.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Counting the Stars

Chapter Seventeen

Fear of the Water - SYML, Soft Universe - AURORA, and No Mercy - PVRIS
Hermione raced through the corridors of the Manor.

Her mind and her heart were at war. Despair fighting anger. Confusion battling panic. It felt as though she were being tossed about inside of a tornado, like every time she came close to spinning out of the top, the clouds pulled her under again.

What was she supposed to do?

Voldemort knew. Tom knew.

And he was coming.

He was going to come, she just knew it. She was torn between falling onto her bed to have a cry, and running out of the front door with the clothes on her back.

But where would she go? She'd never make it far. Walking through the fields and hills of Wiltshire with no money in her pockets, she'd make it to town before she was recognized.

Why didn't my necklace work? Why didn't Draco come when I - when my heart rate - he -

The panicked thoughts redirected. Draco couldn't have come. Tom had him in his clutches. He'd been crucioed three times, possibly more. He couldn't have come for her.

Did he even want to?

Hermione burst into her bedroom, her head canting forward as the nausea overtook her. She fell to her knees, clutching her stomach. It simmered and jolted with terror.

Neville. Poor Neville.

Draco had killed him. She hadn't seen it, but she knew. In her heart, she knew that he was dead. Tom had made it clear that killing Neville was his punishment. His punishment for harboring her.

It was all her fault.

She held a hand to her heart, which felt like it was trembling and falling to pieces inside her chest. She'd let not only Neville down, but Luna, too. She could still remember the peaceful smile on Luna's face as she slid over the edge of the boat, whispering Neville's name.

And yet I still had the nerve to feel pity for Draco being cursed. I still had the gall to care about the way he was screaming.

Hermione was a horrible person. A horrible person and a horrible friend. Luna didn't deserve her. Neville didn't deserve her. No one deserved her.

What was she supposed to do? Tom would come for her. He would come for her and make Draco do to her what he'd done to Neville. He would kill her. They would all kill her. She would be dead. Dead, dead, dead, and all the sacrifice - all the pain and the torment and the sacrifice would be for nothing. It would mean absolutely fucking nothing because she had thought for a second, just one bloody second, that she was safe.

"Sing my praises, Draco. Or else I shall make her sing them."

Draco couldn't protect her. She couldn't protect herself.

"You. Are. Nothing."
She fell into gut-wrenching sobs. The anguish eclipsed her, clawing up from the depths of her soul. She fell onto her side and curled in on herself, sobbing without taking a breath. She could feel her chest constricting tighter and tighter, desperate for air. But she didn't deserve air.

She deserved to suffocate.

The black spots expanded in her vision. Her breaths came in short, violent pants. She was shaking, shaking so violently that it hurt her muscles. Her hands curled into fists as tight as vices. Her teeth clenched and ached.

With one final gasp, she fell into unconsciousness.

When Hermione awoke, she could see by the lantern light that it was 10:45PM.

With a groan, she pushed herself up and cast a weary glance around the room. She felt disoriented, like the Earth was tipping back and forth on its axis. Her body hurt in the faint sort of way that indicated that she'd had a panic attack. The right side of her body felt sore, and she could feel bruising on her back in all the places where she'd slammed into the bookshelf.

It all came rushing back to her at once.

The dining hall. The chandeliers. Tom's wand twirling back and forth between his fingers. Draco's pleading eyes. His trembling hand. Neville.

Neville.

Hermione closed her eyes against the second wave of emotions that threatened to take her down into the muck again. She hugged her knees to her chest and buried her face in them, struggling to calm her breath.

She knew better than to let her angst manage her emotions like that. She knew better than to lose control and spiral. Hermione had never been an irrational person. Today marked the official sixth year since the day Harry died. She hadn't survived this long on fumes of anxiety.

A breath that spanned two seconds. Air that filled her lungs to the brim, gentle and restorative. An exhalation.

Calm.

Okay. It was time to think about this.

What she knew for certain was that the dinner that Lucius had shown her was current. Tom had stated that it had been six years. The people sitting at the table were Death Eaters and they were feasting to celebrate something, likely the anniversary of the battle. Tom had chosen to open the dinner with a display, and that display involved Neville.

He had also chosen to use that display to punish Draco for something. Possibly the fact that he'd hidden Hermione. That meant that at some point, whenever the event was over, her time was up. If it was a Revel, the moment that Revel was over, Tom would come.

What she did not know was where the event had taken place, what event it truly was, and whether or not the "she" Tom had referenced was truly Hermione. There was a possibility that "she" referenced Narcissa. After all, Tom had cast an incurable curse on her and she was not dead. If he had somehow found out that Narcissa was being kept alive, then it stood to reason that Draco could
be punished by extension of Lucius' betrayal.

But if it was Hermione that Tom was punishing Draco for, then why hadn't he punished Lucius, too? Why had he allowed Lucius to steal away to the Manor tonight?

Unless Lucius had made good on his promise to choose Narcissa over Draco.

Unless Lucius had thrown his own son to the wolves.

Hermione felt sick again.

What if Lucius was the reason why Tom knew? He had stated to Hermione in the library that when he gave Draco access to the 150,000 galleons to pay Carrow for his silence, he hadn't known that Carrow already knew who she was. Had Carrow let the information slip to him, causing his enraged outburst tonight? Had Lucius found out earlier, told Tom, and then waited until after he got the satisfaction of hearing Draco's screams to come home and harangue Hermione?

Hermione dragged her fingers into the depths of her curls and hung her head between them.

There was something else she knew for certain. It nagged at the back of her mind, lurking there like a dark cloud of mist. Barely-there, but present and noticeable all the same.

_I want Draco to come home. Now._

Hermione took another deep breath. She didn't want to unpack all the reasons why she wanted him home. She could deal with it later. She just wanted him home, so she knew that he was alive and so she could get some answers.

Because whether she wanted to admit it or not, her hatred of him was purely circumstantial. She did not like the fact that she could still hear his screams. She did not like the fact that seeing tears in his eyes and on his cheeks and dripping down to the floor made her want to cry herself. She did not like the fact that all she wanted to do when he got home was ask him if he was all right.

Hermione did not hate him.

She hated the fact that she cared.

It was 11:30PM by the time that Hermione was able to stand up. She still felt a bit dizzy, but she knew that she needed to figure some things out. She needed to be rational. Rationally, if it were her, Harry, and Ron, they would be making plans to leave. To run. To break down camp and keep going.

_I need to gather anything I think is important. If I have to run, maybe I can convince Malfoy to cast an extension charm on a bag so I can bring vittles and water. Perhaps even an extra change of clothing and a couple of books. Some healing potions._

She brought the change of clothing in question over to her bed and set it down. Then, she paused. If she had an extension charm, it would probably be all right to bring some more undergarments. She went back to the dresser.

Five minutes later, she was tossing things onto the bed in a frenzy. If she was going to go on the run with him, then he wasn't the type to deign to sleep in a tent, or in a log, or dally for three months inside an Underhill eating fruit. There was going to be a suite, or some house somewhere that was Unplottable. He was a Malfoy.
She was definitely jumping to conclusions. There was no confirmation that Tom knew, and no confirmation that Draco was going to "go on the run" with her. She was probably just being overdramatic.

*Being overdramatic is what kept you alive on the hunt for Horcruxes,* she thought. *There's nothing wrong with being prepared.*

This thought steeled her reserve, enabling her to move faster. Soon, she had a small pile of things on her bed, waiting to be packed into a bag the second Draco returned home, should he see fit.

What about Narcissa? Hermione frowned. She would need days to prepare extra doses of the potion. The cauldron would need to be used and reused, and that was provided there were enough mushrooms left in the jar. Since each brew took thirty-to-forty-five minutes, she would probably not be able to fix this issue.

Her heart sank.

Narcissa didn't deserve this. It wasn't her fault that Draco had brought Hermione here to help her.

Hermione's stomach twisted in her torso. She knew that Narcissa had been cursed in December, from what Draco had told her in Paris, but what she didn't know was why. To this day, Hermione still had no idea how the Dark Lord found the sanctuary. Hannah had assumed it must have been Narcissa. But if that were true, she would have been cursed or killed in July of 2002.

She felt confused.

Either Narcissa wasn't the link, Tom had forgiven her for the discrepancy, or Narcissa hadn't actually been cursed in December. Which made no sense, because if she was cursed before that, then she would be dead by December, or at the very least, beyond saving. That would make Hermione's being at the Manor pointless.

Or Narcissa had betrayed the sanctuary.

She held a hand to her temple. If Narcissa had betrayed them and Hermione had been treating the very person who'd gotten all those people killed, including Luna? Then she didn't think she could cope.

It was unfathomable.

Hermione took several deep breaths. It wouldn't do to think about things like that. It was unlikely. Hannah had said that Narcissa had been helping them for years. If she were going to betray Wicklow, she would have done it immediately, the second she entered Dumbledore's office the day of the battle. But she hadn't.

Hermione could feel it in her bones. Narcissa wasn't the enemy.

*I need to focus,* Hermione told herself, tousling her hair to get some cool air on the back of her neck. *I need to go downstairs and get some potions, and then I need to wait here for Malfoy to get home. Then, I'll have answers.*

Hermione could hold no more than 5 bottles of potions at one time.

She hadn't thought there'd be more than one or two that she could bring that were already bottled and corked, so she hadn't brought a bag down with her. She would just have to come back down a
second time.

As she walked through the grand entryway, towards the staircase, she stopped. Her gaze slid to the left, towards the hall that led to the Drawing Room.

Harry's things. They were in the sitting room, in front of the Floo.

She couldn't leave them behind. It wasn't even an option. It would be like leaving Harry behind to run away with Draco. She couldn't live with that knowledge.

They can be shrunken down, she thought as she ran up the stairs as fast as she could. They can be shrunken down and I can place them into the bag. Having the Invisibility Cloak will be helpful in and of itself.

She tossed the bottles onto the bed, trying to run back down to get the chest. One of the bottles bounced and rolled down onto the floor. She let out a sound of frustration and doubled-back, panting as she reached down to grab it.

Still breathing heavily, she made it back to the sitting room. Falling before the chest, she took the cloak and stuffed it into the box, slamming the lid shut and throwing the latch. A faint, relieved smile crossed her face, as though she'd thought she was going to forget it or lose it.

She would never leave Harry behind.

WHOOSH.

The Floo had come to life.

Draco. Draco had to be home. Lucius was probably with him, but at this point, she didn't care. She just wanted to know Draco was okay.

All other thoughts flowing from her mind, she looked up with a relieved smile.

The grandfather clock in the room struck 12:00AM midnight.

Hermione froze, her heart racing ten thousand kilometers per hour.

The emerald green flames faded into ash as Amycus Carrow appeared in the depths of the Floo. He wore his robes, black as pitch, and his sandy orange hair was worn pushed back. His onyx eyes glittered like the endlessness of a black hole as he stared directly at her.

He took a step forward, out of the fireplace.

"The song and dance with your master has been fun," he said, leering out across the room at her. "But my patience has worn out, and I'm itching to fuck someone who doesn't belong to me."

Hermione's mind raced and whirled. Where were Draco and his father? Why weren't they home yet? How had Carrow gotten permission to come to the Manor while the Dark Lord was hosting a Revel at court?

She knew the answer.

He hadn't.

Carrow took another step forward.
Oh, Gods.

Hermione dropped the chest to the floor, where the latch popped open and sent the items inside cascading out across the stone.

His grin chilled her blood to ice. It was nothing like the man she'd last seen when he came to the Manor. In front of Draco, he was a bumbling fool. In front of Hermione?

He was her worst nightmare.

"Run, little muddy," he sang. "Run."

She ran.

"If anyone enters the Manor that isn't me or my father while we're both gone, the windows will turn black. If that happens, run to your room and lock the door to activate the wards. You'll be hidden."

She took to the stairs, glancing behind her.

The windows by the front doors were black. They were black.

She had to get to her room. The knife was under her pillow and it was safer in her bedroom.

Carrow was coming after her, walking slowly. Like a panther on the prowl.

She made it to the top flight of stairs, heading across the hall for her room. If she could just get inside, she could lock the door. If the windows were black, then the wards on her room would activate the second she locked the door.

Crack.

He appeared in front of her, pulling a shriek of fright out of her throat. She skidded to a halt and stumbled, falling back onto her bottom on the floor. How could he Apparate in the Manor? He wasn't a Malfoy. He couldn't be -

Unless the wards were deactivated.

Unless he was allowed inside.

Hermione let out a cry and she scrambled to her feet. She felt Carrow's hand in her hair, dragging her back against the hard planes of his chest. He wasted no time. His hand groped her left breast with vicious zeal. It hurt.

"Let go of me!" she screamed, struggling against the pain even as her scalp pulled and her chest throbbed. She kicked her legs as wildly as she could.

"You're -" He grunted as he struggled with her. ".- as feisty as I thought you'd be. Which is exactly how I imagined it. You -."

Hermione slammed her head backward, her skull blossoming with pain as it connected with his nose. Hard. He let out a sound of shock and his hold on her hair slackened. The moment she was free, she took off.

Lucius couldn't have done this, Hermione thought, desperation and horror pushing her forward. Lucius is not that vile. He couldn't have done this.
Down the stairs she went, hearing Carrow's laughter echoing off of the ceiling after her.

"The Revel is in full swing, little muddy! Your master was punished tonight, so he won't be coming home. So while the insects are being squashed by the Dark Lord's glory, I'm going to take my chance to reap my rewards."

Hermione didn't know what to do or where to go. The mansion didn't loop. Every direction eventually hit a dead end.

Her mind cleared. She saw a flash of sharp, white teeth. The glint of a blue crystal. The moonlight. *Teensy. Teensy can help.*

She made a break to the left, towards the corridors that led to the kitchens and the lab. She screamed Teensy's name, over and over, but no one came. There was no answer.

She had just turned to go towards the back door when *crack*, Carrow was there.

"Oh, don't worry about them," he said, and his grin spread miles wide. "I just used the Floo for dramatic effect. I like to make an entrance."

Hermione sucked in her breath and backed away. The horror was too much to bear. He couldn't have. He was lying.

*Not unless Lucius dropped the Apparition wards.*

Carrow lowered his chin and the look of dark glee that burned in his eyes showed Hermione everything that she needed to know about why Teensy wasn't coming.

"The Malfoy Manor won't be needing House Elves anymore."

Hermione felt rage filling her up from deep inside. She curved her hand into a claw and whipped it around with all of her might, slashing Carrow across the face. The satisfaction of feeling his skin split beneath her fingernails filled her heart with darkness and intensified her bloodlust.

"Teensy was my *friend!*" she roared, her face contorted with fury.

Hermione leapt across the space at him, shoving him backward until he slammed against the wall. Adrenaline pumped through her veins as she attacked him, slamming him with haymaker blows that had the intensity of a supernova behind them. She was screaming her ire. He was trying to defend himself, but she was too wild.

Until his foot slammed down on her bare toes.

The pain was immense, like stubbing her toe on the corner of a wall. She gasped in agony, half-staggering, half-hopping backward.

Carrow stood there, visibly seething through bared, gritted teeth. His black eyes were alight with the fires of hatred. He looked like he wanted to set her aflame and watch her burn.

Hermione didn't wait to see what he had to say.

She fled.

She could hear his footsteps against the floor, coming after her. His silence was more terrifying that his words had been. She felt her desperation turning to whimpers as she pushed her body to go
faster and faster. When she got to the stairs, she tried to take them two at a time, but he'd anticipated it.

He grabbed the hem of her dress and yanked so hard that she went careening backward. Her arms spun for balance, and then she was being pulled down right where she stood. She tried to fight, to kick and struggle, even as Carrow pinned her beneath him.

"You're a fucking handful," he growled, but he was laughing. He was laughing and Hermione knew it would haunt her for the rest of her life.

"I'm sure you're barely two fingers' full," she spat out, even as she tried to smack his hands away from the buttons on her bodice.

His face darkened, the mirth dissipating as quickly as a hurricane rolled in. He exploded.

Carrow grabbed her by the throat, hauled his other arm back, and slammed his fist into the center of her face.

Hermione saw stars. Her nose was numb with pain. She went slack beneath him, in a daze as he grabbed the collar of her dress and tore it open. It felt like there was a fog in her head.

She tried to fight again, tried to get her knees up between them so she could use her leg muscles to shove him off. She writhed, twisting her torso as he grabbed the cups of her brassiere and started to pull.

A choked sob left her lips, but she was determined. She began slapping his face, pushing against it, smacking her palms on his skin. She aimed her fingers for his eyes. Anything. Anything she could do.

WHOOSH.

The Floo.

She didn't think. She didn't know who it was. She just screamed his name.

"Draco! Draco, help me! Help! Ple -"

Carrow struck her again and then she felt his hands gripping her waist. Crack. They were at the top of the stairs. Crack. They were through the only open door in the hallway: her bedroom.

And then she heard him.

"Carrow!" Draco roared, and his voice came from the stairs. Hermione had never heard him sound so angry. It was as though someone had stolen Persephone from Hades. "Touch a hair on my witch's head and I'll slit your fucking throat!"

Nauseous from the Apparition, Hermione rolled onto her stomach as Carrow got to his feet and ripped his wand out. He aimed it at the door.

"You will not take this from me!" Carrow hollered.

The door slammed shut. The lock turned. A muffling charm was cast.

But Draco could Apparate into her bedroom. He'd always been able to -

She looked to her left. The window was black.
The window was black, so did that mean that he couldn't Apparate into the room if the door was shut and her bedroom's wards were activated?

She didn't have time to fret over it because in the next second, Carrow's wand was on her.

"Crucio!"

Hermione's eyes went wide.

She burned.

Her back arched off of the ground and her feet slid with manic abandon against the carpeted floor as the curse rocketed throughout her entire body. Her head was thrown back from the force of the agony that overcame her. She hadn't been *crucioed* in years, and it was just as horrible as the first time.

She just wanted it to stop.

In her ears, she could hear a cacophony of screaming. It was her own, mingling with his. Pain with rage.

She felt lost. Despaired. Her only saving grace was the knowledge that her necklace was still around her neck. Draco could feel her heartbeat. He had to. He had to know she was burning.

Could he hear her thoughts?

*Please, help me!* She projected the thoughts out, desperation intensifying her will. *Draco, please!*

And when the curse stopped, when her body lay prone on the floor in a convulsing heap, Carrow was upon her.

Still, Hermione fought. She would never stop fighting.

With meek hands, she tangled her fingers in his hair. All she had was the element of surprise. Even though it killed her, she dragged him down until his entire body was flush with hers. Then, stomach churning, she wrapped her legs around his waist.

She could feel him pressing slimy, open-mouth kisses to her neck as his lust overcame his suspicion.

Hermione let out a cry of exertion as she gathered all of her strength and rolled them both over. He gasped in momentary shock, giving Hermione just enough time to start punching. She could feel her energy leaving her with each blow.

She had to get to the door. She had to turn the lock.

Hermione felt his fingernails clawing at her bare thighs, leaving fissures in her flesh, but she paid it no mind.

She clasped her hands together and brought her fists down with a vengeance. At the last moment, he turned his head. The strike connected with his temple, stunning him on impact.

Gasping for air, Hermione limped over to the door. She could feel blood trickling down the sides of her legs, along her calves. She fell against the wood, head spinning and chest fluttering. Sweat-slick fingers closed around the lock.
And then she was being hurled across the room by magic, her bruised back smashing so hard into
the wall that it stole the breath right out of her lungs. The emotional strength that she'd managed to
build up began to crumble and she felt tears pricking at her eyes.

Carrow stalked toward her, his wand outstretched.

"I knew," he said with laborious breathing, "that you were a formidable witch. However, I was not
aware that you were a formidable woman."

"Underestimation," she said, her sentence broken by a groan of agony, "has been the death of many
men when it comes to me."

Carrow stopped in front of her. "It won't be the death of me. Crucio."

Hermione dissociated through the pain. Her body was in Hell, pure Hell, but her mind had started
to soar. Just like it had the day Bellatrix Lestrange broke her mind open and sent the pieces
scattering, she drew upon her magic in its purest form and urged it to protect her. She felt
Carrow's crucio pushing those shards as far as they could go and then, at the height of her screams,
she felt her magic searing to life.

Hermione willed all of the pieces back to her. She felt her magical core swelling, pulsating within
her. Even though she hadn't felt this in years, hadn't felt a wand in her hand in so long, she knew
that this power was what was thrumming through her veins and up into her mind. She knew
that this was magic.

Hermione was neither a formidable witch, nor a formidable woman.

She was both.

She broke through the Cruciatus, and slammed her knee upward.

Carrow dropped his wand and screamed, his eyes nearly popping out of his head. He dropped to the
floor like a fallen tree, clutching his groin and heaving for oxygen.

"Yes," Hermione said with another gasp, eyes cold as they gazed upon him, "It will."

Quick as a lightning bolt, she was bounding across the room. She didn't know if Draco was going
to be there, if he was even the one who was coming home, but the pendant wrapped around her
neck told her that it was him.

She pitched forward, into the door, her fingers throwing the lock. Her heart raced faster as she
threw the door open . . .

. . . And found herself at the end of a wand.

Draco Malfoy's wand.

He stood there, his teeth bared, seething. His eyes blazed down at her, full to the brim with anger
the likes of which she'd never seen before. This was the most frightened she'd ever been of him.
She almost took a step back.

He did not lower his wand.

She looked up at him, feeling her body trembling as it held the weakness at bay. She wanted to fall
apart. She wanted to cross the distance and fling herself at him. In spite of everything that they'd
been through in the weeks leading up to this moment, he was the only person she wanted right now.

He glared down at her, something akin to acrimony flickering in the depths of his eyes, and she felt ice spreading along the forefront of her mind.

*I'm here.*

Then, as relief chilled the heat of battle from her body, his contemptuous gaze slid past her to Carrow. Draco sneered.

"Move, Granger."

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE LEAVE A REVIEW!

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Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

It's about to get real fucked up from here on out. Expect dark themes, non-con from Tom Riddle, hate/angry sex smut for Dramione, and torture. Turn back if you can't handle these things. The only warnings I will give are the words "trigger warning" and a generic theme at the top of each chapter. I do not want to spoil things for anyone so I won't be detailed.


I would definitely not write a dragon story that was any less epic than Eragon ^.^

TRIGGER WARNING: mild gore

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Counting the Stars

Chapter Eighteen

Auron's Theme - FFX, Riku - Moises Nieto
"I had thought that 150,000 galleons would be enough to help you understand that the Mudblood is mine."

Like dark smoke, the hiss of Draco's voice drifted out of his mouth and into the room. His steps were slow as he crossed the distance between him and Carrow. His wand remained trained forward.

Hermione's heart pounded a steady drumbeat, marching to the tune of her lingering fear. She had never seen Draco Malfoy this angry, not in their entire time at Hogwarts. The truth about him was now crystal clear.

He was no coward.

Carrow placed a hand on the wall and staggered to his feet. His gaze moved to his right, to where his wand was lying.

Not happening.

Hermione pushed back the exhaustion in her bones and the pain in her muscles and rushed forward to snatch it up. She clutched it with both hands as she limped to stand beside Draco.

"I had thought we'd come to a mutually understood business agreement, Amycus," Draco said, wand still held aloft. Hermione hardly recognized the sound of his voice, hardly recognized the darkness and the baritone. The person that she had seen in Lucius' memory with the trembling hand and the desperate eyes was not here. "Imagine my horror when I get to Buckingham and find out from the Dark Lord himself that not only has he discovered my secret, but that you betrayed me as well. Which would be a lot less surprising if you hadn't accepted the money. You have a fortune of your own. Why would you need to go the extra mile to accept the galleons when you were going to tell the Dark Lord the truth anyway?"

Carrow's upper lip curled. "Accepting the money bought you time. Not silence."

"You'll watch your fucking mouth," Draco snarled, cutting him off by re-brandishing his wand. "Or I'll cut out your tongue and feed it to you." Another mirthless laugh. "Though, I'm considering doing it anyway."

Hermione glowered at Carrow and then, with purpose, she snapped his wand in half. It was worth it to watch the light leave his eyes when she dropped the two halves of it to the ground as though it were little more than discarded rubbish. If she was going to have to live forever with the memory of his hands on her flesh, then he was going to have to lose his wand.

"I paid you for your permanent silence, Carrow," Draco said. "That was the agreement."

"I lied," Carrow said through visibly clenched teeth.

Hermione could feel the fury coming off of Draco's body in waves. She glanced up at him, studying the angry planes of his face, the cut of his sharp jawline, and the way a stray lock of hair was falling forward into his eyes.
Even enraged, he looked like an aristocratic painting. Cold from afar and cruel up close.

"Clearly," Draco said, tilting his head to the side. "Because I come home to find you on the stairs with my witch, rutting against her like a squalid animal, with no regard for the agreement that was made!"

Carrow gave him a vicious smile. "Perhaps you should have suggested an Unbreakable Vow, you foolish boy."

Hermione felt her heart skip a beat. "My witch." It was the second time he'd said it. What did it mean?

She gazed up at Draco again. The look in his eyes was one that she'd seen before. It was the flash before destruction. The fire that flickered before his temper snapped.

"Perhaps," he hissed, his brows lowering. "Or perhaps I teach you a lesson about touching what is mine! Crucio!"

Hermione's eyes widened.

Carrow fell to the floor in a screaming, shuddering heap. He thrashed about the longer Draco held the curse, sweat rolling down his face and neck as the agony slammed into his body, relentless. By the way Draco stood, shoulders drawn back and chin tilted up, Hermione could see.

He meant it.

When Draco finally lifted his wand, Carrow began to laugh. He let out high-pitched, maniacal laughter that seemed disjointed. Like his mind had disconnected from his body after only one casting.

"Ohh, there's no honor amongst Death Eaters, Draco Malfoy!" Carrow shouted with a cadence, glaring back and forth between Draco and Hermione. "150,000 galleons was enough to help me understand that I wanted what belonged to you. 150,000 galleons was what it took to shed light on your lack of wisdom. I didn't need the money. I just wanted what was yours! I've always wanted what was yours!"

Draco's wand lowered, and Hermione grimaced.

Carrow had him.

He grinned, still lying on the floor and trembling. There was blood between his teeth.

"Sixteen years old, and the Dark Lord was already stark raving mad over what you could do with that little mind of yours. There's no Occlumens or Legilimens on this planet that's more powerful than him, but you? You come damn close." He laughed again and sat up. "I've been with him since the beginning. Since before you were born, you fucking ponce. And somehow, you managed to work your way to his side, where he gives you the freedom to betray him with her."

Hermione glared down at Carrow as his attention fell upon her. His grin widened and he stood up, swaying slightly on his feet.

"My only regret is that I didn't get the chance to stick my cock in her. I would have liked to watch her bleed. There's still time, Draco. Care to share?"
Hermione knew what was going to happen, but she wasn't fast enough to stop it. He had a poor temper.

She felt something shifting in the air. She saw Draco go rigid, his facial expression whiting out.

He dropped his wand and lunged.

Hermione watched in shock as Draco slammed Carrow up against the wall, one hand gripping the front of his robes and the other rearing back to strike. When Carrow surprised by catching Draco's fist in his own hand, Hermione's hands flew to cover her mouth. They struggled back and forth for a moment, and then Draco managed to wrench himself away. He landed a blow on Carrow's face with a sickening crunch, and Hermione saw blood spurting from his nostrils.

Draco came towards him again, but Carrow was ready. He aimed a powerful front kick right for him, and the sole of his foot landed square in the center of Draco's gut. Draco's arms flew out at his sides as he hit the wall. With a grunt of pain and a rushed exhalation of breath, he sank to his knees.

Right as he hit the ground, Carrow was there. He grabbed the sides of Draco's head with both hands and slammed it downward onto his kneecap. Draco groaned and fell to the side. Carrow fell upon him like rain from the sky. He straddled his hips and pinned him to the ground by the throat.

Hermione could feel the seconds ticking by as though they were hours. Draco was kicking his legs, trying to buck Carrow off of him. His fingers clawed at Carrow's hands. Carrow just laughed and laughed and laughed.

She didn't know what to do. She was frozen with panic. She'd thought - she'd been so sure that Draco was the powerful one. Draco was supposed to -

"After you take your last breath?" Carrow said, leaning down and pressing so hard on Draco's trachea that Hermione saw his eyes bulging and his face reddening. "I'll fuck her right next to your corpse."

Draco cast her a desperate, sidelong glance. In her mind, she felt the ice again, mingling with shards of panic.

He was terrified.

The dagger, he thought to her. Get the dagger!

Hermione whirled around in a flurry of skirts and curls, dashing for her bed and ripping away the pillow. She snatched up the dagger and ran back over.

Draco didn't have time. He was going to die. His kicks were getting weaker. She could see his hands starting to fall to the floor by his head. His eyelids were fluttering. He was going to die.

Granger . . . Granger . . . I'm sorry I couldn't . . .

It trailed off.

He was dying.

Hermione raised the dagger, and plunged it into the center of the back of Carrow's neck.

Blood spat forth, spraying Draco's face with hot, crimson ichor. Carrow made a strangled series
of gurgling noises. He began to convulse in his own terror, his hands pawing futilely at the front of his throat.

The moment he fell to the side, Draco scrambled backward until his back hit the wall, his chest heaving and mouth gasping for air. He tangled his bloody fingers in his red-stained hair and coughed repeatedly.

What did I just do? Hermione thought, her hands trembling. What did I just do?!

Not again!

A violent panic seized her body. She darted forward and, before Draco could react, she fell to her knees and yanked the hilt. The dagger slid out of Carrow's body with a wet squelching noise. Blood showered her body from the force, warm against her face and her bare torso where her dress was still torn open. She could taste metal in her mouth.

"Granger," Draco said, his voice raw. He looked terrifying, like someone had painted him in blood. "Drop the knife."

Hermione couldn't hear him. She stumbled to her feet, staring at the dagger in her hands. Staring at the blood that dripped to the carpet. She felt it soaking her face, neck, arms, and legs.

"What did I do?! What did I do to him, Malfoy?!" she screamed, looking at him with an expression of pure horror.

On the floor, Carrow's eyes were wide open. He was still twitching, gentle quivers of fading muscles wracking his body. His blood had already begun to pool beneath him. A rattling noise escaped his torn throat as life left his body.

The life that Hermione had stolen.

For Draco.

"Granger, just drop the dagger, all right?" Draco got to his feet and took a step closer. He held one hand out to her. There was a cautious expression in his eyes. "Just drop the dagger, and I'll take care of everything."

Her mind was shorting out, like a worn electrical wire. She was close to hyperventilating. "Of course you'll take care of everything. You're a murderer."

"Come now," Draco said, his voice gentler. "Go ahead and drop the dagger, all right? Everything is -"

"Everything is not fine!" she shrieked, her throat aching from the volume. She tightened her hold on the hilt. She knew she looked like she'd gone mad. "You killed Neville! You killed him!"

"How did you . . . ?" He looked confused. "Granger, I didn't -"

"You killed him," she said, on the verge of tears as she paced back and forth. "You killed him and now you've made me just like you. Because of you, I'm a murderer."

A flash of memory in her mind. Ireland, after Wicklow. A man with a bloody head wound. A broken vase.

Cillian O'Connell.
"I killed him, too.

"No," Hermione whispered, holding her bloody hands to the sides of her head as she shook it back and forth. She did not drop the dagger. "No, no, no, no."

"I didn't kill Longbottom, all right?" Draco said, and she saw him step over Carrow's lifeless form.

Hermione leapt back, pointing the dagger at him. She couldn't make out his face through the sheen of her tears. "Stay away from me! You brought me here! You turned me into this . . . This person."

"I didn't turn you into anything," he said. His tone was soft, but there was conviction in his eyes. "Everything is all right. He was a Dark wizard. A bad man."

"No!" she screamed, backing up further. Her knees knocked together as the emotion and nausea rolled together inside of her body. "Just because someone is bad . . . Doesn't mean we get to decide who lives or dies! You're the one who said that in the clearing, Malfoy! You're the one who said that we don't get to decide!"

His gaze hardened and he stopped advancing on her. "I said I don't get to decide whether you live or die. But Carrow? I would have killed him if you hadn't."

Hermione's panic burst in her chest. "And that's why I hate you! You're a horrid, vile, evil man!"

She screamed and fell to her knees, sucking in wheezing breaths. She couldn't think clearly. All she could see in front of her mind's eyes were the things she knew to be certain about him.

He'd let the Death Eaters in.

He'd taken the Mark.

He'd fought on the Dark Lord's side.

He'd paid a man 150,000 galleons to keep her presence a secret.

He had a shelf full of poisons that he'd used on an unknown number of people.

He'd crucioed Neville.

She inhaled her panic and her terror and her despair and when she exhaled, it was on a gut-wrenching sob.

"You killed him," she sobbed. "You killed everyone. You killed them all."

Draco paused and then he said, "Granger, you're not . . . Yourself right now. We can talk about everything, I promise. But first, I need you to drop the dagger."

On her knees, Hermione rocked her upper body back and forth, one arm holding the bloody dagger out and the other one wrapped around her aching stomach. Tears streamed down her face like a dam had been broken. She was crying for too many things to count. Her emotions were tangled in a thick, tight mass inside of herself.

"And now you're gonna kill me," she whispered before she began to sob anew. "I'm such a fool. I'm such a bloody, sodding fool."

She never should have come to the Malfoy Manor. She never should have allowed herself to be so helpless that she accepted an unholy sanctuary from a demon.
"Granger!" he suddenly barked. "I am not gonna kill you!"

"Teensy's dead . . . Teensy's dead . . ."

"Teensy is not dead, you silly bint."

And then he was on one knee before her, pulling his robes up to allow himself room to do so in his black denim trousers. He grabbed her wrist and she shrieked, trying to pull it back. He held tight, however, and used his other hand to wrestle the dagger out of her hand. He tossed it to the side and then she felt his hand cupping the back of her head. It steadied her in the storm of her panic, even if he was the one she was panicking over.

Draco used his thumb to tilt her face upward.

"Look at me. Look at me." He raised his voice as his eyes searched her tear-filled ones. "Teensy and Longbottom are not dead. Do you understand what I'm saying to you? The House Elves were summoned to Buckingham for questioning after Carrow's accusations."

Hermione took several gasping breaths. "And Neville?"

"I refused to do it. I told him he could kill me first. I was bluffing, but the Dark Lord rose to it. He sent Longbottom back to the cells." He let go of her wrist, but not her face. He looked extremely troubled for a second. "I'm not gonna kill you."

Hermione gazed up into his blood-smeared face. He was a murderer and this was all his fault, but damn if she didn't want to fall into his arms.

"He knows, Malfoy," she whispered, a tear rolling unchecked down her cheek. "The Dark Lord knows and he's gonna take me. He's going to -" She started to sob again. "- he's going to take me away and kill me."

He opened his mouth to reply, but was stopped by a voice on the stairs.

"It looks like you've finally gone too far, son. You've finally stepped out of line and now, the hounds are coming." Lucius came into view, his cane thunking on the floor as he approached. The smirk was in his eyes as he sighed in a self-satisfactory manner. "The Dark Lord knows. He comes at first light to collect you both. What will you and your pet do now?"

Draco let go of Hermione and stood. Hermione whirled around on the floor to face his father, accidentally sitting on the toes of Draco's shoes. His legs were like a wall against her back.

Lucius took in the sight of first his son covered in blood, then Hermione spattered with the same. The shock on his face registered in stages of confusion, intrigue, and then alarm. It was perhaps the only thing she did not regret about killing Carrow.

And then his gaze moved to his right, to look behind them, and it all melted away. When he looked at them again, his disposition was as cold and vicious as a snowstorm.

"What did you do?"
PLEASE LEAVE A REVIEW!

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Thank you so much to everyone for the support and love :)

From here on, this story gets darker. If you prefer something I've written that is lighter, check out my story Cupere. If you prefer darker, keep reading.

TRIGGER WARNING: Dubious consent scene featuring: oral sex, coarse language, hateful speech, hateful actions. Teeters on non-con if you're sensitive and not reading the entire story. This scene is ABSOLUTELY Hermione's fault because I WROTE it to be her fault. Seriously. Please do not read this chapter if you cannot handle face fucking.

This is the worst it gets for Dramione. They will have some more fighting obviously but they will not be so hateful after this.

Please also keep in mind that Hermione is a traumatized, unreliable narrator because of her past. More will be revealed in Chapter 21, so please be patient. She is a bitch right now, and for good reason. You will see.

TRIGGERING PART STARTS AFTER THE THIRD SCENE BREAK!

YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED!
Lucius took a deep, shaking breath.

"What did you do?" He repeated himself. "What did you do, son!?"

Hermione inhaled, preparing to speak, but Draco beat her to the punch.

"What I had to do. He came into our home and touched my property."

Hermione glared up at him from the floor. He was taking the fall for her on the back of the lie that she belonged to him?

She wasn't surprised.

Lucius's jaw hung open for a second. When he spoke, his voice was as cold as ice. "Do you realize what you have done? Amycus Carrow is - was the Dark Lord's executioner. Every death that goes on under his regime goes - went through him. Do you believe this will go unpunished?! When you are already hours away from punishment for your filthy little trollop of a -"

"Shut your fucking mouth, father," Draco snarled. Hermione saw the sharp line of his jaw flexing as he clenched his teeth. "I told you that I was extending protection to her, along with sanctuary."

"Filth over family," Lucius said with a sneer. "I told you that if the Dark Lord found out, I would throw you to the wolves. Your mother comes first."

Hermione had had enough. She hopped to her feet, in spite of the ache in her body.

"If Narcissa came first, we wouldn't be in this mess!" she yelled. "If you wouldn't have kept trying to sabotage me at every turn with your vitriol, then perhaps you could have had a hand in ensuring that this -" She pointed to Carrow. "- didn't happen!"

Lucius looked like he wanted to murder her. "Put a muzzle . . . On your mutt . . . Draco."

"You're helping me clean this up," Draco said, taking a step towards his father and looking down at him. "Why? Because while I was being crucioed by the Dark Lord tonight, you didn't lift a bloody finger to help me. 'Filth over family.' Tch. It's fear over family, for you."

Lucius narrowed his eyes. "I'll help you with this, but not because of her. Because your chances of living past this evening are already slim, and I don't want anything else to give the Dark Lord cause to search the Manor. Remove your whore to her quarters, and then we shall begin."

"I'm not a whore!" Hermione screamed, her sanity bending and snapping in two. Lucius looked shocked. "Stop talking to me as if I'm worth less than you! Stop treating me as though I -"

"Granger!" Draco moved in front of her, blocking her line of sight with his chest. She looked up at him, panting and seething. "It's best if you go get cleaned up. We'll handle this."

Hermione could feel that she was still shaking. "Of course you'll handle this. You're experienced in this sort of thing, aren't you?"
"Watch your cheek tonight, witch," he said, his eyes flashing. Then, she heard his voice in her head. *I'm taking responsibility for what you did, so the least you can do is mind your tongue. Go to the bath.*

Yes, she thought back. *Something that I did for you.*

Hermione held his glare in place with her own and then stomped past Lucius to her dresser to pull out new pyjamas. She slammed the drawer shut to hide the shaking of her fingers. Then, with one final scathing look to each of them, she stormed out of the room and down the hall to the bathroom.

Hermione had entered the bathroom livid.

Now, thirty minutes later, she was leaving it with a wet head of hair and heart full of rage.

This was all Draco's fault. If he hadn't tricked her into caring about him with his lies, she wouldn't have felt the need to save him. If he wouldn't have cared for her after she was accidentally poisoned, she wouldn't have wanted to care for him. If he wouldn't have taken her to meet Calypso those two times, she wouldn't have seen any good in him. She would have always seen him for what he was.

A killer.

He was a killer. He had killed Mikael Koskinen. He had admitted to killing a table full of Finnish Wizarding Council members in Finland. If he would have had the dagger in his hand, he would have slit Carrow's throat with ease.

She should have run. She should have run out the front door the moment Draco and Lucius both left.

That was why they left the Floo open, Hermione thought with bitterness as she stood in the hall and tried to decide what to do next. Because neither of them expected me to have the strength or the courage to run away. Because both of them truly see me as Draco's property. His toy to entertain him.

It felt like he was grooming her for slaughter. It felt like he wanted her to be as dark and as wicked as him. It felt like any day now, he was going to come to her, pin her down like he had on the window seat, and "fuck her like she belonged to him."

And she would have let him.

Letting out a cry of frustration and ire, she turned and slammed her fist against the wall as hard as she could. The pain of the skin on her knuckles splitting did nothing to quell the flames inside of her. The pain reverberating along her forearm did nothing to turn her away from the hatred burning within. The pain that throbbed across each and every muscle in her body did nothing to convince her that she wasn't a bloody whore.

Because she knew.

She knew that if Draco had pressed forward that night on the window seat, she would have done it. She would have fucked him the way he said he wanted to. She knew she would have because she'd lost everything and everyone was dead and she had nothing left anymore but him.

Hermione jammed the back of her hand across her tear-filled eyes in a furious movement. She felt like she wasn't even a person anymore. She felt like she hated her life.
She hated herself.

"Granger."

Hermione looked up to see that Draco was coming down the hall towards her. There was dirt on his hands, smeared on his face to mingle with the dried blood. He'd removed his robes and now wore his black denims and a black button-up with the sleeves rolled to reveal corded forearms. His silver and black rings were the cleanest thing on his body. Even his hair had flecks of blood and dirt in it.

"You look like you just dug a grave," she snapped, crossing her arms over her chest.

He peered at her. "Why are you so angry?"

"Because you made me kill a man!" she screeched.

"I didn't make you do anything. I didn't even suggest that you stab him. You chose to do that on your own -"

"Because I didn't want to let you die!"

"Lower your voice," he shot back. "There's no reason to shriek like a bloody banshee."

Hermione felt her fingers tingling, itching to slap him or slap herself. She didn't know who she disliked more.

She turned and paced a few steps away, pushing her fingers through her damp curls. Her breathing exercises weren't working. She could still hear the garling sounds leaving Carrow's mouth as the life she had taken floated away. She had scrubbed her entire body until it was pink and raw, and she still didn't feel clean.

She hated her life, she missed her friends, and she despised Draco.

"My father is finishing up outside," Draco said after a moment. "We buried the body the Muggle way. It's unexpected. The Dark Lord would be looking for a body hidden with spells, if he were to come looking."

Hermione scoffed and looked over her shoulder at him. "It must have been difficult for you. You're so used to doing it the clean, easy way, aren't you? You don't usually have to clean blood out from underneath your fingernails, I suspect."

"...Thin ice, Granger," he murmured, and she heard his footsteps on the carpet, his boots heavy. "Thin ice."

"I don't care," she hissed, whirling on him in a flurry of curls. "Put me on thin ice or drown me under the water. This is your fault!"

He moved forward suddenly, so close that she could smell the outside on him. The death and the mud. It was cloying and made her stomach churn. "You're determined to blame this entire thing on me, aren't you?"

"How many people have you killed since the last thirty?" She drew her shoulders back and glared up at him with all the vehemence she possessed in her entire body. "And all without a drop of blood marring your precious Pureblood skin."
His lip curled. "The method matters that much to you? A killer is a killer, and I've never pretended to be better than I am. Never. Not even when we were at Hogwarts. But by your logic, you believe that I'm more dangerous than you because of, what? The number of kills?"

Hermione's response was to raise her eyebrows for a moment.

"Granger, are you fucking joking?" He scoffed. "You stabbed him in the throat. For someone who's never killed before, that's awfully hands-on."

Hermione couldn't stop the memories of Ireland from flashing before her mind. After the sanctuary. The man. The vase.

*Because Carrow isn't my first kill.*

*And I hate myself for it.*

She banished the thought before he could get inside of her head.

"Oh, now because I've taken a life, I'm just as bad as you? Now we're in the muck together, yeah?"

She put her hands on her hips. "It's so lonely down in Hell, innit?"

"You and your bloody Gryffindor ideals." He took a step toward her, forcing her to take a step back. And then another. And another. Directing her down further into the darkness that the lanterns couldn't reach and to the side. "It's not bravery to martyr yourself, Granger. You stabbed him because you wanted to. Because it felt good."

Hermione's back hit the wall right as his palms flattened against the stone slightly above her head. He tilted his head and glared down at her, face half-shrouded in shadows. He was grinning the lopsided smile that she'd seen so many times when they were getting along. Now, it sent a dark thrill down her spine that she didn't understand. A thrill that only served to make her angrier.

She held her head high.

"How many lives have you taken?" she whispered. "How many more lives have you destroyed than me, and all without even lifting more than a finger? It doesn't take effort to tip the vial, Malfoy. You've tipped it more than enough times to outweigh a stabbing." She dropped her gaze and then brought it back up, a look of disgust on her face. "We're not in the same category."

He sneered. "Would you like me to act like a killer? Because I can be what you expect me to be. Easily."

Hermione started to reply, only to find that he'd taken his left hand away from the wall and wrapped it around her throat. Her fingers automatically flew to his wrist, clutching it.

She'd been attacked in the library by Lucius, chased down by Amycus Carrow, and then placed in an impossible position that resulted in her hands being covered in blood. And now he was threatening her.

He sickened her.

Hermione tilted her chin up, forcing her trachea more firmly against his palm. "Go ahead."

"Why are you trying to provoke me?"

Hermione reached her hand up to scrape her nails along the nape of his neck. Watching his eyelids
flutter filled her with a confusing feeling. "Why are you so susceptible to provocation?"

His gaze dropped to her lips. She felt his hand, warm and soft against her skin. He was squeezing her neck, but not anywhere near enough to hurt or restrict air flow. Hermione felt something dark twisting inside of her, low in her abdomen. She knew exactly what it was.

Arousal.

"You're a coward if you don't go through with it," she said in an icy tone. "You're a coward if you hide. Whether it's behind a bottle of poison or empty words, if you can't follow through on your threats, you're a coward."

He was still staring at her lips. Intently. She could see it there.

He was debating.

"If there's something you want to do to me," she said, dropping her hands to her sides, "then man up and do it."

He leaned into her, and she felt the pressure increase on her throat. She parted her lips to get more oxygen in through her mouth.

"We've been over this before." His tone sounded deadly. "I know what I want. Don't push me."

"We have been over this," she said, one eyebrow arching upward. She forced a breath. "And you didn't go through with it."

He loosened his hold on her, looking perturbed. "Because you were crying. You wanted me to stop."

No, I really didn't.

"If you're going to do something - if you're gonna try to prove yourself as this dangerous killer? You just do it."

Hermione didn't understand why she was doing this. She knew why she was angry, but she didn't understand why she was trying to push this so hard. She didn't understand why she was so determined to prove that he was a bad person.

She didn't know why she wanted him to prove it.

"What is it that you think I want to do?" His fingers twitched against her pulse and there was a challenge in his eyes. "Kill you?"

"Or fuck me."

Something shifted in his eyes with violent speed and he backed away from her on a ragged exhalation of breath.

She didn't know why she'd said it. It had just come out.

"You're fucking mental, Granger. Seriously. What is wrong with you? I just came home to save you from Carrow, and now you're trying to get me to..." He combed his fingers through his hair and then gestured to her. "You're mental."

"Yeah, I thought so," she said, giving him a dark look. "You were right when you said you've never
pretended to be something you're not. You've been the same person since school."

He stared at her for a second before he turned and walked down the hall.

"Go ahead. Walk away!" she called. "You're doing exactly what I thought you would do. Glad to know that the person who saved me turned out to be such a bloody coward!"

He stopped and shot her a murderous look over his shoulder. "Stop trying to provoke me."

"Maybe I should take my chances with the Dark Lord." Hermione's anger pulsed hotter and hotter. "At least when he says his intentions, I know he means to keep his promises."

He slammed his fist against the wall, just like she had done earlier. "I promised you nothing."

"You promised me protection."

"And I have given you -"

"You've given me nothing but lies and a lack of security." And you've tried to make me as dark as you.

Well, now I am.

He turned into the bathroom and slammed the door so hard that it splintered.

Hermione sat curled up in the window seat, elbow on the sill and chin in hand.

She gazed out the window at stars that saw what she had done. She wondered if they had hearts and minds, if they would blame her for it. She wondered if they thought something was wrong with her for not only killing Carrow, but provoking Draco, too.

And perhaps she was mental. Perhaps losing everyone she had ever loved had made her spiral into a dark place from which there was no return. Maybe that's why it was so easy to jump right to the choice she had made with Carrow. Maybe that's why she was so angry.

Or maybe she was just sickened with herself for wanting Draco to get it over with and use her like she knew he wanted to. Because why else would he bring her here to make a potion he could make with his eyes closed? Why would he pay 150,000 galleons for silence when he could have just killed Carrow and hid the body like he'd done tonight?

If he had brought her here under a ruse, she just wanted him to stop toying with her and dangling her on a rope of fear.

She was a true killer now, too.

She was just like him.

Hermione looked behind her, at the spot on the floor near the wall. The blood would have to be cleaned more deeply by the House Elves, but it looked like Lucius or Draco had cast a round or two of scourgify to fix the bulk of it. There was no longer a metallic smell; there was only the lavender smell of her bath soap and shampoo.

She didn't think she would ever forget what it felt like to plunge that dagger into Carrow's flesh. Just like she would never forget what it felt like to slam that vase down on the Irish man's head. She didn't want to remember. She didn't want to, but it felt like it was seared into her memory. Like
there were two film reels playing both murders in her head at the same time.

Why was everything so *fucked*?

She buried her face in her knees, hugged them close, and took a deep breath.

The door swung open, because she hadn't locked it.

Draco walked in, wearing naught but his black denims and a black belt. His feet and torso were bare. The expression on his face leaked darkness and menace into the dimly-lit room. His hair was wet, dripping water onto his shoulders to roll down over muscles toned from his daily exercise and fencing.

He'd just come from a shower.

He yanked the door closed behind him and, without removing his gaze from hers, reached behind him to turn the lock.

"This is the seven-thousandth time you've accused me of untrue things, Granger, and I'm losing my patience with you. You make decisions that fill you with shame, and then you blame then on me. Why?"

Hermione narrowed her eyes. So, he was ready to keep arguing. Well, so was she.

Arms still wrapped around her knees, she said, "I make decisions based upon the boundaries of what my life is now. I don't make decisions that I would make if I wasn't trapped in this gilded cage you call a Manor."

"You're *not* trapped," he said, laughing without a hint of amusement. "The door has been open since I brought you here. I gave you a choice."

"Impossible choices, Malfoy," she said in a sing-song voice, gazing out the window again. "What's gotten *into* you?" He raised his voice. "You are not my prisoner, nor my slave! You can leave at *any* point in time. Salazar, I'd give you galleons, food, and clothing if that's what you needed. I'd give you a wand, for fuck's sake!"

Hermione felt her heart leap with a dark emotion and her head snapped to look at him. "That is not what you said when I got here. You specifically told me the 'rules.' You said I was not allowed a wand, and that was why you had to get me a damn self-heating cauldron!"

"Things were . . ." He lowered his voice with a sigh. "Different then. Now, you're . . . Listen, I will give you whatever you need if you want to run. The Dark Lord comes tomorrow, so perhaps it's best that you -"

"No," she said, hugging herself tighter. "No. I'm not running."

"Why not?" He sounded exasperated.

Hermione took her time answering the question. She looked out the window, at the stars that shone, and she wondered what a life on the run by herself would be like. No Luna, no Neville. No sanctuary to find safety. Why didn't Draco understand that she didn't even possess an impossible choice?

In the Dark Lord's world, she had no choices at all.
"I'm done running," she said.

The silence stretched until it was too thin. He broke it.

"I will admit that I approached this whole . . . Situation incorrectly. I should not have set any rules when you arrived. I should have made sure you knew that I was sincere."

"But you weren't," she said.

"I wasn't what?"

She looked at him. "Sincere."

They stared at each other for a long moment.

"Care to explain my feelings to me?" he finally said, voice strained and arms crossing over his bare chest.

"You know why you brought me here," she said, and it felt like she was hissing out noxious fumes. "Don't act like you weren't creating some elaborate farce for me to fall into. Some - some trap where you could keep me here, right where you can control me."

"What?"

She scowled and let one foot drop to the floor. "You and I both know that all you needed was my recipe. You could make that potion just fine without me. My usefulness ran out weeks ago, and you know it."

"Are you mental? That's not even remotely -"

"Oh, you know it's true," she said, her tone biting and nasty as she glared at him. "You know it's true, and the reason why you want me to think it's not is so I don't find out your true intentions. 150,000 galleons is an awful lot of bloody money to pay for someone who isn't your prisoner. 150,000 galleons is an awful lot of money to pay for someone who doesn't belong to you."

He stared at her with wide eyes and an agape jaw for a moment before he said, "On what planet would owning you as a slave benefit me in any way, Granger?"

"What is it that entices you about having me under your control, Master?" she taunted, rising to her feet. "Is it because I bested you in all of our classes? Is it because I punched you in Third Year? Didn't like having a girl be the one to make you run snivelling to Madam Pomfrey? Or was it because of what happened in the Drawing Room Seventh Year? Do you like the way I sound when I scream?"

"Shut up!" he snarled. "Shut your mouth!"

Hermione couldn't stop. It was like word vomit, gushing forth from a well that existed deep within her. It was hatred, or it was fear, or it was despair. She didn't know.

Maybe it was all of them.

"Thing is, I'm fairly certain that your mother is never getting better. I'm fairly certain you never intended for her to get better." She clenched her hands into fists. "I'm fairly certain that you went searching for me based off of some sick vendetta you have. Some repulsive fetish you have for controlling the muddy witch who made your father feel disappointed in you. Either you wanted me
here to fuck me for making your life Hell, or because you love me. Somehow, I think it's not the latter."

There was Hellfire in Draco's eyes.

"And here I thought you were a virgin queen," he hissed, his voice as quiet as death. "Here I thought you were the prude of Gryffindor, determined to defend the honor and sanctity of all that is brave and good in this world."

"Just because I kept to myself and preferred to read, rather than to fawn over wizards, doesn't mean I haven't shared myself with another, Malfoy." Hermione's anger flared once again, hotter than it already was. "I guess that 150,000 galleon price is looking rather inflated now."

Draco shook his head. "And who'd you lose it with, then? The Red Weasel?"

A violent urge to strangle him mixed with a deep, sinking grief over everything she'd lost out on with Ron caused her to sit back down on the seat.

"No," she said, so livid that she was shaking. "It was never Ron."

"Then who was it?"

She scoffed. It wasn't his business. It wasn't anyone's business. "Why does every man on Earth think he's privy to the names, ages, and birthdates of a woman's previous sexual partners?!"

"Because if I'm a fucking slave-owner," he growled angrily, "don't you think I'd like to know who else's hands have been inside of my property?!"

"Your sarcasm," she said with just as much ire, "is delightful. You'll get no answers from me."

"Tch." He turned his face towards the wall where Carrow's body had lain at the foot of not even two hours ago. "So, what? You fucked some wizards at Hogwarts, missed out on your chance with the Weaselbee, and now you're thinking if you let me have at you, it'll be proper punishment for everything you did wrong to lead them to their deaths?"

Yes, Hermione's heart screamed at her. Yes. Yes. Yes.

"No," she said, and then she glowered at him again. "But I can see on your face that you think I'm bluffing. You think I'm all talk, that I'm just trying to provoke you. That I won't follow through."

Draco's brows rose. "You Gryffindors speak of bravery until your last breath, but when it comes down to the possibility that you might actually have it in you to make a mistake - to kill another person to save someone else - you can't cope. You're spiraling, Granger. You're acting like a complete nutter, because why? Because you saved a Slytherin from certain death? A Slytherin you've been determined to condemn since First Year?"

Hermione averted her eyes, glaring so hard at the air that she felt like it was starting to warm up. Everything he was saying was true. It was true, but it sounded horrid. It sounded like she was the bad person all along. Like she had engaged in prejudice before he ever had.

Didn't that make her the villain?

"I'm not spiraling," she growled. "I mean everything that I'm saying. Every word."

They looked at each other. It felt like they were staring across more than just six years of schooling...
and a shit Seventh Year. It felt like they were staring across the universe. Across millions of
galaxies full of trillions of stars. Stars that were born, lived, and died in flames.

And she felt like she was on fire.

"Then let's go, Gryffindor," he said, advancing on her and holding his hands out at his sides.
"Martyr yourself on your knees for me."

Hermione stood up and took the final step towards him. It was just like the night that they'd last
been in this position, only now, she had blood on her metaphorical hands. It was the blood of a man
who was anything but innocent, but it had still tarnished her soul in a way that felt as dark as a
Horcrux.

It didn't matter if Draco was bluffing, or if she was all talk. It didn't matter if she was his property,
his slave, or his witch. It didn't matter if he'd killed hundreds, or if she'd killed two. It didn't matter
if she was Hermione Granger and he was Draco Malfoy.

All that mattered was that she proved to herself that she was in control of her own destiny.

"Show me it was all worth it," he whispered, and she felt a dangerous chill in the room. The locked
room. "If I paid for you - if you're my slave - then show me you're worth the money."

"How?"

"Call my bluff. I'm calling yours."

Her heartbeat passed with a slow thump, thump, thump.

His eyes looked like molten silver with the lanterns behind him and the starlight behind her.

She only reached his chest, but she did not feel small.

Hermione reached her blood-stained hands out and grabbed the buckle of his belt.

The stars she felt between them seemed to explode.

Hermione swung him around and shoved him down onto the window seat. Anger fueled her
trembling fingers as she fell to her knees and began pulling the belt strap out of the buckle with a
frenzied speed. Her mind was blank of all but three words.

I'm still me.

Draco's eyes were wide now, void of the fire she'd seen there seconds before. His hands reached for
hers, but she moved them out of the way. She could feel that the expression on her face was feral,
the look in her eyes frantic. She felt like there was sweat prickling on her scalp, causing her curls to
get bigger by the second.

She didn't care.

I'm still me.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa," he said, gasping when she got her fingers on the button of his denims.
"Granger, stop! You don't need to prove yourself to me!"

They struggled for a moment and then she stopped. She looked up at him, panting.
"I'm not trying to prove myself to you," she snarled, and then she practically ripped the zipper open.

I'm proving to myself that I'm dark now, just like you, she thought, not caring if he was somehow already inside her head or not. That this is how a dark witch would act.

"The Dark Lord comes tomorrow," she said, voice raspy as she ripped the belt out of the loops and tossed it to the side. "So I'm going to give you your money's worth. I'm gonna give you something to remember me by."

I'm still me.

He reached for her hands, holding them in a vicelike grip above the crotch of his trousers. "Granger, you don't have to do this."

"Then tell me you don't want it," she whispered, breathless. Almost desperate in the way she glared up at him. She tried to take her hands back, but he held tighter as he leaned over her on the seat. "Tell me you don't want me to do it."

Silence.

Silence.

Silence.

He looked guilt-ridden as he averted his eyes.

"You want this," she snarled, wrenching her hands away from his hold. "You want me to do this for you."

I'm still me.

Hermione hooked her hands around the outside curve of his thighs and pushed herself up until her face was inches away from his. She tilted her head back, her curls falling away from her shoulders. She hoped he knew how much hatred she held in her heart.

"Why aren't you trying harder to stop me, Master?" she taunted, voice hoarse in the distance between their mouths. She was breathless.

He stared at her, and his gaze burned across the eons to meet her with a sizzling rush of something she didn't understand. "Stop this. Stop this now."

She lifted one hand, feeling her heart slamming against the cage of her chest. There was no going back for her. The Dark Lord was coming tomorrow, and then her fate would be sealed. She wasn't going to run from it anymore. Whether she was meant to die, or meant to be someone else's slave, she was going to make sure Draco knew that everything was his fault.

He'd made the wrong choice during the war, and now all of her friends were dead.

She wanted to hurt his heart.

"You don't want me to stop," she whispered, and then she placed her hand atop his trousers, over the hardness that had grown. "If you want me to stop, then why are you hard?"

"Granger." He sounded pained.
"If you don't want me to stop," she said slowly, angrily, squeezing her fingers, "then why are you hard?"

"Because I don't want you to stop!" he shouted, eyes searching hers with fervor. "Okay? Fuck. I don't want you to stop. Is that what you want me to say?! Do you want me to tell you that you're my property? That I brought you here under a ruse so I could finally see what it feels like to shut you up? That I paid Carrow because I was paying for you? I don't fucking want you to stop!"

"Then I won't."

*I'm still me. I'm still me. I'm still me. I'm still -*

She slipped her hand into his trousers, inside of the opening in the front of his cotton pants, and gripped warm flesh.

The moment she did, he fell back against the window and his head hit the glass.

"Fuck," he groaned.

Hermione tried to send her mind fluttering far away, to another dimension as she used her hand to pleasure him the way she knew he wanted. She felt like she was floating outside of her body, watching herself on her knees before Draco Malfoy, stroking her hand up and down his length, gathering moisture, bringing it down. As though she were an expert. As though she wanted to do this to him.

As though she didn't want him to suffer for all of his lies.

"This is what you wanted, isn't it?" she said, feeling her anger driving her hand up and down, up and down. "Isn't it, Master? You wanted me on my knees, worshipping you like a king."

His hips jerked upward. Her glare intensified.

"Stop calling me that," he breathed out, his head thrown back against the window as he drove upward to meet her movements. "Stop fucking calling me that."

"See? You do like this," she whispered, though she wondered if she were telling it to herself more so than him. "I bet you wish you'd have ordered me to do this when I first got here."

His fingers dug into the front edge of the cushion as he shook his head. "That's not t-true."

"It is true, Malfoy." She twisted her hand and increased her speed. "I bet you're regretting all the times you could have had me touch you, just like this."

"Fu-uck," he whimpered, his knees pressing hard into her sides. "Just like that."

He lifted one hand, reached for her, and then at the last minute, pulled it up to bite the side of his knuckle. His damp hair was falling into his eyes, which were half-shut and swimming with desire. Behind them, the lanterns had just gone out for the night, signifying that Lucius had probably gone to bed.

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. She blinked and saw Carrow, dead and leaking blood onto the floor. She blinked again and saw the Irish man that she'd killed, his head twisted at an awkward angle. She blinked a third time and felt her fear warring with her anguish.
Draco had lied to her. This was what he'd wanted all along. And she was foolish to have thought otherwise.

"I promise you'll be thinking about this for the rest of your life," she whispered, her voice soft. Her gaze scanned his face. Her hand moved faster. "Every time you close your eyes. I'll be here."

She dragged her hand up, slow and firm, and he cried out. He arched his back, one of his hands reaching up and back to smack against the window. He looked down at her, moaning in the depths of his chest. She saw his teeth flash in the shadows as he ground up into the circle of her fingers.

"I'll be right there inside your head," she said, looking down and watching herself betray everyone and everything she had ever known. Her voice came out gentle, quieter than a breath. "Haunting you."

I'm still me.

"Granger, look at me, look at me," he pleaded, his fingers curling under her chin and pulling her head up.

She lifted her eyes to meet his.

"I want -" Another particularly firm twist of her hand cut his words off with a moan. His brows met on his forehead and he bit his lip for a second. "Ngh - I want -"

"What do you want?" she whispered, her brows lowering into a glare.

He turned his hand to wrap it around her throat. His fingers were hot, searing her flesh where they touched her jaw. He sat up, drawing her closer, and spoke in a growling tone.

"More."

For a split second, as he held her gaze, the darkness in her mind cleared. It cleared like rain clouds after a storm and in that moment, she wanted to. She wanted to give him more.

And she didn't know if it was because she wanted to prove to herself that she was strong, or if it was because she truly felt like she belonged to him.

It felt like she was giving up.

When she blinked up at him, she saw all the people who had died because of her, and she knew.

This wasn't giving up. This was fighting back.

He wants it. He'll get it.

But I'm still me.

Hermione lowered her head and took him into her mouth. She heard him hissing through his teeth as she sank lower and lower, until all she could taste was him, her anger, and her determination. She had done this before, but she wasn't able to think about that. She wasn't able to think about anything.

All she could think about was his fingers fluttering along her jaw and cheeks, combing through her hair. His hips rolling, grinding upward against the cavern of her mouth as she did for him what she'd accused him of wanting all along.
"I fucking knew it," he groaned with a breathy laugh. "I fucking knew you wanted me to be like this. That's all this fucking -" He slammed his hips upward, nearly choking her. "- is. You just want me to use you."

Hermione dug her fingers into his thighs, trying her hardest to hurt him for the sake of doing it, but it only served to make him moan more. He dragged her head up, forcing her to release him from her lips. She glared up at him and bared her teeth in a ferocious display.

"I want you to be honest, you bloody prick." Her voice was scratchy, raw. "You've seen me as your slave from the moment you brought me to the Manor."

He smirked down at her. "You'd like me to say that's true, wouldn't you? You'd like me to tell you that you're right. You always did like being right."

"I am right," she snarled, her lips swollen and tingling. "You're despicable. You've been despicable since we were younger. And you're a coward. If you wanted me to be your little Muggle-born slave, you didn't have to pay someone else for the right to call me yours." She lifted a hand to his chin and held it as tight as she dared. "You should have just used that Slytherin tongue to coax my legs open."

"You wanna be right?" he said, his fingers twisting in her hair. "Then, open your fucking mouth. Wider. Wider - yeah."

Hermione did as he asked and he slid inside again, velvet-smooth and warm along her tongue. She allowed him to drive the pace by using her curls as an anchor, but clawed her fingernails along his abdomen.

_I'm still me. I'm still me. I am. I am. I'm still me. I am._

She could feel her resolve slipping. Whatever it was that was keeping her who she was was starting to falter. It was like there was a monster inside her head that had taken over. A demon. She hated him so much. So fucking much.

He'd lied to her. He'd made her believe that he was someone she could trust and feel safe with. When in reality, his protection was a farce. An excuse to get his revenge. To control her. To own her. He'd brought her here under false pretenses, just to turn her into this - this shell of a person. Into a ghost of who she once was.

"Oh, fuck," he moaned, and his other hand ran down his face as though he were distressed. She looked into his eyes, his gaze burning down into her. "Use your tongue."

She did as she was told, continuing to swallow every inch of him that she could.

"Look up at me. Into my eyes."

His silver eyes glowed in the darkness, his eyebrows pulling together and teeth clenching as he thrust.

She didn't know what it was. She didn't know if it was the way he was looking at her, or the sounds he was making. She didn't know if it was because she hated him, or if she really didn't hate him at all.

She moaned.
And then it all fell apart.

She didn't hate him.

Who was she kidding?

She didn't hate him at all. If it weren't for him, she'd still be on the streets. He'd Apparated across a continent for her. He'd put himself at risk for her safety. He'd done whatever he could to protect her.

The Dark Lord was coming for her tomorrow. He was coming for her tomorrow and if she didn't get to know what it felt like to make Draco Malfoy the happiest man alive for even just five seconds, she felt like her entire world would fall apart and crumble into nothingness.

*I'm still me,* she thought desperately, but it was weak. *I'm still -

*His.*

Hermione's hands went from clawing to caressing, running along the dips and grooves of his abdominal muscles as she pleased him. She felt his fingers sliding down to the back of her neck, holding her in place as he took over most of the work.

"I'm close," he whispered, and the anger that had been in his voice before was gone. It had melted away like the snow at the end of February. "*Oh,* you sweet girl. You're so - *ah* - so sweet."

Something was twisting inside her body, swirling along every nerve ending and making her feel more alive than she'd felt in years. She pulled her mouth off of him and wrapped her fingers around his length. Her eyes looked up into his as she moved her hand as fast as she could.

Her mind had whited out.

She didn't know who she was right now.

"*Are you gonna come?*" she said, her voice slow and sensual as it danced around them in the air. It felt like it didn't belong to her. Like it was someone else's words, someone else's life entirely.

"*Do you want me to?*" He almost looked shy.

"*I want you to,*" she said, her voice a near-whine. "*I want you to come for me, Master.*"

He didn't correct her, not when she bit her lip and looked up at him through her lashes. Not when her tongue darted out to taste the tip of him. Not when her hands began to move at a blurry pace. Not even when she moaned again.

"*That feels so good, so fucking good.*" He threw his head back again. "*Oh,* *fuck.* *Fuck,* I'm gonna come. Please don't stop. Don't stop."

Alarm bells rang in her head and a heavy discomfort settled over her like a cloak of self-hatred. She didn't like the fact that she liked this. She wasn't supposed to like this. This was a *punishment* for herself. It was a *punishment* for him.

Hermione tightened her fingers around him until she was squeezing hard enough to hurt. He bit his lip to stifle his cry of pain. Draco leaned forward until his forehead was resting against her shoulder. His fingers twitched in agony against her hips, kneading her skin. He was whimpering.

But she didn't care.
She wasn't his. She hadn't lost herself. She wouldn't lose herself.

He was a liar. He'd made her into a killer.

And she hated him.

"Please." His entire body trembled. "Please."

"Please what?" she said, her voice cold.

"Please . . ." He turned his face into her hair. She heard him take a shuddering, wet breath. She knew she was hurting him in more ways than one. "Please let me -"

"Let you what?" she cut in.

She wanted to humiliate him.

A pause and then another breath. "Please let me come."

She took her hand and loosened it. She listened to the relieved, hopeful sigh that left his lips when she drew her fingers all the way to the end of his length.

_I'm not me anymore._

"Please," he repeated between open-mouthed kisses to her shoulder. "Please."

The moment she felt her body responding positively to the feeling of his tongue brushing her collarbone, she broke free of the last of her reverie. She shattered it from within, pushing away anything that she felt other than her fury and betrayal.

_I'm. Still. Me._

"No," she said, tone flat. She tucked him back into his pants and trousers.

He was deathly silent, even as she shoved him backward. With a blank, cold expression, she zipped his trousers and pushed the button back into the loop.

"I'm not yours," she said, slapping her hands against his knees as she stood. "And I never will be."

He looked up at her in shock, his hands tangled in his hair. "I _never_ said that -"

Hermione didn't want to hear it. She was tired of being lied to. She'd been through too much pain since the war ended. She'd lost everyone she had ever loved, and in her desperation, she'd been taken advantage of by a snake.

"You're a liar, Draco Malfoy. You tricked me and brought me here under a ruse."

"I am not a liar. I never brought you here for anything other than to help my mother. Whatever happened - whatever grew between us - was by chance."

"There is no _us_, Malfoy!" she cried, whirling to face him. "There is no us. And you know what? If I were to stay here, I _would_ be your slave, and that's what is the worst aspect of this entire situation. That you went above and beyond with exorbitant amounts of money, put your mother in harm's way, and spun a web of lies just to get me to a place where you could say I belonged to you."

"That's not fair," he said in a dark tone, carding his fingers through his hair. "I paid that money
to protect you. Granger, I never lied to you. I have never lied to you."

"If Carrow hadn't betrayed you, I would have ended up living here forever, waiting for you to charm your way into my knickers." She sighed. "And I never would have realized that outside of the false world you set up for me to believe in, that I was as good as yours. So, Malfoy, you can think about that for the rest of your life. After the Dark Lord takes me, you'll have plenty of time to think about all the ways you fucked up. I hope you think of me every time you touch yourself, for the rest . . . Of your life."

With that, she turned and left.

"You're such a fucking bitch," he said under his breath with an incredulous laugh.

She headed down the stairs, trying not to think about the fact that in spite of everyone who had died because of him, her thighs were trembling with need.

Desire.

She would have let him have her, and she hated herself for it.

This is who I've become.
Chapter Twenty

Chapter Summary

I literally cannot believe you guys are still here after that last chapter

Uhhh

Yeah when Hot Tom comes into the picture, you may have issues, my brethren

TRIGGER WARNING: Torture via crucio.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Counting the Stars

Chapter Twenty

*The Thousand Year Wish* - Mariam Abounnasr, Roxas - Moises Nieto, and *Seymour's Theme* - Nobuo Uematsu

Hermione woke on the bottommost step of the staircase.
She had curled up to sleep there on the stone, shivering in the cold air until she drifted into a horrid, light doze. She woke on and off for hours, her fear eclipsing her exhaustion.

It had been a long week and an even longer day yesterday.

The moment she opened her eyes for the umpteenth time to see that the morning light was now peeking in through the windows, she felt her heart sink.

The Dark Lord would be here soon.

She pushed herself into an upright position, blinking against how tired she was. She didn't know what he would have in store for her, but she wished she could have gotten at least one night's worth of slumber.

But she supposed she'd ruined that for herself with her little meltdown in Draco's room last night.

She flushed with heat as the memories of everything they'd done last night came rushing back to the forefront of her mind. She closed her eyes, struggling to calm her breathing.

What had she been thinking?

There were no words for how mortified she was for allowing herself to get so angry, so emotional that she provoked Draco and pushed him to those lengths. She didn't even feel like herself anymore. When she imagined herself doing those things to him, it felt like a completely different person's memories.

She didn't want to think about the way her body had reacted. She didn't want to think about the sounds she'd made and the things that had left her mouth. She was not a hateful person, and yet she truly had hated Draco in those moments. She blamed him for Carrow's death, for putting her in that position.

But when she thought about it, she knew deep down that she did not entirely regret what she'd done. She stood by the words she'd said. She stood by the fact that she believed he'd lied to her. She regretted losing control with him and almost letting herself think she wanted him, but she did not regret pushing him to the edge. If she hadn't, she never would have got her answers and found out that her suspicions were correct about him.

After all, what reason would Draco Malfoy have to save Hermione Granger from the streets of Paris, offer her sanctuary, and protect her?

*It's a good thing the Dark Lord is probably going to take me away, she thought, pushing her curls behind her ears. I don't know how I'd be able to live in the Manor with him after that. I don't know if I'd be able to stop Draco from -*

*Thwack.*

"Get up."

Hermione jolted when the cane caught her across the upper back.

Lucius.

She was on her feet within moments. She hurried to comb her curls into place, so she wouldn't look like she'd slept on the staircase. Then, she looked up at him.
"The Dark Lord will be arriving soon," Lucius said, his disdainful gaze falling upon her from the step above. "Go upstairs and make yourself presentable. We may be able to salvage this yet."

Hermione's heart skipped a beat. "We may?"

Lucius brushed past her. "If we play our cards right, he may yet believe that it was a misjudgment."

Hermione glanced up the stairs, wondering what Draco had to say about this.

If the Dark Lord came and they acted like they truly believed that it wasn't a "problem" that Hermione was at the Manor, perhaps they could bluff their way out of it. Yesterday marked six years since the Battle of Hogwarts. Perhaps they could play coy?

That meant that Hermione was going to have to do what she did for Carrow all those weeks ago and play a role. She was going to have to be prepared for anything. This wasn't Carrow they'd be tricking. This was Lord Voldemort.

She bit her lip, lost in thought.

If the Dark Lord decided not to take her away, could she really stay here in the Manor with Draco and his father? Could they go back to the way things were before? After what she had done with Draco the night before, it simply wasn't possible for her to be able to look him in the eyes without remembering the way he sounded when he moaned. She doubted he'd ever forgive her for denying him, either.

She hesitated before saying her next words aloud. As far as Lucius was concerned, Hermione wasn't sure what Draco had him believing. Sometimes Lucius acted like she was his son's slave; sometimes he acted like she was just Narcissa's Healer.

"And you would do this for Draco?" she said, her voice echoing in the quiet, large entryway. "You would lie to your king so he wouldn't have to give me up?"

"No," Lucius said. He glanced over at her. "I would lie to my king so that I don't have to give my family up. I couldn't care less what happens to you."

Hermione stood on the stairs for a few moments to collect herself.

She headed up to her room.

Draco was asleep on her bed.

Hermione froze in the doorway. He was lying on his stomach, his arms hugged around the pillow and face turned toward the door and window. His chin-length hair was a haphazard mess, falling into his closed eyes. He still wore only his denim trousers and belt, and she could see that the flat expanse of his back was as toned as the front of his body, though less marred by scars.

The sound of his soft snores reminded her of when he'd cared for her after the accidental poisoning. She felt her heart wrench in her chest.

It reminded her of a time when she thought of Draco as a friend.

Had she ever really thought of him as a friend if she'd gotten down on her knees for him like that?

Suddenly, one of Draco's eyes cracked open. They stared at each other. Hermione felt like there
was an electrical storm of tension brewing in the air between them.

"Is he here?" he finally said, sounding hoarse.

She shook her head. "Not yet. Can you leave? I need to . . . To get dressed."

"Does it matter?" he huffed, his voice dripping with sarcasm as he sat up.

She knew what he meant by that. Well, two could play at that game.

"I guess not," she said in an icy tone, pulling her top off in the open doorway. "I guess it doesn't matter at all."

He was up faster than she could blink, hop-skipping over to her. He reached over her head and slammed the bedroom door shut. Even though he still looked tired, he glowered down at her.

"My father lives here."

Hermione had to force back the urge to smirk. He wasn't as good at bluffing and calling bluffs as she was. She shrugged, forcing back any lingering shyness over standing there in her brassiere.

"I'm property. Who cares who sees?"

"Granger," he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between two fingers. "Can we . . . Not do this right now? This early?"

Hermione pursed her lips and walked over to her chiffarobe. She pulled it open, wondering what she should wear to look "presentable" for this situation. The Dark Lord was supposed to arrive at first light, and it was technically already light outside. That meant that she didn't have much time.

"Your father wants to put on an act," she said, pulling a slightly fancier dress down from one velvet hanger. It was floor-length, long-sleeved, and made of royal purple satin. Gold embroidery was woven throughout the bodice and there was also gold lacing at the back of it.

"An act?" he said from the door.

"Yes," she said. She paused and then sighed. If she was staying, then they were going to have to navigate things later. She didn't have time to waste on navigation now. She unlaced her pyjama trousers and dropped them to the floor so she could pull the dress on over her head. "Theoretically, if we pretend that it's not an issue that I've been here, perhaps the Dark Lord will take mercy. That's his viewpoint, anyway."

"And what's your viewpoint?" He didn't sound perturbed at seeing her undress and dress in front of him.

Hermione pulled the zipper on the side of the dress up and then pulled her curls out from inside the fabric at the scalloped collar. "I'm a slave, Malfoy. I don't have a viewpoint."

"Oh, don't start with that already," he said with an irritated huff. "It's not even 8:00."

Hermione was already fuming as she pulled the lacing tight on the back of the dress. She tied it in a bow and then turned to face him. He was leaning against the closed door with his arms crossed over his bare chest. He still hadn't scraped his hair back.

His casual, disheveled appearance was startling to her.
"I'm just getting a head start," she said, feigning innocence as she sauntered toward him. "Imagine how mortifying it would be for you if the Dark Lord found out our ruse was real."

When she came to stand in front of him, inches away, her heart was beating so fast that she felt lightheaded. She looked up at him, holding a challenge in her gaze as she studied him.

"Have you made it your personal mission to antagonize me?" he murmured with a slight sneer. "Was last night just the beginning?"

"I don't know," she said, raising her brows. "Was it?"

He scowled. "I can't figure you out, Granger. You swear I'm a monster, but you keep provoking me into becoming one. So how can you know for certain who I really am?"

Hermione reached for his hand and gripped his wrist. To her surprise, he didn't resist when she pulled his hand to her lower back. Using both of her hands, she closed his fingers around the tail ends of the bow she'd tied there. The movement arched her back and pushed her chest against his.

His breath caught in his throat.

"Whether or not you're a monster depends on the choice you make," she said, glaring up at him. "Last night, you made a choice. If we manage to convince the Dark Lord to let me stay, we're going to have to deal with this every day until the day you either let me go or kill me."

The corners of Draco's lips turned up in a smirk and she felt his fingers skating up the length of her spine. They sunk into the depths of her curls and scraped against her scalp. It sent a shiver rocketing through her body, causing her eyelids to flutter in spite of her glare. With a sharp tug, he yanked her head back.

"If you keep provoking me," he said in a cajoling tone, his eyes sparkling with danger, "it's going to be the latter."

If I'm not here as a prisoner, she thought, then why didn't he correct me on the "let me go?"

Hermione, always one to have the last word, said, "Your track record for following through on your threats is poor, Master. I'm not worried about it."

The glimmer in his eyes caught flame. Within seconds, Hermione found herself whirled around and pressed face-first into the wall. Draco's fingers kept her head tugged backward, the back of her skull resting against his pectoral. He smelled faintly of yesterday's cologne, but it did nothing to offer her solace.

Unlike last night, she was worried.

What was he going to do?

Draco let out a dark laugh and brushed his nose along the side of her throat. "I think I'm starting to see the truth, Granger. I think I finally see what you're trying to do."

"And what," she said, voice strained from the tilt of her neck, "am I trying to do?"

"Brass me off." He released her. "I'm going to get dressed. Wait for me in the hall. Do not go downstairs for any reason without me."

She watched through narrowed eyes as he gave her one last lingering glance before he left the
As much as he infuriated her, she hoped this worked.

Hermione adjusted her skirt on the sitting room floor where she knelt.

To her left, Lucius stood with a nonchalant air about him. He studied his nails, periodically looking up towards the Floo. His long white hair was worn loose about his shoulders. He wore the most extravagant set of black dress robes that Hermione had ever seen, with layers of fabric, silver buttons, and a wide collar.

To her right stood Draco, stretched rigid and tall like a pale sentinel. He was clad in a long-sleeved black jerkin with a high collar and a pair of slim black trousers tucked into black boots with silver buckles. Wrapped around his waist was black belt. Over that, he wore a black cloak that hung to his knees with the hood up on the back of a head full of scraped-back hair. He looked paler than normal and when Hermione stole a glance up into his vacant face, she saw that his eyes appeared rather alert.

They had been standing in the sitting room between the two couches, facing the Floo for the past five minutes. The tension in the room was palpable. Hermione found that the more time passed, the more nervous she became. From what she'd seen in Lucius's memories of the dinner, the Dark Lord was not going to be easy to placate.

"Speak only when spoken to, Miss Granger," Lucius said, his tone hissing and clipped. He kept his eyes on the Floo. "Do not say anything that we did not discuss was approved for you to say. Do not look the Dark Lord in the eyes unless he orders you to, unless you prefer to have your entire life trussed up for viewing by his Legilimency. And for Salazar's sake, do not mention my wife. In any capacity."

Hermione said nothing.

"Thwack."

She let out a sound when the cane hit her back, shooting him an offended glance.

"You will answer with 'sir' or 'Master,'" he said. "The Dark Lord -"

"The Dark Lord," Draco suddenly said, his voice a low growl, "has not arrived yet."

Lucius looked at his son, and Hermione could see that something unspoken was passing back and forth between the two. "You would do well to remember that it is not I that has fallen out of his favor, Draco. Your pet needs to understand that as well."

"She understands," Draco said. "Leave your cane at your side, old man."

Lucius started to reply, but Hermione's loud scowl of frustration drew both Malfoy men's attention.

"I know how to act," she said, clasping her hands in her lap. "I know my place. Don't I, Master?"

When her gaze snapped up to meet Draco's, he was glaring at her. She felt ice spreading along the edges of her mind, but she resisted.

She wasn't going to let him in so easily anymore.

Everything was different now. If they succeeded in tricking the Dark Lord, then everything was
going to continue to be different. Hermione had accepted that this was not a world that she was welcome in any longer. She saw no reason to keep pretending she believed in Draco's lies any longer.

Lucius sneered at Draco, looking revolted. "Perhaps a *ruse* is not a *ruse* with the two of you."

"Perhaps you should *shut* your *mouth*, father," Draco shot back in a mocking tone, and then he nudged Hermione's thigh through her skirt with the tip of his boot. "Mind your snark. He could arrive any -"

A cloud of shadows phased into existence in front of the Floo. Tendrils of darkness wafted off of its bulk, swirling up to fade into nothingness in the air. Hermione's heart immediately began to stutter.

The darkness faded and out of its depths came Tom Riddle.

"Good morning." His gaze flickered from Lucius, to Draco, to Hermione, and there it lingered. His voice was deep, and it rolled down Hermione's back in a way that pebbled her skin. There was a hint of a smile on his lips, sinister in the way it seemed so flippant. As if he were here for tea, and not to potentially take her life.

Tom looked similar to the way he had in Lucius's memory, with a three-piece black suit and the curls falling into one eye. But today, he wore a white button-up instead of a black one. His blue eyes pierced across the room and landed directly on Hermione.

She held her breath.

Beside where she already knelt, both Lucius and Draco sunk down to one knee.

"Milord," they said at the same time.

Hermione kept her head up, holding Tom's gaze.

Which was exactly what Lucius had told her not to do.

She meant it to be a show of defiance, but her fear had increased to a point where if she wanted to look down, it would have taken too much effort. She took a shallow breath, squeezing her hands together in her lap until her knuckles paled.

Tom sunk into her head with ease. It wasn't icy, like with Draco. It was hot. It was molten lava oozing across the plains of her mind and melting anything that stood in its way. Hermione had no idea what to do.

Her experiences with Occlusion were limited. She could push memories forward, and she could put memories into boxes and forget them in the day-to-day, but to have someone rummaging around inside of her head? She didn't know how to stop them from getting in.

Frantic, she pushed as many memories as she could forward that wouldn't show Narcissa, the potion, or any of the freedoms she'd been awarded. She focused on her past, shoving childhood events and moments at school to meet the heat of Tom's flames. She felt sweat beading on her forehead as she held the line, supplying him with memories every time he started to wander further.

Finally, he backed away. He slid out of her mind as easily as he had sunk into it, leaving her panting slightly. Her vision blurred for a moment, and then she lowered her gaze. Her head was throbbing.
She should have listened to Lucius.

"Well," Tom said, and Hermione heard his voice coming closer. "This is something, isn't it? Two of my most trusted disciples, and I simply cannot know for certain which of the two of you has hurt me worse."

Hermione gulped, viewing Draco out of her peripheral vision. His face was blank as it stared at the carpet, his body unmoving.

"First, I should like to take a look at the Mudblood who has caused my disciples to wound me so grievously."

Hermione clenched her teeth when she felt magic wrapping around her throat and yanking her high up into the air. She dangled five or six feet off of the ground, her fingers clutching at air that suffocated around her neck. Remaining strong, she allowed her lungs to burn. She refused to open her mouth even to make futile attempts to breathe. If she could be strong when it came to going toe-to-toe with Draco, she could do the same for Tom.

A dark wizard was a dark wizard.

Tom came closer. Hermione kept her eyes on the ceiling.

Though she supposed it didn't matter. Draco could get into her head without needing to look into her eyes. So why would Tom be any weaker?

Tom's magic lowered her until she was slightly above eye level, her feet still clear of the ground. She could feel his breath, heated and moist against her neck. She resisted the urge to gag from the combination of terror and her inability to take in precious oxygen.

"You are a little slip of a thing, aren't you?" Tom murmured, sounding amused. "Ducking in and out of wizarding towns and sanctuaries. Hiding from me for all this time. What, you didn't want to be with me?"

He let her fall to the ground. Her knees slammed down on the floor, the stone feeling harder than usual underneath the carpet. Her kneecaps screamed in pain, but Hermione managed to stifle her cry behind lips sealed tight. She chanced a glance upward to see him turning an amused gaze to Lucius and Draco in turn.

"And the two of you," he said. "Which of you risked it all for her? Which of the two of you set out to break my heart into pieces to offer her safe harbor?"

Draco remained stoic, silent. Lucius immediately began to speak.

"Your Majesty," he said in a whisper, "surely you can understand and - and appreciate the power of temptation on a young wizard's psyche when it comes to school rivalries. You see, my son -"

"Your son," Tom said, raising his voice without filtering any of the calmness out of it, "is the reason we are here, Lucius. He has wounded me with his betrayal twice over. To hide Undesirable Number One in his home and then to deny me the right to see Undesirable Number Two sacrificed in my glory?"

Neville's alive, Hermione thought, powerless to stop the excitement from growing in her chest. That confirms it.

Except that it didn't confirm it. It only confirmed that Draco hadn't carried the execution out. Who
was to say that some other Death Eater hadn't jumped at the chance to please their king?

Her excitement plummeted to the foundation of her heart and she retreated back into the safety of her quiet demeanor.

"Tell me, Draco." Hermione saw Tom's black shoes coming into view directly in front of Draco's kneeling form. "Have you become disillusioned with your power and privilege?"

There was a moment's silence; a moment that dragged out too long.

"No, milord," Draco said, voice quiet.

"Then, by all means," Tom said in a voice that was just as soft, but much more dangerous. "Explain your thought process to me."

Lucius cleared his throat. "My Lord -"

"Silence!"

Tom's loud roar echoed around the room, and Hermione flinched away from the tentacles of darkness that were wafting off of his body. They reached for her. The moment their tips stroked the satin of her skirt, smoke began to rise from burn marks on the fabric. With frenetic movements, she pulled and tucked her skirt closer to her body to escape them.

How does he have this power?

The darkness faded again, and Tom continued.

"Draco. I would like an explanation. I would hate to have to ask again."

Draco said nothing.

Hermione's heart raced. They'd discussed this before the Dark Lord arrived. They'd discussed it with Lucius. The plan was set. Surely he hadn't forgotten. Surely he wasn't going to throw his life away just to get back at Hermione for the rows they'd been having?

"I wanted her," Draco said, and it sounded like he was clenching his teeth. Like he didn't even want to say what he'd already agreed with his father to say. "I wanted revenge on her for past grievances during school. So, I went searching for her myself. I found her, brought her here, and made her my slave."

"And the 150,000 galleon payment made to Amycus Carrow?"

A pause. "I paid him for his silence so that she wouldn't be taken from me. She is my slave for a reason. That means I would like to keep her. Respectfully, milord, I believed that after all I had done for you, you would not be remiss to grant me this request without punishment."

Tom began to pace. "You wish for me to grant you not only clemency, but the Mudblood that you stole from me as well?"

Hermione gulped. That didn't sound good.

"Yes," Draco said. "I will admit that I went about it the wrong way, but she is someone that I . . ." He seemed to choose his words with a careful mind. "Desired the ownership of."

Hermione felt the old flames of her anger from last night rising. Of course I am. Of course he
"And were you able to achieve that goal?"

Hermione frowned and looked over at Draco in spite of her instructions. What did that mean?

"Milord?" Draco said, lifting his head. His eyes met Hermione's for a second before raising to Tom's.

Then, Tom was there, crouching in front of Draco with his elbows on his thighs and his fingers steepled before him. Hermione dropped her gaze quickly, her heart rate rising again.

"Have you fucked the Mudblood yet?"

Hermione's mind screamed at her. What if Tom went into Draco's mind and saw that they hadn't? What if he went inside of his memories and saw the truth of what had happened yesterday? What if he saw her killing Carrow?

She couldn't stop herself. She looked at the Dark Lord.

"Yes, milord," Draco said. "Every day."

Tom smirked. "Show me."

Draco gave him a reverent nod and then looked into his eyes. They stared at each other for a long time, and Hermione knew.

Tom was inside of Draco's head, looking for the memory of something that had never happened.

Hermione's nerves trembled. What would Draco show? The only memory he could possibly show was the events that had taken place in Hermione's bedroom the night before. If he showed those, Hermione would just have to trust that Draco was powerful enough to hide the argument and the night in its entirety from the Dark Lord's Legilimency.

Trusting Draco was difficult.

When Tom blinked rapidly and gave Hermione a once-over, she knew that Draco had shown him something.

"Hm," he said, humming his disapproval. "It would seem that the Mudblood has a penchant for lying facedown on tables in my potioneer's laboratory. It's quite gauche for one such as Harry Potter's Mudblood. Perhaps when you come to the palace, I can show you the proper way to treat your slave, Draco. Should I deign to allow you to keep her, of course."

Hermione felt her stomach roiling, churning with discomfort. She knew for certain that Draco had never bent her over a table in the potions lab. Another chill rent the air, striking down to the depths of Hermione's darkest nightmares.

*That means that whatever it was Draco showed him was a fantasy. Something he conjured up from the recesses of his own imagination. Something vivid enough to trick the Dark Lord.*

*Something that proves he wanted me to be his slave all along.*

Hermione closed her eyes.

*I was right.*
Tom rose to his feet. Rubbing his hand along his jawline, he cast a thoughtful glance over both Draco and Hermione.

"I would like to take the time to think on your request," he said. "For now, you may keep the Mudblood here in your custody until such a time as I summon you to court to receive judgment and my response. Your House Elves will remain in my custody until they are done being questioned."

"Judgment, milord?" Draco asked, his head lifting once again.

Tom smiled and it was more terrifying than his smirk had been. "No sin goes unpunished, Draco. Were you not my most trusted archduke, I would execute you on the spot. Surely even you have not forgotten that only the righteous escape judgment from their Lord."

Draco dropped his head and did not respond.

Hermione wondered if he was scared.

"As for you, Lucius," Tom said, turning his attention to the deathly-quiet Malfoy patriarch. "Do not think me unaware of the fact that you slipped out of the palace after dinner last night."

"I apologize, Your Majesty." Lucius already sounded terrified. "I was -"

"I was also made aware of the fact that Amycus also took leave after the Revel began," Tom went on, beginning to pace towards him at a slow, nonchalant gait. "Interestingly enough, he never returned. However, you did."

"Perhaps he went home for a spell?" Lucius said.

Hermione shot him a sidelong glance. How could he be this terrible at keeping up his own ruse? The idea to trick the Dark Lord with lies was his.

"Perhaps," Tom said, stopping before Lucius and slipping his hands into the pockets of his trousers. "Or perhaps one of you knows what happened to him."

"It's merely coincidence, Your Majesty," Lucius insisted, kowtowing completely with his nose touching the ground.

"Coincidence." Tom smiled. "Coincidence that on the night that Amycus spills the secret about your son's illegality and betrayal, you both disappear and only one of you returns?"

When Lucius said nothing, Tom looked to Draco.

"Did you see either your father or Amycus here last night?"

"No, milord," Draco lied. "I saw Carrow last night until he left the Revel. Then, when I came home, my father returned home after me. There was no one else here in the Manor."

Tom said, "Yes, I do recall you leaving the Revel earlier than I instructed. Though it is understandable, given the acts you participated in."

Hermione glanced at Draco out of the corner of her eye again, her stomach churning. She knew what he'd done at the dinner, cursing Neville and being cursed himself.

What had he done at the Revel?

"So what happened to my Head Executioner, hm?" Tom said, voice rising an octave. "Where is
Amycus?"

Draco said nothing. Lucius said nothing. Hermione said nothing.

"Very well," Tom said. He sounded bored. "Crucio."

Hermione's head shot up. Tom had withdrawn the Elder Wand.

Lucius began to scream, howling in agony at the top of his lungs as he fell to his side on the floor. Draco started to cry out, but just like he had at the dinner, he managed to choke it off and stifle it behind clenched teeth. He pitched forward on his knees, catching himself on one hand on the carpet. The other arm wrapped around his middle.

The Dark Lord was crucioing them both at the same time.

“That isn’t possible, Hermione thought in horrified awe. How can he be powerful enough to not only walk in shadows across miles, but also to crucio two people simultaneously?

Lucius's screams faded into deep, anguished gasps. Draco remained in the same position, breathing heavily.

"I asked a question," Tom said after releasing the curse. "I believe it deserves an answer, does it not?"

"Your Majesty," Lucius said, trembling as he tried to push himself back up. "Please. We don't know his whereabouts."

Tom's expression was frigid and unfriendly. "Crucio."

Lucius fell into screams again. Draco only let out a tormented groan, his forehead falling to the floor to meet his fists. Hermione tore her gaze away from Lucius and watched Draco shivering and convulsing in his agony. She felt her heart beating faster again.

She wasn't getting along with him, but that didn't mean that she wanted him to be in this sort of pain. She almost wanted to . . . To reach for him, or to embrace him . . . She supposed it was in her compassionate nature, but the way he was trying to bite back his whimpers was overwhelming to hear.

This was proof. The Dark Lord suspected Lucius and Draco of Carrow's death.

The only issue? Hermione was his killer.

Lucius' screams stopped and Hermione glanced at him. He'd fallen unconscious. She looked at Draco. He was swooning, falling to his side, but still conscious. He rolled onto his back, one hand on his abdomen and his eyes half-lidded and dazed.

"I do not enjoy this," Tom said. "You know that I don't enjoy this, Draco. But I cannot abide by insolence and mendacity. Where is Amycus?"

"I don't fucking know!" Draco yelled, surprising Hermione with his outburst of rage.

Tom blinked and then his face contorted with rage that she hadn't expected. He brandished his wand with vehemence and snarled, "Crucio!"

Draco began to scream this time, as though it were so powerful that he couldn't fight it back. His back bowed up off of the ground and his head rolled towards Hermione. She watched with an
expression of horror and helplessness as he screamed and screamed and screamed. He made numerous attempts to get solid breaths in, but it seemed that the Dark Lord had no intention of giving him a third reprieve.

Hermione couldn't sit here and watch this. She just couldn't. She didn't care what was going on between her and Draco. No one deserved to be cursed like this; not for this long.

She was going to tell Tom the truth.

When Draco's agony-darkened eyes met hers, she gave him a desperate look. Immediately, she felt shards of ice stabbing into her mind from all sides. He didn't seem able to be gentle. The pain was acute, but she bit down on her back teeth and forced herself to stay still. The last thing she wanted was Tom noticing that Draco was attempting Legilimency on her while he was using the Cruciatus on him.

_I'm going to tell the Dark Lord it was me_, Hermione thought the moment she opened her mind to Draco's.

_No! Don't you dare!_

Hermione's brow furrowed with concern. _Please, Malfoy! You can't take the Cruciatus for this long!_

His screams choked off into short, gasping sobs. He seemed to be trying his hardest to fight it. To prove that he could take it.

_Don't you fucking dare say a word, Granger. Everything I've fucking done for you, and if you give yourself over to him -

_Malfoy -

As your master, I order you not to say a word. Do you understand me? I order you not to say a word._

Hermione glared at him, but she found that it was hard to maintain any level of anger when he was sobbing and curling in on himself.

She shot a dark look up in Tom's direction. Seeing the manic gleam in his eyes and the feral grin on his face, she could see how someone as barmy as Bellatrix Lestrange could have fallen for him.

They were both completely sadistic nutters.

Finally, the Dark Lord nixed the curse. Draco pushed himself up on one elbow and then rolled onto all fours, panting with exertion.

"I apologize," Tom whispered, his hand shaking as he slipped the Elder Wand up into his sleeve. "I got carried away. If you say you do not know, then I believe you. The thought that you would _hide_ anything from me . . . No matter." He snapped his fingers and Lucius woke with a start. "Lucius, I would like for you to come to Buckingham immediately. There are things about Romania that we must discuss."

Before Lucius had even finished orienting himself to his surroundings, Tom had disappeared in tendrils of shadow. Lucius struggled to his feet, leaning heavily upon his cane. He gave Draco and Hermione one final withering look.
"He has no shortage of Death Eaters he can appoint into Carrow's position," Lucius said, his voice raw in his throat. "But don't rest too easy: he will keep searching for answers. For now, wait for the Dark Lord's summons to the palace. I will do my best to retrieve the House Elves."

"Just go," Draco said. His voice was husky from screaming and there were tears drying on his cheeks. "Just . . . Fucking go."

Lucius pressed his lips together in a thin line.

_Crack._ He was gone.

The silence that was left in the large room felt crushing.

Hermione chewed the inside of her cheek. There was still much to navigate, especially with whatever it was that Draco had shown Tom in his "memory," with whatever he'd done at the Revel, and with their toxic interrelations. They were by no means friends.

But she wanted to go to him.

"Malfoy?" she said softly, creeping towards him on her knees.

"Stay there," he said angrily, his body wracked with violent convulsions.

Hermione drew her hand back towards her chest, frowning. "What should we do now?"

"How the fuck should I know?" he cried, his teeth chattering. "I've never been in this position. I've never messed up this badly. I don't know how long it's going to be for him to make his decision, nor do I know what's going to happen to either of us."

"Will he execute you?" Hermione asked.

"No - _fuck_ - he won't," Draco said, wincing as he moved to sit on his rear and lean back against the front of the chaise. He looked like he was still in pain. "He needs his potion. But that doesn't mean he won't punish me. It doesn't mean he won't take you away."

Hermione pouted down at the floor. "What did he mean by the table in the lab?"

"Just leave it alone, Granger."

"No," she said, her anger rising again. "I want to know what you showed him."

His eyes flashed with danger. "Leave it."

"You swore to me last night that you weren't lying to me," she said, her fists balled in her lap. "Yet it's a rather narrow coincidence that you were able to conjure up a _memory_ of bending me over the potions lab table for _Your Majesty_."

"You want to see it?" he said, his hand shooting out to wrap around the back of her neck. "I'll show you."

Hermione's shock was faster than her body's reaction. By the time she thought to try to pull herself out of his grasp, the ice storm was already swirling in her head. Within seconds, he was inside of her mind, pressing images there that were way too vivid to be false, but involved her doing things she had never done.

The potions lab in the middle of the night, the stars and the moon showing in the windows.
Hermione, bent over the new table he'd bought her, her skirt rucked up to her lower back.

Draco behind her, one hand digging into her hair, the other disappearing between the table's edge and her lower body.

The filthy things they were saying to one another.

The look of desire on his face.

None of it had happened, and yet he'd imagined it. None of it was real, but it was clearly something that he'd thought about enough to paint an undeniable picture.

Everything that she'd feared was true.

He wanted her.

She shoved him out of her mind as hard as she could, using her hand to physically push his body away for good measure.

"You're vile," she said, baring her teeth.

"I'm vile?" He used the couch to pull himself to his feet, glaring at her. "I'm vile? You killed a man and blamed it on me. How's that for vile? Notice how I just went through Hell for you, for something that you did, and I never once blamed you for it. I took responsibility for my part."

"What part?!" she cried. "The part where you paid for me like chattel?"

"The part where I left you here, alone, with no protection," he snarled. "So yeah, Granger. Maybe I fantasize about you from time to time. But that doesn't mean I lied to you when I brought you here. It doesn't mean I've wanted you as my slave all along. It just means I want to fuck you."

She opened her mouth to reply, getting to her feet, but he appeared to be done with the conversation.

With a crack, he DisApparated.

Hermione stood there, alone in the sitting room, sick to her stomach thinking of the one thing she wished she could deny.

Her thighs were trembling again.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Summary

This chapter should explain why Hermione is so adamant about keeping her sexual past close to the breast.

Also things will be getting better with Draco and her soonish, but it will take time before she can tell him everything and for them to get through it. But I will say that a shocking event in 24 helps them along, and 25 is sad but fluffy. And there is smut.

TRIGGER WARNING: NON-CON in flashback of Hermione's journey on the run that uses somewhat vulgar language/descriptions. Murder.

I considered describing the non-con a bit more because let's be real, those of us who have been assaulted know there is no warning or censoring when it happens, but I think I reached a happy medium.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Counting the Stars

The Burning Sands - Masashi Hamauzu, My Friend - Hayley Williams, Why We Ever - Hayley
Three days went by before Draco spoke a word to her.

It wasn't for lack of trying. Hermione found it seemed easier to go back to her normal routine with the potions lab, tea room, and treating Narcissa, than it did to sit in her room and panic over when the Dark Lord would send his summons. When she walked into the lab the first day, he wasn't there, but on the second, he was.

She couldn't think of anything to say to him at first. She was still angry over what had happened. Embarrassed over her actions, over taking it that far. In hindsight, she wished that she hadn't allowed her emotions to control her. It was so far out of character for her to do such a thing that she couldn't even think about it without cringing. She couldn't believe the things that had come out of her mouth, the things that she'd gotten the courage to do.

Thinking about it now, she could see that she was distressed that night. She'd just stabbed a man in the throat, so it was understandable that her mind was frazzled and her emotions were going to be knee-jerk reactions. And Hermione naturally had a hot temper, so throwing that into the mix explained why she had let it get that far.

But that wasn't the problem.

The problem was that Draco was the one in control, at that point. He was the one who should have made the choice to stop her. To keep her from making such a huge mistake.

He hadn't.

He'd chosen to give in to temptation, and now she had no idea what was going on. Had he given in because he was a man and she was offering? Or because he truly wanted her to be the one to do that to him?

Whatever was between her and Draco was irrevocably changed.

Even worse were the strange feelings that kept cropping up whenever she was near him, or in the same vicinity as him.

In the lab, she'd looked over her shoulder more times that she could count to stare at his slender hands moving across the parchment, or to view his statuesque side profile. She found that her eyes tracked the movements of his fingers when he pushed his hair back. The worst part was the time when she accidentally headed for the door when he did, and she got the strangest urge to melt into his side just to see how warm his body was.

"Oh, you sweet girl."

What she wouldn't give to hear him call her "sweet girl" in that soft voice again.

It made her feel confused, disturbed, and more than a little terrified.

On the third day, she tried greeting him to see if she could start a rapport. The House Elves were still gone and the food in the kitchens was running low. Hermione had been eating whatever was left, but now there wasn't even enough to put a sandwich together. She didn't want anything to do with Lucius, so her only solution was to talk to Draco.
It was difficult when the air he gave off was negative.

But that's my fault, isn't it? she'd thought when she was sitting on her stool and agonizing over whether or not to speak to him so she could ask. I wanted to humiliate him and I did, but I'm the only one who should be embarrassed. I took it too far and now I'm left feeling like I want to do it again.

She'd nearly dropped her ladle.

That wasn't . . . No. That was not what she felt like.

Am I just blaming everything on him because it hurts less than blaming myself?

On the fourth day, Hermione had eaten the last apple in the pantry. She didn't know how Lucius or Draco were eating, but since they were the ones with the galleons and wands, she was sure they'd figured it out. Hermione was helpless in that regard, and she needed food.

It was time to approach him about it.

In the lab that morning, she decided to just blurt it out.

"I need food."

He froze, his quill coming to a flat stop. He didn't look up from the parchment. "So make yourself some."

"I have been," she said. "It's run out."

"Fine," he said. "I'll handle it."

She continued grinding her poppy seeds for a moment. A bubble was expanding in her chest. It burst and pushed her words out.

"Do you know when the House Elves come back?"

"No," he said in a monotone. "It takes a while to question them because of spells that Pureblood families weave into their contracts when we take them in."

"Oh," she said, resuming her work.

The silence stretched on for a few more seconds before Hermione couldn't bear it any longer.

"What do we do about your mother?" she said, setting her mortar down.

"What do you mean?" He sounded annoyed.

"When we go to Buckingham. Who is going to make sure that she gets her medicine?"

He opened his mouth to speak, and then scoffed. He turned to glare at her. Her heart skipped a beat when his gaze fell upon her expectant face.

It was the first time he'd looked directly at her in three days.

"Do you not grasp the gravity of this situation? The Dark Lord isn't inviting us to tea, Granger. I broke his law. I've been harboring Undesirable Number One in my home. I'm fucked. You are Undesirable Number One. You're fucked. And he suspects my father and I of killing Carrow. We're
Hermione didn't know if it was the fact that he was talking to her, or if it was the fact that she was finally getting some social interaction, but she yelled at him.

"Of course I grasp the gravity of the situation! I'm the one who's most likely going to be killed when the Dark Lord gets his hands on me. So, pardon me for caring what happens to your mother when I'm gone!"

His eyes flashed. "I'm not in here to have lover's quarrels with you, Granger. I am in here because the Dark Lord will fucking burn this house down if I don't make him his potion. So leave me the fuck alone."

He turned back to his work, and Hermione turned back to hers.

Though she was fuming, she wondered.

*Why doesn't he seem to care what happens to his mother?*

The kitchens were stocked full the following morning, but Hermione wasn't hungry.

She was depressed.

When she woke up, she didn't have the energy inside of her body to sit up, let alone put her feet on the floor. She felt like she was an extraterrestrial being living inside a body that wasn't hers, in a life that didn't belong to her. As the days counted down to whenever the Dark Lord decided what to do about Draco's betrayal, she found herself becoming more and more disillusioned with life as she knew it.

She had a matter of days or weeks left alive. Was she meant to spend it going from the lab, to Narcissa's room, to the library every day? Was she to follow that routine until she died at the end of the Elder Wand? And all with Draco spreading his hatred for her throughout the corridors, and Lucius avoiding the ground she walked on as though she were the plague?

This Manor was dreary, but her circumstances felt even more so.

Skipping breakfast, she went straight to the lab.

She pouted down at the jar of moonflowers. She wished she could have been able to figure out how to make them work. It seemed like a lot of excitement for absolutely no payoff. It would have been a miracle if she could have seen some improvement in Narcissa's condition before they received the summons from the palace.

It seemed like there was no hope for her. She was lying in the exact same spot and position that she had been when Hermione arrived. Hermione was beginning to worry that her medicinal brew was doing nothing except keeping Narcissa alive.

What if Draco didn't care because he knew there was no hope after all?

"Can I use your wand?" she said over her shoulder to him. "This potion isn't as potent without magic."

"I purchased you that cauldron specifically because it has the self-heating charm on it," he muttered. "So, no."
"Malfoy," she said with an exasperated sigh. "I'm telling you the truth. I mean, without magic, I'm just making a - a poultice, or a -" She threw her hands up in defeat. "- a bloody soup."

"Don't talk to me," he said, his words lashing against her sensibilities like a whip.

It stung.

Hermione stared at the tabletop for a long time, even after he rolled up his parchment, bottled his brew, cleaned up his workspace, and left.

Normally, him lashing out like that wouldn't bother her. She was Hermione Granger, after all, and petty things didn't bother a girl with a temperament like hers. But with everything that happened, she supposed she just needed a friend.

She wished she hadn't ruined their friendship with her own paranoia and fears.

After making an extra dose for Narcissa after the first so she wouldn't have to come back to the lab in the evening, she left. She spent the day in her room, lying in bed and staring at the wall. She left only one time, and that was for Narcissa's nightly dose.

She slept fitfully throughout the night.

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**July 2002 - October 2002**

Hermione took the boat all the way out of the mountains to the first Muggle town she came across.

Exhausted and stricken with grief, she wandered in without ever checking for the name. She had no money, no food, and no water. Nothing but the clothes on her back.

Her grief was absolute. Luna was gone, and so was the sanctuary. She felt like there was no purpose to her life anymore. Like everything she'd ever worked towards was for naught. She and Luna had been together for over two years, running and hiding and taking care of one another.

Now, she was just gone.

Hermione fell back against the side of a bank building and sank down until her bottom hit the concrete hard enough to bruise. She fell apart into uncontrollable sobs, not knowing where to go, what to do, or whether or not she even wanted to be alive anymore.

What was the point of living in a world without anyone left to love?

It wasn't until a pair of snakeskin shoes came into her line of sight that she stopped weeping.

Before Luna died, she would have scrambled to her feet and ran, or found something to defend herself with just in case he was a dark wizard. But now?

She just looked up at him.

"Why are you crying, darling?" he said. He was older, probably around forty, and he had salt-and-pepper hair with a set of kind blue eyes. He wore a sharp-looking suit and carried a leather briefcase. His smile contained a full set of pearly-white teeth that Hermione's parents would have fawned over.

Hermione, who was in a half-starved state of mind, told him.

"My best friend died. All my friends died." Tears began to fall down her cheeks again. "I have no
The man crouched down beside her, giving her a concerned look. "Do you need me to call someone for you? Perhaps your mother or father?"

The thought of her parents - who she didn't think she would ever see again - sent a fresh wave of emotion through her. She buried her face in her hands and continued to sob.

"Do you need a place to stay?" he asked.

At that, Hermione had looked at him and weighed her options.

Up until the sanctuary burned, she would have run before she even got to the point where a man asked her if she needed a place to stay. This man could be a Death Eater, for all she knew.

The longer she looked at him, the more she realized she didn't care. It was over. It was all over. Her time running and surviving had come to an end. If this man turned out to be a wizard in disguise, then she didn't care. If she was caught and taken into Voldemort's custody, she didn't care.

"Yes," she said to him.

And she followed him home.

He turned out to be a Muggle named Cillian O'Connell. He lived in a small but tidy flat. It was the sort of flat that contained one of every necessity: one couch, one coffee table, one TV, one coffee maker, and so on. He gave Hermione the one couch with one fluffy blanket and told her she could stay as long as she liked.

How kind of him, she'd thought.

She should have known that a forty-year-old Muggle man extending the kindness of indefinite free lodging to a twenty-year-old girl he didn't know was a bad sign.

Or perhaps she did know. Perhaps she knew exactly what he would want. Perhaps she just didn't care about anything anymore.

Her life was pointless.

Her honor was pointless.

Her body was pointless.

It was only four days before he came out to the living room at night and propositioned her. He didn't threaten her, didn't force her, and didn't warn that he would kick her out. He just stood beside the couch and waited for her to make her decision.

Hermione knew her friends would be repulsed. They would look at her with disdain and think she was either under the Imperius curse, or a whore.

But they were all dead and Hermione didn't care to be alive anymore.

Hermione felt like the version of herself that would have said no died at Hogwarts on May 2nd, 1998.

So she sat up and unlaced the drawstrings on his pyjama trousers.
Three months passed. Hermione didn’t tell the man who she was or anything about herself, and he
didn’t ask. He gave her money occasionally, but she never left the flat. She spent all of her time
lying on the couch, watching the telly and zoning into worlds that weren’t her own. In all that time,
she learned that they were in the city of Rosslare, and that was it.

At night, Cillian used her body and she allowed it.

I’m still me, she assured herself, night in and night out.

Her birthday passed by and she turned twenty-one. She told Cillian and he brought her a cupcake.
It tasted like ash. She spent that night on her knees in front of the couch for him, jerking him off
and asking him if he wanted to come on her face. Not because she wanted to, but because that’s
what he told her to say, and he pulled her hair if she didn’t.

She felt like she was dead inside.

She felt like she was dead inside, but as long as she thought, I’m still me, everything was fine.

It wasn’t until October 5th, 2002 that everything changed for the worse.

Cillian had slowly been getting more and more controlling. He started ordering her to eat at
certain times and taking the remote for the telly away after 8:00PM. He stopped allowing her to
wear trousers and soon, she was told that she wasn’t allowed to step outside of the flat even to get
fresh air. The day after he made that rule, he had the doorknob changed so he could lock her
inside the flat when he went to work.

The amount of times that he found pleasure in her body increased and went from being in bed to
anywhere he wanted. The kitchen, the bathroom, the living room, it didn’t matter. It got to the point
where she thought anything was better than this life she’d carved out for herself. Even living at the
Malfoy Manor as a slave to Draco Malfoy would be preferable to this torture.

She had become Cillian's property and she had no one - not a single friend or family member - to
contact for help. And it wasn’t as though she had a way of contacting anyone. She was a witch
without a wand.

She couldn’t even remember the last time her magical core flared to life.

On the evening of October 5th, he brought a mate from work home.

He worked at the bank that Hermione had been crying outside of when he first met her. This man
was someone who, according to him, signed loans. And according to the man, he had a family
waiting for him at home, so they needed to "make things quick."

At this point, she regretted her decisions. The guilt and shame was starting to creep in at the edges
of her psyche and make her wish she would have just let herself scrounge for food in dumpsters
and live on the streets.

So when Cillian outright told her to lay down on the bed and allow his mate to "have a go," she
knew that she couldn’t take another day of this. She was going to take her chances on the streets.

She just needed to escape.

"I took you in," Cillian had said when she protested. He was angry, but he seemed to be trying to
remain calm in front of his burly coworker. "It's my right to do with you as I wish."
Hermione had felt the lioness inside of her start to growl, the lioness that had been with her in her spirit since her days at Hogwarts.

"You may have taken me in, but I don't belong to you!" she'd cried. "I don't belong to anyone!"

Cillian didn't care. He grabbed her, choked her, and beat her. At this point in her life, her lioness was too weak of heart. It was unheard of. She was Hermione Granger. Hermione Granger wasn't weak.

This Hermione Granger was.

So with tears of rage glittering in her eyes, she allowed herself to be bent over the side of the bed and rutted into like an animal by the man with the family.

I'm still me, she'd thought as he emptied himself all over her back, decorating her skin like he was painting the walls of a broken-down, ramshackle house. I'm still me.

Then, Cillian took his turn, sealing his fate.

When he was asleep that same night, she crept into his room and stole a pair of his trousers and a belt. It was October and it was cold, so she took one of his jumpers, too. He had stashed her old boots that she'd been wearing on the run in his closet, so she took those back and put them on in the living room.

At the last minute, she decided it was best to take some Muggle money with her, too. At the very least, it could help her make it to the ferries. She was going to get as far away from Ireland as possible, even if it took her right into Lord Voldemort's waiting arms.

And the key. She needed the key. It was on the table as well. He'd never needed to hide it before because her spirit had been too broken.

Not anymore.

She crept back into Cillian's room, where his pocketbook lay on his bedside table. Heart pounding, she held her breath and slowly reached for the black leather. He'd only ever been rough with her a few times, to make sure she understood the rules, but she wasn't sure how he'd react if he woke up.

Relief flooded her veins when she plucked the pocketbook as well as the front door key from the dresser with ease. Turning, she tip-toed back out of the room. The pace of her breathing picked up with excitement. Soon, she would be free of this Hell.

"And where do you think you're off to?"

She whirled around right as her fingers were sliding the key into the lock. Fear exploded in her heart as he grabbed her by the hair and swung her around until her back slammed into the wall. Smack. He slapped her, and her ears rang where his palm hit.

Hermione managed to slam her knee up into his groin, her adrenaline pumping. She was leaving this flat. Tonight. She was not going to stay and be his willing prisoner forever.

This wasn't who she was, and it wasn't who she was going to be.

Not anymore.

They struggled further into the house, a flurry of slapping hands, shoving arms, and clawing
fingers. He pushed her onto the table in the dining room, and she heard the flower vase in the center of it toppling over as he did so. Water spilled out, slicking her fingers as Cillian began tearing at the clothing she'd stolen from him.

The vase!

When his fingers began tugging at the buckle on the belt she'd taken to ensure the trousers stayed on, the much smaller girl twisted and grabbed the heavy, porcelain vase. Using all of her strength, she rammed it into his temple as hard as she could. It cracked and broke apart on impact, the dead flowers that remained inside of it spilling out on his back and the tabletop.

Cillian went limp.

Screaming slightly with lingering terror, Hermione kicked him off of her and he slumped down to the floor. When she hopped off of the table, she could see that he had fallen with his head twisted at an odd angle. There was blood pouring from an open gash on the side of his forehead.

His eyes were open.

Unblinking.

Dead.

It took every fiber of strength and Gryffindor courage she had remaining in her body not to empty bile onto the floor. She'd killed someone. She'd killed a man.

She hoped that wherever Harry and Ron were, they couldn't see her sins.

She wasted no more time. She took the money and ran.

Fortunately for Hermione, the flat was located on a busy street that had a map on the side of a building across the road. She followed the directions to the ferry terminal and sat outside of it until it opened. She wasn't worried about the Muggle police.

In this world, she was as good as a ghost.

Hermione paid for her ferry ticket with some of the euros in Cillian's pocketbook, and then she waited until it was time to start loading. She watched her fingers tremble. Not even four months ago, she was still just a girl, Luna was alive, and they would watch dragons play on the plains.

Now, she was a woman, and everyone was dead.

She left Rosslare behind and settled in at a table on the second floor of the ferry, headed for Cherbourg.

Hermione woke with tears on her cheeks.

She didn't remember crying and she didn't think she wanted to remember. Her mind was full of the lasting images of her nightmares, showing her Cillian O'Connell's lifeless face over and over. They were interspersed with memories of the way it felt to stab Carrow. How something that took so little effort could cause so much permanence. Sprinkled atop all of those were Draco's words echoing in her head repeatedly.

"I fucking knew it. You just want me to use you."
She didn't think she had an appetite today, either.

Draco was not in the lab today, so she assumed he must have gone to Buckingham to deliver the Dark Lord's potion. Hermione still wondered what it was for, but she didn't dwell too much on it. She was depressed and felt nervous on top of it. What if Draco came back with the summons?

It was hard living every day wondering if it was going to be her last.

Once Narcissa had been given her medicine, Hermione wandered down to the tea room. She wasn't hungry, but she wanted to savor the view just in case it was her last opportunity. She sat at the round table and placed her chin in her hand, sighing every so often with the weight of her depression. She hadn't eaten since yesterday, but she just didn't feel up to it.

The food would be there tomorrow.

Three white peacocks trundled into view, their beautiful tails seeming to shine underneath the May sunlight. Hermione watched them go by, wondering what it would be like to do nothing except wander the estate. The peacocks didn't have to worry about anything except where their next meal was coming from.

"It's important for growing girls to eat, Miss Granger. Surely your Muggle parents thought to teach you such things."

Hermione jumped with surprise at the suddenness of Lucius' voice in the doorway behind her. She cast a wary glance over her shoulder at him. To her surprise, she saw a blatant lack of malice in his face.

Odd.

"I'm not hungry," she said, her tone clipped. She turned back around to watch the peacocks wander.

His cane thunked against the stone floor a couple of times and then a plate of fruit appeared in front of her. Eyes wide and brow furrowed, Hermione stared up at him. He raised one eyebrow down at her.

"I highly doubt my son would be pleased to know you're not eating." He lifted his chin and viewed her with an expression that indicated he knew something that she might've thought he shouldn't. "In spite of the rather . . . Tense situation you've found yourselves in."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. There was no way Draco would have told him what happened in her room the night of Carrow's death. She didn't know if he loved his father, but they certainly weren't on good terms.

So why was Lucius looking at her that way?

"Have you been watching me?" she asked, voice cold.

"I'd rather cut my hair than spend my precious time on this Earth studying you, Miss Granger," Lucius sniffed, smoothing one hand back over his long silvery-white hair. "However, if you weren't aware, my son is not exactly discreet. His poor moods dampen the spirits of the entire Manor."

Hermione snorted. "It's not as if the Manor's spirits were very high to begin with."

Lucius ignored her and placed both hands atop his cane, leaning upon it. "He would not be pleased.
It's best that you eat."

Hermione frowned at the food. "What, you're not going to tell me he's laced it with poison, or that he's killed some other political official?"

"Not this morning." Lucius pursed his lips. "However, I'm not so sure that my son's the only one with a killing hand. Isn't that right, Miss Granger?"

Hermione looked up into his eyes and she saw the accusation there. Draco must not have told his father outright that Hermione was the one who wielded the dagger that night. She understood why. One crucio from the Dark Lord, and he'd throw Hermione into the Malfoy estate pond to drown.

"I wouldn't know," she said, shoving the plate back towards him. "If you think I'd trust you after everything you've done, you're mental."

He stayed there for a moment longer before he picked up the plate and walked away.

She listened to the thunk, thunk of his cane on the stone until it faded up the stairs.

Draco was the one to come to her in the tea room the following day.

Hermione was watching the peacocks again, still trying to savor the view every single day that she possibly could. She'd eaten the night before, sneaking down to the kitchens in the middle of the night to grab things out of the cupboard and ravage them with her mouth until she didn't feel like her stomach was caving in any longer. But she'd woken up again today without an appetite and so was sitting in the tea room to try and muster up the energy for hunger.

"My father," came his voice as he strolled into the tea room without ceremony, "has enlightened me as to your death wish."

"What?"

Draco came to stand in front of her, blocking her view. He wore a pair of tight black trousers, an oversized black knit jumper, and his boots. That, coupled with his black rings, made his skin look stark pale in comparison. He held two plates in his hands and there was fruit on them both, just like Lucius's plate yesterday. There was even some toast and scrambled eggs. Both plates had forks sticking out of the side of the eggs.

"Did you . . . Cook?" she asked, confused. Her brain was unable to conjure up even an imagined version of him cooking. He didn't seem like the type.

"The House Elves are gone," he said, "so obviously."

"Well, I'm not hungry." Hermione gritted her teeth to hold back her anger. "... Thank you, though."

"My father told me you said that yesterday," he growled. "So, either you're lying, or you're just trying to be a brat."

Hermione crossed her arms and legs, fixing him with a sharp look. "And why would your father care about my appetite enough to tell you about it?"

"He knows that I care," Draco bit out. He held one plate out to her. "Eat."

Hermione thought back to the time he'd walked past her in the library and told her the same thing.
Only this time, everything was different between them. The chasm was too wide.

If it weren't, then he would have showered her with gifts, like he always did when he was sorry. 

Except how much does he really have to be sorry for? she thought. I'm the one who pressured him.

She glared at him.

"If I say I'm not hungry, that means I'm not hungry. My stomach isn't going to magically open up just because you tell it to."

His eyes flashed with familiar flames of ire and he set the plate down so hard on the table that the toast shifted on the china. Then, he pulled out the chair adjacent to hers and sat down. Hermione watched in shock as he started to eat the eggs on his own plate. She didn't think she'd ever seen him eat before.

"What are you doing?" she said.

He paused to chew slowly, looking at her as though she were stupid. "I'm eating my breakfast."

"I can see that," she snapped. "But why here? Why now?"

"I'm making sure you eat," he said, spearing some more eggs on the tines of his fork. A lock of his hair fell forward and he combed it back. "Neither of us is leaving this table until you've eaten."

Hermione quickly looked away, hoping he didn't notice the slight heat of her cheeks.

Who did he think he was, anyway? He couldn't force her to eat. Not like last time. Things were not salvageable between them.

"I don't want to eat with you, Malfoy," she practically snarled. "I don't want to share my meals with you. I don't want to look at your face."

He finished his bite and then leaned back in his chair, resting his wrists on the table in front of him. "Granger, if you don't eat with me, then you don't eat at all."

"Then you can just force feed me again," she said with a slight sneer. "Because that's the only way you're getting that food into my mouth."

He stared at her for a long time before he said, "Why aren't you eating? What is the issue?"

"The issue is that you're trying to force me to do something that I don't want to do!" she cried angrily. "So if you want me to do it, you're going to have to play your stupid Master card, because it's not happening other."

"Damn it, Granger!" he suddenly shouted, slamming his fist down. "I can't do this with you. Do you not grasp that? I cannot do this back and forth with you. I don't have the energy, nor do I care to spend my precious time bickering with you."

"Then stop trying to force me to eat. Go play with your potions or with your sabre in the bloody gym!"

"I took you in," he snarled, rising to his feet and placing his hands on the table. "It's my right to ensure that you're taken care of, in spite of how we may feel about each other right now. If you want to go that route, then I will order you to eat your fucking food!"
She wanted to ask him to elaborate on how she felt, but she couldn't seem to get past the words that he'd just said.

"I took you in. It's my right to do with you as you wish."

Hermione sucked in her breath and exploded.

Leaping to her feet with her face contorted in rage, she hooked her fingers under the round edge of the table and upended the entire thing. It crashed against the ground and the plates shattered on the ground, sending the food spilling out on the floor. Her heart was beating wildly and her hands were trembling.

"If it's your right, then you might as well just push me down and take me right here on the floor!" she shrieked, her hair and eyes wild.

Something in his face shifted and closed off like a light going out. His expression went from open and aflame to cold and frozen like ice. Without a word, he turned and headed for the open doorway.

Chest heaving, Hermione called out after him. "And where are you heading off to?!!"

"I have to fucking go."

"Why?!" she cried.

He paused without turning around. "Because if I don't, I'm going to fuck you until I'm not angry anymore."

Hermione gasped, her heart stopping its wild beating. She watched him walk away with her hands shaking at her sides. She felt like she couldn't breathe.

When would she learn to stop toying with the feathers on Lucifer's wings?

Chapter End Notes

PLEASE LEAVE A REVIEW!

Want to connect with me?

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Hermione's last official meal was the night before her and Draco's most recent row. She hadn't suspected that this situation would come about, but she was glad that she'd gorged herself. She wasn't about to let Draco get the best of her. She was too stubborn. She avoided the tea.
room at breakfast and then, at lunch, went to the kitchens. She wasn't going to eat with him, if it was the last thing she did.

The doors were locked.

He was standing in the hallway when she turned around, leaning up against the wall with his arms and ankles crossed. A smirk played about his lips, but she noticed that it didn't quite reach his eyes like it used to.

"Something you need from the kitchen?" he asked, his tone low and smooth.

Hermione put her hands on her hips and prepared to yell at him. Then, she took a deep breath and set her shoulders back.

"Why?" she said, sauntering across the corridor towards him. "Is there something you want in return for opening the doors?"

He narrowed his eyes, but didn't move even when she was three inches away from him. He just looked down the length of his nose at her.

"Perhaps you'd like me to get down on my knees?" she went on to say.

Hermione saw his smirk deepen. He was calling her bluff. He uncrossed his arms and his hands went to his belt. "Hands and knees, and you've got yourself a bargain."

But Hermione was ready.

"You know," she said slowly, her gaze falling down to where his fingers rested, "last time you put on this act, I rose to the occasion. I know you like to bluff, Malfoy, but do you really think I'm someone who won't rise to the occasion again?" she began to walk her fingers up the center of his chest. "And again? And again?"

He stared directly at her lips.

"I'm starting to think that I was right about knowing what you wanted from me," she said, caressing her lips around the words because she knew he was looking. She tilted her head back, her curls falling over her shoulders. "And you know how much I like being right."

Her fingers trailed lightly from the hinge of his jaw to the center of the underside of his chin. He was glaring at her now, even as she walked around the side of him and let her fingertips drag down the side of his throat.

His pulse jumped.

"I'm not hungry anymore," she whispered, and then she walked away.

A little before Hermione was due to brew Narcissa's nightly dose, her stomach began to gargle.

It wasn't something she could ignore, either. It clawed at her abdomen from the inside, nearly bringing her to nausea. As mortifying as it was, she was going to have to concede defeat early and go find Draco. He wasn't going to unlock the kitchen doors.

She was going to have to eat with him.

Swallowing what little pride she had left, she went through the house looking for him.
He was in the gym, shirtless and shoeless, clad only in grey trackies. He was using two sabres to spar with a dummy, which had two foils of its own.

Mesmerized, Hermione stood in the doorway and watched as he blocked, spun, parried, and swirled the blades. He seemed angry, and his facial expression reflected it as he dropped to one knee to avoid one blow. He crossed his blades into an 'X' and blocked the second one from the ground. Then, when the dummy leapt back, Draco got to his feet and attacked it.

With each move he made, Hermione could see the hard muscles shifting beneath his back. His arms, though slim, looked like they were carved out of stone. When he lifted his blades high above his head, pivoted on his back foot, and brought them down in a diagonal slashing motion to strike the dummy's wooden gut, Hermione saw that his abs looked more toned than they had the month before.

She felt her heartbeat falter for a moment.

What was she doing?

Why was she staring at him, watching him like this? Why was she analyzing his movements and the way his body looked?

Okay, no, this was frightening.

She turned around.

"Granger," he called, breathless.

Hermione flinched and turned back around. She trained her facial expression to remain indifferent, watching as he scraped his fingers through his sweat-dampened hair. His lean chest heaved for breath. It took all of Hermione's strength not to drop her gaze to linger on it.

The wooden dummy was frozen in motion, as though he'd paused it with his mind. He had been holding both swords in one hand so he could fix his hair, but now he transferred one back.

"Fuck. Just like that."

His hands in her hair, twisting.

"Granger, look at me, look at me."

His fingers fluttering along her jaw.

"More."

His head tilted back against the window.

"Open your fucking mouth. Wider."

His hips snapping up to meet her lips.

"Use your tongue."

The warmth of him in her mouth, hot and throbbing.

"That feels so good, so fucking good."
The disarming vulnerability of his breathy moans, like he was so desperate for her to just -

"Please don't stop. Don't -"

"Can I assist you with something?" he said, dark eyebrows shooting up. He was still panting.

Hermione jolted out of her lewd reverie. Blood rushed up to her face.

She opened her mouth to speak, but the words had been wrangled and trussed up in her throat. With an uncharacteristic squeak, she shook her head back and forth.

And rushed out of the room.

Panic.

She was panicking.

She'd just been ogling Draco Malfoy, thinking about the fact that she'd put her mouth on his - on him when she -

Dear, sweet Merlin.

Am I attracted to him?

Hermione regretted the nonsense outside the kitchens, of course.

She was so hungry by the time she woke on the second day without a meal that she was about ready to eat with Draco. But she knew that if she ended the cold war early, then that meant that she would lose. And losing to Draco was not an option.

There's always Lucius.

That had been sarcastic, but now that she thought about it, it was true. He'd already tried to feed her once before. Perhaps he could be convinced.

Not that she wanted to accept anything from the hands of someone as vile as him, but desperate times . . .

Hermione went to the library first, to check his study. The door was shut, but with a simple knock, she was granted access.

He was sitting in an armchair by the fireplace, reading the Prophet. Something irked Hermione about the fact that he could just read the newspaper as though the entire household's fate didn't hang in the balance. The Dark Lord's summons would be for all of them, not just Hermione and Draco.

"May I help you, Miss Granger?" he drawled.

Hermione tried twice to speak, but it was like pulling teeth. She pulled a sour face and glared at the floor.

"I would like to eat now."

Lucius hummed. "And you couldn't ask my son for access to the kitchens?"
Hermione pressed her fingernails against her palm. This was agonizing. "No."

"Ah, yes." Lucius turned the page. The paper rustled. "Because that would mean giving in and admitting that you lost. That wouldn't do well for your image."

Hermione scowled. How did Lucius know so much about what was going on between her and Draco? There was absolutely no way that Draco had that open of a relationship with his father. None. That meant that Lucius was either guessing, or he was watching them too closely. Knowing how cunning and deceitful the Malfoy men were, Hermione was leaning towards the latter.

"I have no image," she said, "so I guess I'll have no breakfast. Have a good day."

She turned to go.

"Miss Granger," he called, his tone lilting upward. She turned in time to see his head rolling lazily in her direction to look at her. He gave her a faint, almost smug smile. "I will unlock the kitchens for you in thirty minutes. I would like to finish reading the Prophet first."

Hermione fought the urge to roll her eyes. "And now I'm supposed to thank you?"

"If you wish."

"I don't." She turned again.

"You know -" he said, his tone lilting at the end as he turned the page on the paper again.

Irritated, Hermione sighed and stopped mid-step. She crossed her arms, huffed, and turned back around again. "What?"

"My son is not as cruel as he pretends to be," Lucius said, sounding bored. "In case you thought his poor demeanor was permanent."

Hermione said nothing.

"Draco is . . ." Lucius paused. "A complicated individual. He cares too much, in spite of everything I did to try to squash that weakness out of him. And I had managed to do a fairly decent job of it before you were painted into the picture."

Hermione frowned, her curiosity piqued. "What do you mean?"

Lucius lifted his chin, reading the top of the page he was on. "Oh, just that he's a different man because of you."

Hermione did roll her eyes at that. "In the two months that I've been here, I've seen no change. He's not caring. He's just as arrogant, cruel, and self-centered as he was in school. He . . ."

"I did not say that he was caring." Lucius cut in in a clipped tone. "I said that he cared too much. Study the difference and understand your place. Your place, that you only have because my son has chosen you to be the one he cares too much about."

Heart pounding, Hermione swallowed. Lucius had to be lying. He had to be trying to stir up confusion and drama. Draco didn't care about her. He didn't care about anything other than his own agenda and what he wanted.

"I'm sure he's talked about me with you so much," Hermione said, disbelief wafting out of her
voice and into the air.

"Another thing you will learn about my son," Lucius said, turning another page, "is that he is an open book. You like books, don't you?"

"He's not -"

"For twenty-two years, my son has had his pages open to the entire world. It's just that no one chooses to read them." Lucius was looking directly at her now, still holding the paper up. His silver eyes seemed to pierce right to the heart of her. "I know you know how to read, Miss Granger."

"And how long," Hermione said, trying to sound nonchalant, "has he had his pages open to me? Because two-and-a-half months isn't enough time to undo all the damage he caused in school."

Lucius answered without missing a beat.

"Ten years." He watched her for a moment, as though waiting for his words to sink in. "Now, run along. I will be down to unlock the kitchens shortly."

He turned his attention back to the paper.

Hermione walked through the library in a daze. Her mind spun and raced. With the information she'd gotten from Narcissa, she knew that Draco had been writing to his mother about her in their Sixth Year. But now, according to Lucius, Hermione had been on Draco's mind much sooner than that.

It was currently May 8th, 2004. Lucius said Draco's "pages had been open to her," whatever that meant, for ten years. If she did the math . . .

. . . Ten years ago would be May of 1994.

That was the end of their Third Year. The same year that she'd punched him in the face. The same year that contained the Summer of the Quidditch World Cup. The Quidditch World Cup, where Death Eaters had organized and attacked the Quidditch fans' campgrounds.

A faint memory drifted forward as Hermione padded softly down the corridor outside the library.

"You wouldn't like her spotted, would you?"

"Granger, they're after Muggles."

"If you think they can't spot a Mudblood, stay where you are."

But . . . No - that couldn't be - it wasn't -

He'd called her a Mudblood. If he'd called her a Mudblood, then -

He was just a kid. Kids make mistakes. Maybe he cared, but didn't know how to process it?

Lucius had admitted it just moments ago; he'd tried to stamp his Pureblood ideals into his son and it hadn't worked. He'd tried to write all over Draco's pages, making edits and redactions, and yet somehow, Draco had managed to keep his story intact.

And Hermione was continually attempting to rewrite the entire narrative.
The thought that perhaps, Draco wasn't the villain of this story was causing her head to spin. That perhaps she really was here because he wanted to protect her. That perhaps the reason why she felt attracted to him was because he was just fucking attractive.

That perhaps it really was that simple.

Hermione stopped at the end of the corridor and leaned back against the wall, holding a hand over her heart. It didn't make sense. It was too overwhelming to think about.

It was easier to believe that Lucius was a liar.

Hermione stopped in the doorway of the potions lab.

It was just before her normal dinnertime, and her stomach was nice and full from the food she'd finally been able to eat. Lucius had come down to unlock the door, as promised. Hermione had immediately run to the pantry. Now, she was getting ready to brew Narcissa's nightly dose.

Draco was there.

He was sitting on his stool, his feet up on the rungs between the legs and his chin propped in his hand. He wasn't writing any notes tonight. He was just watching his cauldron bubble in silence. From what she could see of his face from the side, he was lost within his thoughts.

Hermione walked into the room and sat down on her stool, trying to focus on her preparations so she didn't have to think about everything that was bouncing around her head.


It was all too much.

"I heard you ate."

Hermione blinked, snapping out of her hazy mind. "What?"

"I said, I heard that you ate," he said, enunciating his words.

"You've been speaking with your father about me quite a bit," Hermione said in a snippy tone. "I'm not sure how I feel about that."

"First, I'm a liar. Now, I'm talking to my father too much," he said, his tone stretching lazily. "Is there anything else you want to nag me about?"

"Yes, actually," she said, chopping the mushroom in an agitated manner. "Now that I have your attention for about five seconds, I'd like to discuss what we're going to do about your mother's potion when we're at Buckingham."

Draco was quiet, so Hermione took it as an invitation to speak. With her back still turned, she spoke while she continued to work.

"There's a possibility that the Dark Lord will let you - let me stay - but we need to act as though he will decide otherwise. That means we need to make extra brews of your mother's potion and stock up. I'm not sure if it's actually working as well as I'd like it to, but to stop a medicinal brew abruptly could be more devastating to her health than if it were just continued for as long as possible."
"So, I'll need to bottle the extra doses so that you can give them to her. I mean, provided he decides to let you come back, of course. It's not as though your old mate Tom is going to let us just waltz back home every day for someone who he cast an incurable curse on.

"Have you thought about that, by the way? Have you planned for what will happen if he discovers your mother is still alive?" Hermione let out a mirthless laugh, shaking her head. "You really should have taken that into account before you brought me here. I also think it's important that we -"

Suddenly, there was a loud series of shattering noises, followed by the loud, reverberating thunk of his cauldron as it crashed to the stone ground. Hermione jumped and whirled around, dropping the paring knife as she took in the sight.

Draco was standing over his table, his shoulders heaving as he hung his head and placed his hands on the tabletop. Everything that had been on that table - from glasses, to beakers, to jars, to his cauldron, to his utensils - was now on the ground. He'd swept it all off in a show of emotion.

"What - ?" Hermione started, but was interrupted.

"Don't you think I know all of this information?!" he shouted. He didn't turn around fully, choosing instead to turn his head slightly to indicate he was yelling at her. As if there were anyone else for him to yell at. "Don't you think I understand my circumstances?! My mother is going to die, Granger. I get that. I understand that."

Hermione gulped, feeling her stomach twist with nerves and remorse. "No, that's - that's what I'm trying to avoid. I want her to get better as much as you do."

He finally spun to face her. She nearly lost her breath at the anguish mingling with rage on his face.

"She's not going to get better! Do you not grasp that? My mother is going to die. The Dark Lord cursed her for a reason. We are not supposed to be treating her, or curing her, or making plans to stock up on more of the brew. We were supposed to let her die." He was waving his hands around, talking with them to emphasize his thoughts and feelings. "And now that we've royally fucked everything up, the Dark Lord is taking his sweet time deciding what to do with us and there's nothing we can do except wait."

Hermione ran her fingers through her curls and took a step forward. "He seemed amenable to pardoning you."

Draco's gaze snapped to hers, and his eyes looked crazed. "But not to pardoning you, Granger! He wants you dead, do you understand that? He's been looking for you since the day the war ended, and now that he's finally found you, I'm fucked. You're fucked, and he's going to take you away from me, and -"

He stopped. His face drained of what little color it had and he blanched.

Hermione felt like her heart wasn't beating anymore. Like time had stopped.

Had she heard him correctly?

She whispered, "What do you mean, take me away from -"

*Crack.*
He'd Apparated away.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Twenty-Three

Chapter Summary

I am warning you one final time

This is a DARK fic

EXTREMELY dark

There is NON-CON

TRIGGER WARNING: There be smut

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It wasn't possible.
It wasn't possible that Draco had noticed her as early as Fourth Year.

It wasn't possible that she was attracted to him, for any reason.

It wasn't possible.

Yet it was, and she knew she needed answers.

After their encounter in the potions lab, Hermione couldn't get out of her head long enough to walk in a straight line, let alone to sleep. She gave Narcissa her potion and went to her bedroom to change into her pajamas. She put on a pair of dark blue satin trousers and an oversized top, and then knotted her hair at the top of her head.

She stood and stared at the spot where Carrow's body had once lay prone and emptied of blood.

She needed to talk to Draco.

The Dark Lord could summon her any day and before it was too late to turn back, she needed to know the answers to her questions.

Did you seek me out because you wanted revenge on me, or because you wanted to help me?

Is your mother's potion just a ruse to keep me busy, so I won't discover the truth of why I'm here?

Do you see me as your property?

Am I your slave, or am I just a slave to my own fears?

Most of all, she wanted to know why she hated him. Because in order to hate someone, you had to feel something for them in the first place. For her to admit that he'd destroyed something between them, she'd have to admit that there was something there to break.

She wouldn't be able to locate his charmed bedroom door, but there was one place she had a feeling he might be.

Hermione pulled her boots on, ensuring to lace them up. Then, she took the oversized shirt off and traded it for a large jumper. She fixed her bun, which had fallen out of place, and then stared at herself in the mirror for a moment.

The scar on the tip of her nose stared back at her, reminding her of a time she wished she could go back to. A time when Draco played with her in jest, laughing and bantering with her. A time when he held her hand in the forest in the dark and lifted her up into the air just to prove that he could.

A time before she ruined everything with her self-destruction.

No, she thought, drawing on her reserves. There's no reason for me to feel bad. Not until I get my answers. If he proves to me that everything I've accused him of is wrong, then I will apologize and wait patiently for the Dark Lord to take me. But I'm not going to Buckingham without a fight if I find out that I was right.

If she found that he had lied about his mother's prognosis and manipulated her into coming to the Manor so he could win some sort of strange Hogwarts game that she never agreed to be a part of, then she would allow herself to hate him fully. Then, she would make sure that Draco knew what a mistake he had made bringing her into the Manor.

He was a killer.
But she was, too.

Hermione walked down to the back door, not worrying about trying to be silent anymore. Things were different now.

If she truly wasn't his slave, then she was free to walk out the back door whenever she wanted.

The fates smiled on her. He was just barely turning down the left-side hallway when she went from the entryway to the bottom floor hallway. He wore a jumper and tight trousers with the hems tucked into boots again, all black.

"Malfoy!" she called, following after him.

He stopped in the doorway and turned to look down at her, scraping his hair back out of his eyes. "What are you doing up?"

"Gonna send me back to bedtime?" she challenged, coming to stand in front of him with her hands on her hips. "Are you going to see Callie?"

"Yes, alone."

Hermione's gut twisted unpleasantly. "Oh... Well, we need to talk."

His jaw clicked. "I don't want to talk to you right now."

"Well, you don't seem to care what I want, so we're gonna talk now."

His eyes flashed. He lifted his hands and tangled his fingers in his hair, turning to face the wall. "Ohhh, my Gods. You are the most infuriating witch."

"I don't care," she said in a flat tone. "We need to talk."

"What do you want me to say?!" he said loudly, sounding angry. He threw one hand outward. "Anything I say, you just claim is a lie. Anything I do, you think I'm doing with an ulterior motive. I am too fucking stressed to deal with your refusal to accept anything I say!"

Hermione raised one eyebrow. "You're the one who told me you didn't want me to stop."

He narrowed his eyes.

"In my room that night," Hermione went on, encouraged by his silence, "I asked you specifically if you wanted me to stop. You were rather enthusiastic about the fact that you didn't want me to stop. And I understand that you're stressed out - I am, too - but I think what happened between us is something we need to talk about. You're the one who came to Paris and found me. You're the one who sought me out. I want to know why. It's too coincidental, with the money and the -"

His came towards her with a sudden motion, causing her jaws to snap shut. She backed away a few steps.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?! I don't want you like that!" His hand shot out above her head, pointing behind her. "Whatever you did in that room that night? The position you put me in? I get that you're upset about the circumstances of your life -" he spoke with a bit of a sarcastic cadence to his tone, "- but I'm not the person you think I am. And I'm not going to spend the last fucking days I have with you arguing over whether or not I -" He broke off with a loud roar of frustration. "Salazar - fuck, I don't want to deal with this. I do not want to deal with this."
The last days he had with her.

"He's going to take you away from me."

That implied that she was his to be taken. Which was the problem.

She couldn't tell in what way he felt she belonged to him.

Hermione was reeling, but she forced herself to remain calm. She wanted answers. It was time she got them.

Even if they were hard to hear.

"Okay. Fine. I'll humor you," he said, one hand upside down on his waist, near his back. He rubbed his jaw. "Why do you keep offering yourself up to me? Because it seems like you either truly feel like you are my slave, or you are trying to get me to admit that everything I've ever done for you has been a lie. Either that, or your penchant for self-destruction is way more toxic than mine. Do you really want to be used that badly?"

Hermione swallowed against the sudden lump of emotion that rose up. Bits of her time with Cillian burst forth like flashes of lightning in her mind. The most shameful three months in her life. A time so horrific and so mortifying that it had led her to do what she did to Draco in her room.

The pressure. It felt like he was trying to rip her heart open, reach inside, and pull her emotions out so he could lay them out on a table and inspect them. Like he felt privy to them, like even her memories belonged to him. It felt like he was trying to understand her much deeper and more profoundly than anyone ever had before.

Why did she feel like it wouldn't be the worst thing in the world if he was the one to do it?

I won't let him in, she thought, and she didn't care if he heard it. Not him. Not anyone.

"Granger," he said, vexation apparent in his facial expression. He repeated his question, punctuating each word with a nod of his head. "Do - you - want - to - be - used - that - badly?"

The pressure detonated.

"Yes!" she shrieked, unable to lift her gaze further than his collar, and the length of his lean, slender neck.

Merlin, did she want to kiss that neck.

What? No, I do not. No, I do not!

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut.

"Yes," she whispered into the silence, clutching her hands to her chest. "All of my friends are dead because I wasn't strong enough to protect them. I don't deserve to be happy living here or living anywhere. The Dark Lord is not going to let me come back here anyway, so . . . Yes. I want to be used." She closed her eyes, feeling defeated. "I don't want to feel anything anymore."

"No."

Hermione's eyes snapped open. That . . . Hurt. It hurt more than she thought it should. She looked up at him, confused.
Because if he was saying no . . . Did that mean she had been wrong about him?

Was this an answer?

"No," he said again, shaking his head as he glared down at her. "You may want to be used, but I won't be."

He turned around and left out the back door, letting it slam shut behind him.

Hermione stood there for a second, her heart racing.

What if the Dark Lord summoned them tomorrow? What if she left and never got any answers?

Before she could stop herself, she was moving forward. She opened the door and dashed after him. He was already almost to the trees. Hermione followed. She panted for breath as she tried to keep up.

"I said I was going alone," he growled.

"That's nice," she said. "I have some questions for you. If I'm going to get taken away from you, then we need to have this talk now, rather than later. Don't you think?"

He stopped walking, glowering down at her. She wondered what he was thinking. His gaze was guarded, but she could see anger simmering behind the barrier.

She raised her eyebrows and the corners of her mouth turned up into her version of a smirk. "What're you gonna do? Order me to go back?"

"You know what? Whatever. You're here. Just follow me." He sighed and went into the copse, melting in with the darkness.

She walked behind him in silence for a while, trying her best not to trip and fall flat on her face. She could not see a thing. The Spring leaves were too thick. It wasn't until she felt her foot catch underneath a root and she slammed face-first into his back that he scowled.

"You're going to be the death of me," he growled, and then she felt him reaching behind him in the darkness.

His fingers wrapped around her wrist. Then, he yanked her to his side and began to walk again.

"If I don't, you're gonna trip, fall, die, and then I'm going to have to carry you. And I'm not interested in carrying another dead body through the woods."

Hermione's eyes nearly popped out of her skull and for a moment, she forgot everything that had ever happened between them. She scolded him.

"Malfoy!"

He was laughing. It was quiet and short, but it was real. Suddenly, it felt like his fingers were searing the skin that stretched over her wrist bones. They slid down until their palms were pressed together.

"I was just kidding, brat," he said.

Hermione glared at him. She wasn't sure if she was ready to go back to "kidding" with him yet.
He laced his fingers with her own in a loose connection for a moment. Hermione held her breath. He was holding her hand again. He was laughing. He was using a nickname or a moniker or whatever she wanted to call it -

*He's holding my hand.*

As fast as her emotions had begun to swirl with confusion and a strange elation, he unlaced their fingers. He moved back to her wrist and held that the rest of the way. Hermione grimaced through the discomfort of moving through the wards, and then after thirty or so quiet, awkward minutes, they entered the willow glade.

Hermione's jaw dropped.

Calypso was the size of a horse.

The dragon was perched atop the boulder, curled up like a cat with her tail dangling to the grass. Her scales had darkened slightly to a more rich shade of blue; they shimmered as she breathed. She lifted her head, which alone was as big as a horse's head, and her tongue snaked out to taste her own nose for a moment. Her horns looked frightening in how sharp they twisted up from the top of her head. Her cobalt blue eyes seemed to light up when she saw Draco, and then brighten further when she saw Hermione.

With a crooning sound, she slunk down off of the boulder and trundled to meet them. She spread her wings for a second.

Hermione's eyes widened. Calypso's wings nearly spanned the width of the clearing itself, brushing the willow branches that ringed the edges. She came to a stop by the two of them and sat back on her haunches. She seemed a lot calmer than she used to a couple of months ago.

"She's as tall as you when she sits like that," Hermione said, marveling at how fast she'd grown. "Perhaps taller."

Draco said nothing, running his hands along Calypso's scales underneath her chin and on the top of her neck. When his fingers dipped down to brush the top of the crystal in her chest, it glowed in response and Calypso hummed. She headbutted Draco's face.

For a moment, Hermione's mind flashed back to black-and-grey scales and Hannah's wild laugh. Her heart trembled.

She couldn't think about that. She couldn't think about the past. Because if she thought about Hannah and Aodhan, then she would think about Luna. And if she thought about the fall of Wicklow Sanctuary, then she would think about Cillian.

She wished, though, that Hannah and Aodhan had survived. Perhaps then they could have learned that Hannah was one of the Drakin, and they could have been connected.

"She's not as playful anymore," Draco murmured when Callie sat back to watch them with the curiosity of a sleepy cat. "I think she's outgrowing this clearing."

"You can't make it bigger?" Hermione asked, stepping beside him so she could reach out to stroke the side of Calypso's neck. She stifled a laugh when she dropped her nose to the top of Hermione's curls and nudged until her bun came loose. Her hair tumbled down to her lower back.

"I can," Draco said, twirling one of the black rings around his right-hand middle finger. His gaze
drifted all over her, focusing on her hair in an absentminded manner. "I . . . Could."

Hermione eyed him, scratching Calypso under the chin. "But you don't want to?"

Draco lowered his gaze and for the first time, Hermione felt like he had let his walls down. Instead of cold ice, she could see all the little gears turning in his mind. All the things that were unsettling him.

He was scared about something.

"There's a chance the Dark Lord won't let me come back," he said in a soft voice, still twirling the ring. His sleeves were so long that they were halfway down his hands. He looked pale under the moonlight. "There's a chance I'll be executed. I don't want . . . I worry that something will happen to her. That she'll be discovered. It's only a matter of months before her neck reaches higher than the trees. You know as well as I how big Ukrainian Ironbellies can get."

Hermione felt the strings of her heart being tugged. What if someone discovered Calypso and hurt her? Or worse? He was right.

"I may have to make some tough decisions," Draco said, and then he looked into Calypso's eyes. He placed his hand over her crystal. "I just wish I could have figured out our connection."

As complicated as things were between them, she knew how much Draco loved Calypso. Making the decision to let her go would likely be something he regretted. It would be like Hermione having to give up Crookshanks after getting him back, or having to give up the memories of her friends that didn't break her heart.

It was indescribably sad.

Draco resumed twirling his ring back and forth on his knuckle. He bit his lower lip and studied Calypso as though he were trying to memorize her. He took a deep, shuddering breath.

Hermione thought he looked frail.

Was that why he wanted to come out here alone? Because he was going to send Calypso away?

The moment the thought came to her, she felt floored by her shock. The fact that he would send his beloved dragon away, coupled with the outbursts he'd been having since the Dark Lord crucioed him, were starting to make sense.

He was more than stressed out.

He was terrified.

"We - erm, you don't have to make any decisions yet," Hermione said, heart pounding as she shot a glance up to Calypso's innocent face. "Just think about it for awhile. All right?"

He nodded and then when his gaze fell upon her again, it seemed a little clearer than usual.

"Ask your questions," he said.

Hermione parted her lips, preparing to speak, trying to figure out how to word them. Now that she was here, alone in the clearing with him and surrounded by moonlight and glowing white moonflowers, she almost didn't want to ruin the ambiance.

But she knew she had to. They could do this - what they were doing, spending time together -
unless she knew the truth. Because if the truth was that he believed he owned her, then this was not a part of herself that she wanted to give to him. It was not a part of him that she wanted to accept.

"You know what?" he said suddenly. "It would be better if you didn't speak right now."

Hermione narrowed her eyes. Because he was upset over Calypso? Or because he was still annoyed with her?

"Is that a command?" she snarked, rolling her eyes.

"I just don't want to fight with you," he said on an exhale, and then he crossed his arms over his chest. "And I can sense that's what this will become."

"Oh, you can sense it?"

"It's in the air." He sneered.

"I told you that I have questions," Hermione said. "That's why I came out here with you. I didn't come here to pretend everything was back to normal."

The anger entered his eyes like a flash flood. "I didn't ask you to come out here. In fact, I said I wanted to come alone."

"Well, I'm here, so you should follow through."

"I really don't care about your questions, Granger. There's a lot more important things going on right now than whether or not you're my slave."

She put her hands on her hips, feeling her pulse pounding harder as she began to stray into new territory. Territory that could either backfire on her or give her the truth.

"You know, your father told me a thing or two about you," she said. He gave her a sharp look. "And it makes me think that I'm even more right than I already was. If you want to prove to me that ownership over me wasn't your intention, then you had better do it quickly. How am I to believe you based purely on your word?"

"You're supposed to trust me. That's how."

"Trust you?!" Hermione spluttered a laugh. "Trust what? Your poisons? The fact that you tried to keep the 150,000 galleon price you paid Carrow from me? Or perhaps the fact that you had already given up on your mother by the time you brought me here? You said it yourself: your mother is going to die. So what was the point of bringing me here for a useless potion, then? To keep me busy while you worked on manipulating my legs open?"

"Shut up," he said.

He was right. There was something in the air.

Tension.

Beside them, Calypso made a strange, pitiful sound. She pushed her nose against Draco's side, but he was too focused on glaring at Hermione.

"No," Hermione said. "I told you we needed to talk. I didn't say it would be easy."

"I don't want to talk about this."
To Hermione's surprise, he turned around and walked across the clearing, towards the boulder. Indignant, she went after him. Calypso walked slowly behind them.

"Well, we're going to talk about this!" Hermione cried.

She reached for his wrist.

He whipped around and she saw his eyes blaze with rage. The moment their gazes locked, he was inside her head.

It was just as easy for him to sink inside as it had been for the Dark Lord, and Hermione found herself staggering to the side as a terrible ache began to spread across her forehead.

_We'll talk when I'm ready to talk_, came his voice. _Stop pushing me._

She glowered at him, clenching her teeth and leaning back against the rock.

"What?" he said, his upper lip curling. "You don't have a dagger on you right now? You have nothing to stab me in the throat with?"

Hermione was starting to hate him again.

Finally, he slid out of her mind, taking the iciness of his Legilimency with him. Calypso came to sit beside them again. She was making that crooning noise again, quiet and repeated.

"Stop this," he said. "Whatever this is that you're doing. I told you I wouldn't be used. Are you trying to provoke me into doing something that I have no desire to do?"

"I," Hermione said with a heavy breath, still leaned against the boulder, "just want you to admit it."

"Admit what?"

"That you want to."

They held a lingering staring contest with one another, Hermione's eyes full of determination and his full of ire. She saw him clenching his fists at his sides, opening and closing them as though he was itching to do something with them.

"Fine," he said, eyebrows shooting up. "I'll admit it."

"Fine. Go ahead."

"I want to fuck you, Granger."

Hermione's breath caught in her throat. That was not what she'd expected to hear.

She didn't know _what_ she'd expected to hear. She'd thought he'd admit to some sort of elaborate hoax that he'd created to trick her into coming to the Manor. But instead, he'd just looked her directly in the eyes and said that as though it were the simplest thing in the world.

"There," he said. "Happy?"

Hermione let out a strange laugh. She could tell she was blushing.

But she wasn't going to let him make her speechless. She wasn't going to let him win.
"And is that a new conclusion you've come to?" She gave him a once-over. "Or has that been something you've wanted since Fourth Year?"

He looked confused.

Hermione laid her cards out on the table.

"'You wouldn't like her spotted, would you?' I believe you said that to Harry, Ron, and I at the Quidditch World Cup. So, was it before I punched you or afterwards that you realized you wanted to -"

"Shut up!" he suddenly roared, and then his hands were around her upper arms, pressing her firm against the rock. His eyes searched hers. "Shut up! You don't know anything."

Calypso let out a loud screech of her own. She snapped her jaws, her teeth clacking together. She began to prance back and forth around the side of the boulder. The dragon was in distress, but she was ignored.

"Why do you . . ." His voice faltered for a moment. His eyes dropped to her lips, then snapped back up to hers. His glare intensified and hands tightened. "Why do you have to twist everything to make it - to make it . . ."

He trailed off, his lips still parted as though they were waiting to keep moving. Hermione's breathing grew shallow. Their proximity was within inches. He smelled of sandalwood.

There was something else in his eyes.

Calypso paced, the faint thump of her heavy step providing a unique background tune to their stand-off.

Suspicion entered Hermione's mind.

"What do you want to do?" she asked, threading the tiniest note of challenge into her tone. "Right now, what do you want to do?"

"I really want to shut you up," he growled, his grey eyes boring holes into her very soul. It felt like he was trying to see every part of the inside of her head.

"So do it," she said, lifting one eyebrow.

She didn't know what she thought he'd do. She supposed he would back away. After all, he was the coward, wasn't he?

Draco inhaled and held his breath. His gaze fell to her lips again.

And he kissed her.

No.

He devoured her.

He devoured her with his head turned to the side and his hands bruising on her arms. With his entire body pinning her to the boulder with so much force that the only way she could breathe was to open her mouth and let him inside. There was desperation in his moan.

But there was rage in it, too.
The moment his lips touched hers, his tongue was inside her mouth, searching for something. She didn't know what. She didn't care, either. She just kissed him back with as much fervor as he had. With just as much anger and frustration and stress and fear as he was giving to her.

His hands began to roam. So did hers. His fingers scraped down the sides of her waist and around to her lower back, squeezing her backside through the fabric of her jumper. Her fingers were in his hair, her nails combing his scalp and eliciting a pained sound from his throat.

He broke away for a moment, his eyes meeting hers briefly. He hissed through his teeth, barely moving back far enough to keep their noses from touching.

"You fucking infuriate me, you little witch. You make me want to just . . ." He groaned and his hands went to her waistline again, lifting her up and pressing her to the boulder with their hips melded together. "Throw you down and just -"

She shoved him away and slapped him. She didn't know why. She just wanted to.

He stared at her. Her palm stung.

They each took a breath.

"I promise you that if you don't knock it off, you're going to find yourself in a bad situation," he said in a threatening voice.

Desire fueled her as she surged forward and kissed him again. Draco's hands pressed tight on her waist, and she wrapped her legs around his hips. Hermione bit his lower lip, hoping he understood that even if he was taller than her, and bigger than her, and making her feel like her blood was on fire, she was the one in control.

He slammed her against the face of the boulder again, the sounds of their almost feral groans and sighs mingling with Calypso's anxious growls.

Her mind was blank. Just like the night she'd pleasured him on the window seat, inside the expanse of her head, there was nothing but the white-hot heat of the star that was Draco.

She was kissing Draco Malfoy - snogging him, really - and all she cared about was the fact that she wanted to keep doing it until one of them won the battle. She wanted to tear his hair out and claw his eyes and wrap her hands around his throat and -

She tore her lips away from his and gasped as though coming up for air. Everything was spinning. Her skin was hot, too hot, and she just wanted to breathe.

"Stop making promises you can't keep," she said, her breaths high and pitchy. Her hands gripped the sides of his head, holding him to her neck. Her eyes rolled up as he nibbled the skin beneath her ear with near-vehemence.

"You want me to throw you down and fuck you right here?" he growled, and then he was sucking on her earlobe. Her hips jerked as a bolt of lightning jolted her core.

"You'd like that, wouldn't you?" she snarled, trying to keep herself from moaning as the feeling of his tongue on her ear and neck threatened to send her into a tailspin. "You'd - you'd like to just - ah - tear my clothes o-off and - nnh!"

She felt like she was going insane. It didn't make any sense. She was so angry, yet she wanted him so badly that it hurt. Her stomach clenched with a need so ferocious that she thought she might keel
over and die. She moved her hands through his hair, all over his head, like she couldn't get enough of its softness.

"I think you're the one who would like it," Draco whispered into her ear, moaning as they continued to grind against one another. "Since you - fuck - keep trying to - to get me to - *Fuck, I can't take this!*

His hips rolled to meet hers. Hermione's skull exploded with pain as she let her head fall back against the rock. He was hard as he ground against her again and again, firm enough to make her cry out with every movement. She didn't even mind the pain, or that she was seeing more stars than just the ones in the sky.

He kissed a line of molten passion down the side of her throat, tasting her skin with his tongue. She pulled his hair because she wanted to. Because she was angry that he was kissing her like this, just to shut her up, when she was trying to prove that she was her own person.

But damn if she didn't want him to sink inside of her and make her his.

*Skreee!*

A screech. There was a thundering sound.

Calypso, in her agitation, had run across the clearing and was now bounding back. The ground shook so much that Draco's hands slipped, forcing Hermione to let her legs fall from his hips. There was a strange crackling noise, like the scream of electricity in the air.

Calypso was inhaling.

Hermione's eyes widened. Draco cursed.

Her throat was glowing blue.

The dragon let out another angry screech and opened her maw. The blue glow spilled out from within and Hermione had to squeeze her eyes shut against its brightness. She felt Draco's hands on her, yanking her forward as he backed away from the rock and shoved her to the other side of it. She stumbled behind the safety of the boulder. He whirled around to face the dragon.

Calypso exhaled.

A beam of blue light expelled from the depths of her throat, razing the grass flat with something hard and white. It streaked across the clearing and went straight for the pool of water.

The water froze instantly.

Calypso made a coughing, hacking noise, and then she crooned. She looked at Draco with the expectant look that Hermione had come to realize meant she was happy.

"Did she just breathe ice?" Draco said, sounding breathless.

"I think so," Hermione replied. She stared at the frozen trail in the grass and then looked up at Calypso. "And she looks pretty pleased with herself."

"Do dragons breathe ice?" Draco asked, looking perturbed.

Hermione recalled what she'd read in *Dragons and their Kin*. Before learning about the Drakin, she wouldn't have thought this was possible.
"It's the crystal in her chest," she said with confidence. "The crystals influence scale color and elemental magic. Her element must be ice."

She walked over to the ice floe that bisected the grass, kneeling down to feel it with her fingertips. It was rough, cold, and hard. When she touched it, she felt like she could feel the magic thrumming within it. It was like tiny sparks, remnants of magic-past.

"Fascinating," she whispered. Then, over her shoulder she called, "Looks like Calypso is an ice dragon."

Draco didn't respond. He went to pet Calypso, using his hands to stroke her head. He murmured to her, avoiding Hermione's gaze.

The heat was gone and awkwardness had settled in.

Hermione walked to the other side of the clearing, running her fingers through her hair. She took deep breaths, struggling to find some sort of calmness within her spirit. Whatever issue she'd been having before the snog of the century was now ten thousand times worse. The feeling of his kiss lingered. On her lips, her ear, her neck . . .

It was dangerous, and raw, and poisonous, and infuriating, and just -

She hated him. She hated him more than anyone she'd ever hated before.

Hermione stopped her frantic pacing and glanced across the clearing.

Draco was climbing on top of the boulder to sit on it. Calypso curled around it, resting her head on Draco's lap. The narrow tip of her long, snakelike tail thumped against the ground in bliss when Draco smoothed his hands along her scales on the side of her head.

He glanced to the side, towards Hermione.

Their gazes met.

"You want me to throw you down and fuck you right here?"

Hermione whimpered in irritation, low under her breath, and turned away. She sat down in the grass, facing the willow branches.

Because yes, she did. Kissing him was like dancing with the Devil and soaring past the stars, all at the same time. His tongue was sinful when it spoke, lecherous when it kissed, and iniquitous when it tasted. There was wickedness in the press of his fingers and the roll of his hips.

Her heart sank.

What if it turned out that he just saw her as a slave? Had she just sealed her fate with a snog?

All the fighting and arguing that they'd been through would all be for naught if she found out that not only had he lied to her, but she'd been so foolish as to let her body control her actions.

Everything was so confusing now.

After what felt like hours, Draco approached her.

"Let's go," he said, voice as closed off as his facial expression.
"All right," she whispered, and then she stood up. She glanced at Calypso to say good-bye, but she was asleep on the grass by the boulder.

The boulder that Hermione and Draco had rutted against.

She looked away quickly. She and Draco stared at one another for a moment.

They absolutely could never go back to the way things had been in February. They were going to have to just keep moving forward and disentangle the threads as they went.

*If we have time to,* she thought as they started off through the trees. *Because the Dark Lord will summon us any day now, and that might be the end.*

She knew that if the Dark Lord had her executed, then it didn't matter if Draco wanted her to be his property or not. She'd be dead. Their time together was limited.

Hermione just didn't know what to do with it.

They walked back in tense silence. They did not hold hands, but Hermione kept a shy grip on his jumper sleeve. He let her. She tripped quite a bit, trying her best not to make a sound so that he didn't have cause to talk to her. She could tell by the air about him that he was on edge, agitated, or angry. She didn't know if it had to do with her or with Calypso.

Did he think they'd made a mistake, kissing like that?

O

Hermione's bedroom door seemed to loom up in the darkness of the hall.

"Tomorrow," Draco said, and it was more of a mumble. "I'll see you tomorrow."

"Okay," Hermione said, her hands clasped behind her back.

There was silence. Draco twirled his ring again, like he had earlier. Hermione was beginning to think it was a nervous habit. Which was odd, because before everything that had happened with Carrow, Draco had never seemed like an anxious person. He'd always seemed rather cold.

If she could be wrong about his personality, maybe she was wrong about what she thought he wanted from her?

"Granger, I didn't protect you that night," Draco said, drawing Hermione's attention with the seriousness of his tone. He was staring at the floor, from what she saw. Her eyes had just barely adjusted to the darkness. "You fought Carrow off to get the door open; I couldn't break the wards. You were the one who killed him, because I was on the ground. I should have been the one to do it. I should have been the one to kill him. I didn't protect you and I can't protect you from the Dark Lord when he sends for us . . . Forgive me."

Hermione felt her heartbeat begin to flutter. "I forgive you for that."

His expression was unreadable, but no less intense, even in the dark. "I'll make sure the Dark Lord doesn't find out it was you. That's a promise I can keep."

"And what if he crucios you?" She closed her eyes. Even if they didn't get along, watching him fall apart like that, sobbing in agony as the Dark Lord's magic rippled through his body? She never wanted to see that again. "Like last time?"
"Then I'll take it. If that's what the Dark Lord does, I'll take it ten thousand times over if it means keeping you safe. Even if I have to take the fall for Carrow."


If he was willing to fall upon the sword for her, then that must mean that he cared for her. He cared for her enough to take all those *crucios* in the sitting room, and now he was saying he'd do it over and over again.

And if the things Narcissa and Lucius had told her turned out to mean something, then that meant that the answers to her questions as to his truthfulness lied in context and circumstance.

But Hermione didn't want context. She wanted undeniable proof. After what Cillian had done to her, she *needed* undeniable proof.

Even if it were true that Draco cared about her and his parents had told her useful information, none of it explained away her fears. He could be willing to fall upon the sword for his property or his witch. It was interchangeable.

*How am I supposed to find out the truth?*

"What if . . ." He took a step closer and dragged his gaze up to meet hers. "What if I told you that you were right about one thing . . . What if I told you I wanted you? Would you want me, too?"

Hermione stared up at him in shock. What was he saying? Was he asking her if she wanted to . . . To be with him?

Her mind whirled. Forty-five minutes ago, they were clawing at each other, violently snogging against a boulder and cursing at one another. And now he was asking her if she wanted to *be* with him?

There was something forlorn in his expression. She didn't know if it was because under his stoic, caustic exterior, he was just a sad person. She didn't know if it was because their days were numbered while waiting on the Dark Lord's summons. She didn't know if it was because of either of those things, but it was like he expected her to say no. Like he wanted her to say no so that she lived down to his expectations.

That bothered her.

They were *not* in a place where she could answer that question.

"No," she said, because she simply couldn't give him another answer when she was so convinced that she hated him. "I don't want anything with you."

But even as the words left her mouth, she knew they weren't entirely true. She just didn't know how to dissect them. How could she say she didn't want anything with him when she could hardly look at him without feeling her stomach flip?

He nodded in the sort of way that one nods when they're on autopilot. When Hermione thought about what he must be feeling, she did feel poorly about it, but she just . . . Couldn't answer his question with anything else.

Yes, perhaps they had made a mistake in the clearing.

"Goodnight, Granger," he said.
Hermione let her glance linger for a moment before she went inside her room and shut the door behind her. Her hand hovered over the lock.

All she needed to do was turn it. If she turned it, he couldn't come in.

Her mind screamed a very loud, *Who cares if he can't come in?! Lock the door!* in her direction.

Why did she care if he wanted to come in? If he came into the room, well then . . . Then . . .

Then she wasn't so sure what would happen.

She wasn't so sure she could *stop* what would happen.

Hermione left it unlocked.

With a sigh, she tossed her coverlet back and threw herself into bed with her jumper and boots still on. She pulled the blanket on over her body and tried to settle in on her side facing the wall. She closed her eyes and tried to count Snitches.

Maybe if she didn't look at the door, then her imagination wouldn't be allowed to wander.

Because it really would be simple for Draco to just waltz in, since she'd left the door unlocked. Even if she'd locked it, the windows weren't black. That meant that he could Apparate in.

If he wanted in, there really was nothing to stop him.

An image of Draco Apparating in and crawling on top of her in bed flashed across her mind.

Hermione swallowed and rolled onto her other side. The half-moon was rather bright today, closer to the Earth than normal. The Spring temperature in the air was warm but with the jumper, it was downright sweltering. She could feel sweat beading underneath her arms and on the back of her neck.

The jumper was going to have to come off.

She sat up, crossing her arms in front of her. She grabbed onto the hem and pulled it off over her head.

Another mental image. Draco standing at the foot of her bed, watching with hard-as-flint eyes as she revealed her camisole to him.

Hermione shook her head to rid her mind of it. That was absurd. It had to just be something lingering from the boulder incident. The boulder incident, which would never happen again and would never be spoken of.

She lay down on her back, the coverlet bunched up around her waist.

She just needed to go to bed.

Hermione's eyelids fell shut. One moment passed.

"*I promise you that if you don't knock it off, you're going to find yourself in a bad situation.*"

His hands on her waist, pressing in and kneading her flesh with his fingers. His lips against her pulse. His tongue, soft and wet against her earlobe.
A situation with Draco Malfoy didn't sound so bad right now.

Hermione gritted her teeth. Her lower body felt like it didn't belong to her. Like it was awake, alert. She pressed her thighs together, shifting her feet against one another.

She was not attracted to him like that. She couldn't be. She'd snogged him, but it was out of anger. She'd ground her hips to meet him, but it was out of hatred.

"Fuck, I can't take this!"

The memory of the feeling that had coursed through her body when Draco pinned her to the boulder and lost control was undeniable. She couldn't erase it or push it away, even if she tried.

Even if she wanted to.

What was it about him that just . . .

"Oh, you sweet girl. You're so, so sweet."

Hermione felt like her entire body was on edge. Alive. On fire. She wanted him to walk in, or to Apparate into the room, so she could throw caution to the wind. To get it out of her system. To get it over with before the Dark Lord took her and killed her.

She wanted to show him that she wasn't sour all the time.

Sometimes, she could be sweet.

She slid down deep under the blanket, until the entirety of it covered her whole body. The heat that enveloped her was different from the stuffiness she'd felt when wearing the sweater. It was slightly stifling, but in a way that made her feel lightheaded. Her skin tingled all over. She took a deep breath, feeling it warming her inside. The sheets were rather soft.

She could do it just this once, to the thought of him, and then never think about it again. She could take the strange attraction she had to him, the memory of the kiss, and the memory of what she'd done to him in the window seat, and put it in a box somewhere deep inside her mind.

After all, what would have happened if Calypso hadn't lost control of her magic?

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut in the darkness.

What Draco didn't know, wouldn't hurt him.

I still hate him, she thought as her hand slipped down the front of her pyjama trousers. I'm still me, and I still hate him, even if I want to imagine him when I -

The moment she touched her fingers to her bare flesh, her eyes rolled and back arched. Her imagination - her desire for Draco - was so strong that she was having no trouble whatsoever imagining that it was him under the coverlet with her.

She allowed her mind to wander as she explored her own core, her toes curling. Though her touch was gentle, the image of Draco in her mind was not. He was rough with her, like he'd been in the clearing. This Draco was the violent clashing of lips and the forceful spreading of her legs as she wrapped them around his waist. She could almost hear his moan in her ear again.

The enclosed space beneath the blanket was getting hotter. Her breathing grew shallow, her exhales turning to low whines as she parted her lips to try to get more air. The combination of the
pleasure and the lack of oxygen was heady. She felt dizzy, but in a good way.

As she felt herself steadily climbing to the top of the mountain, she imagined his eyes. Silver storms swirling in an icy wasteland. Watching her, boring down into her, glaring at her. Wanting her to spread her thighs wider. Wanting her to come for him.

She didn't know if that was what he would want or say, but her mind had taken on a life of its own.

"I wanna see you come," she imagined he'd say in the same voice he used when he was angry with her. "Now, Granger. I want to see you come undone for me."

Hermione let out a cry as the pace of her fingers swirling against her pearl nearly brought her over the edge. Her cheeks flamed with mortification, but her body was unable to stop. She rolled onto her stomach and buried her face in the sheets. Her hips ground against her forefingers, her arousal making everything ten thousand times more severe.

She was so close.

And oh, she just wanted it to last.

She wanted it to last forever. She wanted to hang on the knife's edge of ecstasy for as long as possible so that she didn't have to put it in the box yet.

Hermione pressed her face even harder against the mattress, her head spinning in wild, oxygen-deprived circles. She moaned aloud, into the sheets where the sinful sound became trapped. Her thighs began to tremble. Her lungs burned, desperate for air. She could feel it. It was getting close.

She was going to come.

The Draco in her fantasy wrapped his hand around her throat and squeezed until she saw spots. He looked at her not with hatred, but with a possessiveness that she knew had no boundaries. He looked at her like she belonged to him.

I do, she thought, the voice in her head frantic with desire. I do, I do, I do, I -

She couldn't breathe. She was seconds away from passing out, but she didn't want to lift her head from the sheets. Not when she couldn't stop moaning, whimpering like she was on the verge of tears.

The Draco that existed in her head was the one that was stroking her between her legs, winding the coil in her core tight, tight, tight until -

"Tell me," he whispered with that Slytherin tongue against the shell of her ear. "Do you hate me now?"

The coil snapped and sprang apart, electric shocks traveling along her veins as she shattered in her first orgasm in months. She sobbed into the sheets, stars shooting across her vision as she the euphoria wracked her body with convulsing shivers. It was overwhelming, the power of it as she finally lifted her head to gulp in air.

Sparks of anger replaced the pleasure as it slowly ebbed from her body. She hadn't actually meant to think that. I do, I do, I do? No, she did not. She did not belong to him. Even in her imagination, he was still trying to control her. To own her.

Tomorrow, she would have to figure out a reason to explain why she was angry with him again.
She certainly couldn't say, "I'm angry with you because you're a prat, even in my imagination." And she couldn't tell him she was brassed off because she was attracted to a dark part of him that she had no business being attracted to.

At least if she could focus on her anger, she wouldn't have any energy to feel embarrassed for touching herself to the thought of him.

As she lay there in the aftermath of the tsunami, shame tingling along the network of her veins, she realized something.

She hadn't gotten to ask any of her questions in the clearing.

He hadn't let her.

*Prat,* she thought, her vexation already growing. *Bloody prat.*

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Twenty-Four

Chapter Summary

TRIGGER WARNING: Draco snaps in this chapter (not non-con, I just am warning you there's a fight.) There is violence. References to past non-con. Death.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Counting the Stars

Chapter Twenty-Four


October 2002

Hermione stepped off of the ferry and onto French soil.

The terminal was in Cherbourg, a place that Hermione had never been to before. She felt exhausted and nervous. She'd slept on the seat of the table booth she'd chosen for almost the entire trip.
What if the Dark Lord had taken France in the year since she'd been at Wicklow? What if there was a Trace on her that had stopped working while she was in the protection of the magic valley, and then somehow kicked back into action the moment she left it?

Of course, that didn't make any sense. She'd been in Cillian's flat for three months. If there had been a Trace on her, she would have been found.

She almost wished she had.

Hermione glanced around the terminal. The other patrons of the ferry streamed out around her, the majority of them trailing suitcases along behind them, or holding the handles of luggage in their hands. They were all smiling, talking, and laughing. Like normal people. Normal people who hadn't been imprisoned like she had. She felt like she didn't belong in the real world anymore, or like if anyone knew who she was and where she'd been, then they wouldn't want her.

She felt small.

Walking forward through the large building, Hermione searched her brain for an idea of what to do next. Given that she had euros, a hotel was in order. Perhaps a cheap motel. If she stuck to Muggle areas, that would be safest.

The temperature outside was mild as she walked through the doors and out onto the street. She looked to the left and the right.

What now?

She didn't speak French but since there were so many people around, she realized that the only way she was going to be able to figure out a motel was by asking around. She wandered this way and that, trying to get someone who spoke enough English to direct her. When she finally found someone, she felt wary.

Not all wizards avoided Muggle areas, but all wizards were untrustworthy right now.

Luckily for her - and her journey had mostly been driven by sheer luck - the woman who helped her was just a Muggle. She spoke enough English to direct her to a hotel. Hermione thanked her and began walking.

By the time she got settled in her small, tidy room, she was able to relax. The moment she did, the depression that settled over her body sent her straight to bed.

She had paid for two nights with the Muggle money because that was most of what was left in Cillian's wallet that wasn't a card. She couldn't use his credit card, even though she knew it was probably loaded. If anyone had discovered his body within the last day, the Muggle authorities could find her and detain her. If that happened, then she'd be stuck in a cell, waiting for the Dark Lord to come and pluck her out.

While she was living with Cillian, it had been so easy to give in to her grief and let him use her. It had been so much simpler to take all of her pain - all of her despair and her loss - and start placing it into neat boxes in her mind with lids and latches. She didn't know if she was doing it with her magic, with Occlumency, or just because she desperately needed reprieve.

She just wanted to feel nothing.

Hermione napped for hours. The nap was punctuated by random bouts of waking up from nightmares and crying herself back to sleep. Sometimes, she dreamed of Cillian's bloody face and
unseeing eyes. Sometimes, she dreamed of Luna slipping silently into the water. And sometimes, she dreamed of clouds made of dragonflame.

By the time she woke, it took her an entire hour to get up to use the loo because she was so forlorn.

What was she supposed to do now? There was nowhere to go. No one to run to. She had no friends left. They were all gone. She was a used-up trollop who had been turned into naught but a toy for a Muggle, all because she'd given up. She knew that she was Hermione Granger and she wasn't supposed to give up, but her friends were dead.

She couldn't be strong all the time.

Unable to afford room service, she went down to the lobby. There was a chain fast food restaurant across the street that she remembered from her childhood to be inexpensive. At the very least, a hamburger wouldn't cost too much and she would be able to save some of the leftover money for one meal tomorrow.

It was looking like she might have to get used to having an empty stomach again.

She debated eating in the restaurant since it was late and not many people were around, but she was still worried about a Trace. A hotel room wouldn't be any safer, but something about being surrounded by four walls and a roof made her feel more secure. Besides, she wanted to take Cillian's clothing off for a moment to wash it in the bathtub. There wasn't any blood on the fabric, but she felt like they were soiled.

She felt like she was soiled.

Taking her burger outside with her, she prepared to cross the street.

Crack.

There was someone standing underneath the streetlight beside her. He wore all black and he looked like he was waiting for someone. He was looking right at her.

A flash of red hair.

Hermione's heart leapt up into her throat. She nearly dropped her food to the ground.

Was it - ?

Bill Weasley stepped forward, looking almost exactly the same as the last day she'd laid eyes on him at Shell Cottage. The scar was still there, dark and pink where it bisected his face. His hair was much longer and the beard he'd never seemed able to grow had come in.

"Hermione?" he whispered.

Hermione could only nod. It wasn't Ron, but it was someone.

"It's really you?" His eyes went wide and he crossed the small distance to her with speed, his arms shooting out to crush her against his body. "Merlin's bloody beard, it's really you!"

Even though she was over the moon to see Bill, to see a friend, she went rigid in the circle of his embrace. All she could feel was Cillian's arms. Cillian's body holding her tight, not letting her get away. She squeezed her eyes shut and finally dropped her burger. Her heart couldn't stop racing.

"Oh - your food," he said, letting her go to hold her by the shoulders and look down. "Ah, Hell.
We'll get you another. We'll get you whatever you want. Come here."

He hugged her again, tighter this time. It took all of her strength not to break down in his arms. She was terrified - terrified that he would look at her and know she was different - but she was just so tired of being sad. She wanted to be happy to see him. She wanted to be happy that someone had survived.

She threw her arms around his waist and fell apart, sobbing into his chest as the walls around her heart shattered. Even though she was frightened and overwhelmed with grief, she felt like she could breathe again.

She hoped he could see how filthy she was now.

"How did you -"

He cut her off. "You think Fleur and I aren't watching every magical core signature that comes from the islands?"

Hermione pulled back far enough to look up into his eyes. She needed confirmation. Answers.

"Does he have Ireland?" she asked.

Bill nodded, looking sad. "He's got Great Britain, Ireland, and Greece. He's working on stamping out the rest of the Irish wizard rebellions, and we've heard rumors that he's headed for Lithuania next."

Hermione held her breath for a moment and then stepped out of his hold. "And here?"

"He hasn't cast his eye on France yet. We don't know why he's bouncing around so much," Bill said, and then he cast a couple of surreptitious glances around. "Will you come with me?"

Hermione looked across the street, at her hotel. She hadn't left anything in the room because she didn't have anything but Cillian's wallet. She looked at Bill again.

"How can I trust that it's you?" she said softly.

"Ron soiled the bed until he was thirteen," Bill said automatically, grinning. "That do it for you?"

The one secret that Ron had never told anyone but her.

Hermione felt a strange feeling come over her. Her eyes pricked with tears and her heart filled with warmth. "It'll do. Where do you live?"

"Paris," he said. "With Fleur. Tinworth was overrun, so it wasn't safe, even with the wards. We came here to join her father."

Hermione swallowed, hard. "And what about everyone else? How did you escape the castle?"

"Portkeys. Fleur and I tried to hold them off in the courtyard, but got separated from everyone else. Then Mum found us and told us to give in and go. So we did." He averted his eyes. "We feel guilty about that."

Hermione shook her head. "We all had to run. And everyone else?"

Bill was the one to swallow, his pulse jumping in his throat. "Mum told us we would all meet at the Burrow in one week's time, but she never came. No one did."
Hermione felt the devastation so viscerally that her knees went weak. She'd always feared that Ron was dead, but now, knowing for certain that there was no chance of seeing him again? It was like Bill had ripped the last shred of hope she had left out from underneath her.

Bill held out his hand. "Let's go home, yeah?"

Reorienting herself so that she didn't fall into a depressive stupor, she forced a smile onto her face. "Yeah."

She took his hand and they DisApparated.

Hermione woke as though she were coming out of a coma.

She felt confused and heavy. It was as though someone had weighed all of her limbs down with sand. For a moment, she had thought that her dream was real. She'd thought she was back in Cherbourg, embracing Bill Weasley under a streetlight in the middle of the night.

She lifted her head, eyes searching for the clock in the dark. It was on the wall -

Draco was there. He was standing beside her bed.

Before she could stop them, before she could even stop to see if she felt ice in her mind, the memories of what she'd done before she fell asleep crossed her mind. They flashed one right after the other, disjointed but coherent. She really, really hoped he couldn't see those.

He held out a glass of water. Their fingers brushed. Hermione's stomach flipped.

"You were screaming," he whispered. "Again."

She sat up, painfully aware that all she wore was her camisole. She'd removed her pyjama trousers, brassiere, and boots before she'd closed her eyes. She hoped he hadn't cast a charm to see in the dark the way he did when he went to see Calypso.

As she sipped the water, her gaze fell to the silver and black rings he wore on his fingers. Aside from those, all he wore was his trackies. His hair was completely falling forward, into his eyes. She noticed that it was shorter than his chin, the ends of his fringe just lightly dusting his cheekbones while the rest was cut close to the scalp.

He looked rather handsome.

Oh, Merlin, she told herself. Now is not the time.

She handed the water glass back. "Thank you."

He held it, tapping his forefinger against the rim.

"Is there something else you need?" Hermione asked, struggling to keep her voice from wavering.

"No," he said, voice husky. "Is there something you need?"

Hermione held his gaze and spoke through clenched teeth. "No."

The glass, which was still half-full of water, was placed gently onto her bedside table. She felt like the clink of it against the wood was rather loud.
Why did it feel like the room was so stuffy?

"Can you get out now?" she said, her voice rising in pitch.

He pulled a face. "The fuck are you on about? I just came in to give you water."

"And I'm supposed to just know that?" she snapped, pulling the coverlet up higher to shield her chest. She felt embarrassed and irritated. Even though it felt hot in the room, her breasts said the air was cool.

"Yes," he said, stressing the word. "I have never given you a reason to think otherwise, Granger. I've been in your room tens of thousands of times and haven't tried anything yet."

Hermione's brow furrowed and she spat vitriol. "You're the one who said you didn't want to stop that night. How am I supposed to know you don't feel the same way tonight?"

She regretted that. She shouldn't have said that.

The mild irritation on his face intensified to rage. "Are you being serious? Are you referencing the answer that I gave you in response to your question that you asked while your hand was wrapped around my -"

Hermione felt all of the blood rushing to her cheeks, so she cut him off. "Why did you let it go that far, then? Why didn't you say you wanted to stop?"

"On a good day, I'd say it was coerced."

"I wasn't in the right frame of mind!" she cried, still holding the coverlet to her chest. "I'd just killed a man!"

"Neither of us was in the right frame of mind."

"So then you lied. You did want me to stop. That makes you a liar." Hermione gritted her teeth. Just as I've already thought.

"I'm not a liar!" he yelled, his hands in fists.

Hermione couldn't think clearly, for her anger. It was the dead of night, and all she could do was fight with him. He looked attractive and that made her want to have it out. And he was a liar.

She clutched the blanket tight and glared at him. The moonlight illuminated his face. He looked livid and more than a little offended.

"So, you're telling me that if we were both in the right frame of mind, you wouldn't be able to stop yourself," she said, her mind full of very clear images of the night in reference. "Is that what I'm hearing?"

He scowled. "Granger -"

"No, if that's all you want me for, then just take what you need and go." She pulled the coverlet aside, anger and defiance fueling her actions. She felt the rush of air against her body as she did so, felt his gaze upon her chest like a beacon.

What the fuck was she on about?

Why did she keep doing this to him? To herself?
He wasn't Cillian.

Draco sighed and passed a hand across his face. "I'm knackered, Granger. Can we at least wait until the sun comes up to start bickering?"

Even though she was being ridiculous, getting angry this late, she had valid reason to be. He hadn't let her ask any of her questions. He didn't care whether she trusted him or not, otherwise he would have let her ask them.

So if he didn't care if she trusted him or not, and he wouldn't have been able to stop himself even if it weren't right after a murder, then what else did she have to believe in about him?

"Why didn't you protect me?" she asked, looking him directly in the eye as she snatched the blanket back onto her body.

"From who?" He took a step closer to the bed. "From Carrow?"

"From myself."

It escaped her lips before she could stop it. But it was already out there. Now that it was, she wanted to know the answer. She needed to know.

He stared at her, looking almost as terrified as he'd looked in the courtyard when his parents had called him over to Voldemort's side. It was like he wanted to look away, but everytime he did, his eyes were drawn back and pinned to her.

"I tried," he said.

 Crack.

The rest of May passed as sluggishly as quicksand.

It oozed out of the universe and down into the black hole that was Lord Voldemort's impending summons. Every day that passed by felt like weeks, waiting for the summons only to have it never show up. Hermione went to sleep relieved and woke up in fear day in and day out.

When would he finish deciding their fate?

Draco avoided her after the night he brought her the water.

She supposed it was just as well, given the fact that she couldn't seem to talk to him without starting an argument. She knew she was being cruel, but she couldn't seem to look at him without feeling like he was throttling her. It was frustrating, and it made her angry.

Any time they passed in the corridors, he didn't look at her. He kept his gaze turned resolutely forward, his hand in his pocket. Sometimes, he clenched the fist of the hand that hung at his side.

In the potions lab, he didn't even greet her. She didn't try to greet him. They worked in silence and he continued to bottle his potions. She didn't know why he was still going to Buckingham every three days to deliver the potion, or why the Dark Lord wasn't telling him to stay or to bring Hermione with him so he could execute them both. She had no intention of asking.

If he wasn't going to speak to her? Then she wasn't going to speak to him. Now that she was eating like normal again, the next cold war had begun.
The strangest aspect to the rest of the month was Lucius.

After the strange conversation they’d had in his study, he’d been acting very differently towards her. He no longer swatted at her with his cane or glared at her. There were no more cruel remarks or snide glances.

He gave her a nod. Every. Single. Time.

The most bizarre thing that he did the entire month was on the 15th.

Hermione had been in the library past the time he’d told her to be, having dozed off in the chair while reading. Instead of waking her with a sharp tongue, he woke her with a gentle hand on the shoulder. When she opened her eyes, he spoke to her.

"Best be off to bed, then. It's rather late."

There were many times that month that Hermione wondered to herself.

*Is he trying to make amends?*

On the evening of the 29th of May, Hermione was tired. She'd spent the entire day in utter boredom. She was beginning to believe that the Dark Lord had already made his decision to let them off without warning, and that Draco just wasn't telling her because he was a royal arsehole. She felt too bored to read, too bored to sit in the tea room, and too bored to forage outside.

By the time she went to Narcissa's room to give her the dosage, she was so bored that she almost missed the fact that her eyes were closed.

Wait.

Narcissa's eyes had never been closed before. They'd been open only to blink for the entire time that Hermione had been at the Manor. The curse and its subsequent magical coma kept her mind in a constant state of confuddled limbo. And since her chest was still moving up and down, that meant she was asleep.

Hermione rushed to her side, her hands clutching the potion bottle. She didn't know what to do. Did this mean that Narcissa was taking a turn for the better or the worse? Was she sleeping because she'd come out of her coma and passed out from sheer exhaustion?

*Oh, what do I do? Should I tell Draco? He hasn't spoken to me in weeks. What if Narcissa's condition has worsened?*

She bit her lip, searching for a solution.

It came to her.

*Lucius.*

He hadn't been *kind* to her, but at least he'd spoken more than zero words to her this month. And if this was an emergency, he would be the first person who would want to know.

She turned and fled, throwing caution to the wind and yelling Lucius' name just like she had the night that Draco had Apparated into her room wounded.

"Lucius!" she cried, running towards the stairs. "Lucius, come quickly! *Lucius!*"
Crack.

As she came to the foot of the stairs, she found herself face-to-face with Draco. His hair was disheveled and his chest was heaving as though he'd run. With wild eyes, he looked her over.

Behind him, jogging out of the library without his cane, came Lucius. He looked perturbed.

"What is it?" Lucius said, walking over. "What's happened?"

Heart nearly tearing itself out of her throat with fear, she didn't waste any time. She let her gaze slide past the panting Draco, to move to his father.

"It's Narcissa," Hermione said, breathing heavily. "She's closed her eyes and - and that's a sign of change in - in a magical coma."

Draco and Lucius exchanged alarmed glances and then with a simultaneous crack, they were both gone. She could hear their voices, frantic and concerned, wafting faintly down the stairs.

Hermione, still catching her breath, leaned against the round end of the banister. She felt worried. She hoped Narcissa was all right. If anything, Hermione wanted the chance to thank her for the help she'd given with the sanctuary for all those years that Seamus said the survivors had been there. She had wondered for so long, too, why the sanctuary fell and whether or not Blaise had been telling the truth when he'd said, "She got caught."

As the door to Narcissa's room closed, Hermione found herself holding a hand to her cheek and frowning.

Why had Draco Apparated to her when she'd called Lucius' name?

She went to bed that night with more questions, and still no answers.

Hermione was happy.

Well, as happy as she could be.

Bill and Fleur were the only people she had left in this world, and being with them was as good as it could possibly be. So, she was happy.

Fleur's father, Maurice Delaceur, owned a wizarding version of a thrift shop in a wizarding alley in Paris. It sold all sorts of magical knick-knacks, such as cursed treasure chests, robes that had been grown out of ivy, bottled pixie dust, rare potions ingredients, and Scandinavian rune stones that were to be used for all sorts of ancient magic.

Maurice was a kind, portly old man and he was all-too-happy to welcome the famous Hermione Granger into his home.

"After all," he'd said, "A heroine's heart remains a heroine's heart, when in Britain or in France."

Fleur was ecstatic to see Hermione, pulling her into a sweet embrace when she saw her. Hermione felt a bit guilty, remembering the way she used to think of Fleur when she was younger, and she'd hugged her back with the silent vow to treat her better in the future. She was just as kind as her father, if not more so.

Bill helped with Maurice's shop, but he also had his own treasure trove of magical artifacts in the family room of the small, cramped two bedroom flat.
He had three very important items: a magical radio that picked up the wizarding radio stations in Great Britain, an artifact that kept a disillusionment ward up around the flat above the shop, and something that looked like a tabletop mirror. He called it a Detector. It looked a lot like Dumbledore’s Foe-glass, only it showed small specks of light that looked like sparkles.

The first night, he explained it to her.

"It's how I knew to come to Cherbourg," he said. "It tracks magical core signatures. I can use my wand to change the town or city that it's checking. The little specks are white if the citizen has been here since before the war; they turn red if a new person enters the borders. Then, I go check it out and if it's an enemy, I take them out. I was doing my nightly routine of checking all the coastal towns, and then I saw the red. We haven't had a red speck in weeks."

"Take them out?!!" Hermione cried, alarmed. Flashes of Cillian went by her mind's eyes and she had to hurry and lock them away before they overwhelmed her with panic again.

He gave her a look. "I obliviate them, Hermione. I don't kill them."

"Oh," she said, heaving a sigh of relief. "So how does it know all that? The specks and the areas?"

"Don't ask me," he said with a shrug. "It's Japanese. It just works."

After that, they'd cast a special charm to put curtains up around the couch, giving her the privacy of feeling like she would have a room. Hermione didn't mind. She was just pleased to finally be sleeping on a couch in a flat that did not have Cillian O'Connell in it.

The first night, she slept with nightmares. Fleur had sat with her, pillowing her curly-haired head in her lap to sing her to sleep in French.

The second night, it happened again.

Again on the third.

By the time the first month had ended, Hermione loved Fleur like an older sister and wept herself to sleep against her abdomen every night.

Six months in, Hermione finally stopped crying. The nightmares ceased. The pain was in its box.

Voldemort wasn't here, so she was safe.

Hermione spent the 29th in an anxious mood.

The air in the Manor was gloomier than normal, made worse by the random bouts of rain that they were having that week. Without House Elves, the entire mansion felt empty and cold. Hermione hadn't realized that it had at least had a buzz to it before they'd been taken to Buckingham.

Draco was nowhere to be found. He wasn't in the potions lab in the morning, and he wasn't in the gym. She didn't see him in the library or either of the two sitting rooms. She looked everywhere for him, not knowing what she wanted to say.

Remembering how tough it had been to make her parents forget her, she just wanted to make sure he was okay.

Lucius was in Narcissa's room all day. He sat at her bedside, still wearing the same clothes as yesterday. He didn't seem interested in moving in the morning, and not even when Hermione came
to give the evening dose. Judging by the way he was clutching Narcissa's left hand in both of his, he was a lot more concerned than Hermione was.

And she was extremely concerned.

Narcissa looked like a normal, sleeping woman. Her hair was still in the perfect plait that Lucius always kept it in. Her flesh was rosy and not pale. Her eyes moved beneath her eyelids, a positive sign.

She went around to the other side of the bed, her gaze flitting over Narcissa's chest. Thankfully, it was still moving up and down with breath. That lifted her spirits a little.

"Lucius?" she said, her voice hardly above a whisper.

He didn't take his eyes off of Narcissa's face. He looked beleaguered. Pale. His eyes had deep red circles under them, like he hadn't slept in weeks. His silver hair was limp around his shoulders.

"Yes, Miss Granger?" he replied in his typical clipped drawl.

"If a patient is in a magical coma for an extended period of time, it is completely normal for them to fall into a deep sleep when they come out of the coma," she said. There was a light flickering in his eyes at her words. "She may yet awaken."

Lucius finally looked at Hermione. "Is that in your expert Healing opinion?"

"Not expert," she said with a grimace. "But it's in every Healing book I've ever read that contained information on magical comas."

Lucius eyed her for a moment and then his lips twitched upward.

A semblance of a smile.

"Thank you, Miss Granger. You may go."

Hermione looked down at the potion. "Should I - ?"

"No, that will be all," he said.

As Hermione headed quickly for the door, her slippers shuffling on the carpet, she heard him clear his throat. She paused in the open doorway.

"Please leave the potion on the dresser," he said. Then, she heard him whisper, "Just in case."

Hermione watched over her shoulder as he lifted Narcissa's hand to his lips and held it there. He closed his eyes. Shock registered in Hermione's body as she watched a tear tracking silent and steady down the slight wrinkles in his face.

It's really not that shocking, though, Hermione thought with sadness. He may have been cruel to me, but I don't think it's debatable that he loves his wife.

I hope Narcissa won't stop fighting.

Hermione set the potion on the edge of the dresser, and then left the room.

As she entered the corridor, she felt a lump in her throat. She hugged her arms around her waist, hung her head, and headed for her bedroom. Even though her experiences with Narcissa were
limited, she was worried for her. Her waist-length curls fell forward as she trudged along. In a funk, she didn't bother to push them back.

She looked up, and then did a double take.

Draco was standing in front of her bedroom door.

His arms were crossed over his chest and he was leaning against the door with his back. He wore a black shirt with a high collar and black trousers, and his hair wasn't slicked back. His fringe fell into his face like it had when he'd been in her room, like he didn't have the energy to push it back. His eyes, which were normally bright and alive with fire, looked dead and hard as flint.

He was waiting for her.

"Don't give him hope," he spat out, sounding bitter. "Don't give him any hope, you selfish little witch."

"Excuse me?" The lump in Hermione's throat was getting bigger, fanned by her anger and indignation.

He sneered at her, pushing himself away from the door with his foot. "I told you my mother was going to die. Why would she suddenly wake up after weeks of no improvement? My father knows nothing about Healing, and you taking advantage of him for whatever little mind games you're playing with me makes you a lot less Gryffindor than you think you are. Brave? Chivalrous? My arse. My fucking arse."

Hermione stared at him during his tirade, her jaw agape. She couldn't believe the things that were coming out of his mouth.

"Mind games?!" she cried, uncrossing her arms so she could put her hands on her hips. "I don't know what you're talking about!"

"The mind games you play on me," he hissed, taking a quick step toward her. "The mind games you've been playing on me. Telling me I'm a liar, provoking me. Breaking me down for no reason other than to be spiteful."

She didn't back away. She just glared up at him, raising her chin to maintain eye contact.

"What reason would I have to be spiteful?"

"To me? Every. To my father? Every." He looked like he wanted to take the dagger he'd given her that had mysteriously disappeared after Carrow's death, and plunge it into her face.

Hermione narrowed her eyes. Did he know about Lucius's encounters with Hermione since she'd arrived? Did he know about the beating? Did he know about the way that Lucius had tossed her about the library the night of the battle anniversary?

Did he care?

"What do you know?" she asked in a strained tone.

"What do I -? What do you mean, what do I know?" He looked confused for a moment, and then his ire returned. "What I know is that you're not as honorable as you pretend to be. I wouldn't put it past you to lie to my father. To get his hopes up about my mother as some sort of sick way of getting back at me for what you perceive to be my manipulation."
Hermione studied him for a moment. She couldn't figure out if he was grieving early, or if he truly hated her. All this time she'd spent despising him, and now seeing him despise her back, she was surprised.

She hadn't realized he didn't hate her before.

"That's not true," she said, trying to keep her voice calm. If he was grieving, she knew better than anyone that things said in the heat of the pain were not words you could take into account.

Even if they hit you right in the heart.

"I've seen it in your head. You don't care about my mother." He loomed over her, giving her a wrathful look up and down her body. "Tch. You just want to know about your precious sanctuary. You want to know if she betrayed you, or got caught."

Hermione's eyes widened and astonishment blew her anger into a storm. "You knew about the sanctuary? And you never said anything?!"

"Of course I knew," he snarled. "How do you think I knew to come looking for you? And I know that's all you've had on your mind since the beginning. You just want your answers. It's always about answers with you, innit? Answers on tests, answers in books, answers from me. You don't care about my mother. You don't give a damn."

Hermione's mind reeled. Everything he was saying was so hateful, so hurtful, but only one thing was sticking out to her.

"The sanctuary fell in 2002," she said. "If it fell in 2002, then why did you wait until January to find me?"

"I didn't," he said. "I've been looking for you since it fell. You were the only one to make it out, but no one saw you for a year-and-a-half. Finding you in Paris was by chance during the take-over."

Hermione wanted to sit down. Okay, so that meant that Draco knew she was at Wicklow, which made sense because of Narcissa being the Order member who helped deliver survivors. Then, she was in Rosslare for three months, hiding in a flat that she was never allowed out of. Finally, in Paris in a warded flat with Bill, Fleur, and Maurice.

"I took you in. It's my right to do with you as I wish."

Cillian's box was coming open.

Hermione took a deep, shuddering breath as panic rose within her. Draco was so powerful of a wizard that he could read her thoughts without even looking in her eyes. He was so powerful that he could Apparate across the water, even if he did get Splinched.

Yet he somehow wasn't powerful enough to find her when she was inside a Muggle flat in Ireland? In a town on the banks of the river that led straight to the sanctuary?

She felt sick to her stomach.

"For someone who's been so adamant about wanting to protect me for all this time," she said, feeling Cillian's hands on her body, "you did a horrendous job."

"What?" he said, tone dark.
"I was in Rosslare," she hissed.

"I know that," he said. "You stayed in the same place for three months."

She wanted to burst out into tears. Of course she was in the same place.

Cillian hadn't let her leave.

"How did you know I was there?"

"A Trace on your magical core," he said. "Combination of Dark magic, Legilimency, and my memories of you. I figured you were safe because you were in the same place, and the Trace was still activated. If you were dead, it would have deactivated."

_I wasn't safe_, she thought miserably. _I wasn't safe at all._

She thought of Cillian. Of the Hell she had experienced behind those walls. She thought of him, and she wished Draco understood. The nights on the couch, the floor, bent over the table and the counter, on Cillian's bed. She wished he could understand.

He could have saved her.

He was looking at her, but she couldn't look into his eyes anymore. If he knew how filthy and used she truly was, then he would know why she had to be so strong that she hurt other people.

He would know what he could have stopped from happening.

"If you would have come for me back then?" she said, shoving past him for her door. She placed her hand on the knob and turned to glare up at him. His facial expression looked muddled, perplexed, and like he was trying to figure her out. "Then I wouldn't be who I am now."

She went inside her room and made sure to slam the door.

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January 15th, 2004

_It was cold in the flat._

_Maurice's shop didn't make much money and even though they had a small fireplace, it wasn't enough to keep the Winter chill out. In the entire year and three months that Hermione had been here in Paris, she didn't think she'd ever felt so cold. She wore two sweaters and three pairs of socks, and still she was always freezing._

_At least her heart was warm. She didn't panic about Cillian anymore. She had long since put him to rest in her mind._

_After dinner, Maurice went to bed early. Fleur and Hermione stayed up braiding one another's hair, laughing and reminiscing about school times. Bill sat at his table, fiddling with his radio. It had broken the week before, so they hadn't had any new information._

_Not that there was any new information. After the Dark Lord finally finished taking over Lithuania a couple of months before, he'd gone quiet. It was unfortunate, because they didn't know where he would head next._

"My galleon's on Italy," Bill said as he tinkered with the antenna. "Mm . . . Actually, I think I'm gonna put it on Africa."
Hermione and Fleur exchanged glances, Fleur on the floor between Hermione's legs with her back to the couch.

"Africa is a continent, Bill," Fleur said, giggling. "I don't think the Dark Lord can take over an entire continent."

"He took over Ireland!" Bill pointed out.

Fleur giggled again. "Ireland is not a continent, either."

"Aw, bless," Hermione said, laughing merrily as she plaited Fleur's long silver-blond locks.

"My job was curse-breaking," Bill said, also chuckling. "It wasn't to learn the . . . Continents . . . Erm - countries . . . I . . . What?"

He went silent.

Hermione, still chuckling, looked over at him. "Did you fix it? The radio?"

"No," Bill said, his voice a whisper. "I did not."

The seriousness in his tone drew both Hermione and Fleur's full attention. Bill was hunched over the Detector, rubbing it with his sleeve in frantic motions.

"What is it?" Hermione asked, feeling dread creeping in on the edges of her confidence. They'd been safe here in France for over a year.

What if they weren't safe anymore?

"My Detector is going off," Bill said, raising his voice. It was tinged with panic and distraction. "It's completely - what - why is this . . . ? This is Paris. There's Muggles here. This is . . ."

"How many do you see?" Fleur asked, standing up with her braid half-done.

He stared at it for a second and then gave both Fleur and Hermione a helpless look.

"Hundreds."

The three of them were silent. The faint sound of the fire in the small fireplace could be heard, crackling. Hermione could also hear her heart beating as though it were on the outside of her chest, held between them in her hands.

She knew what to do.

"He's here," she whispered.

"Here?" Bill looked stunned. "He can't be here. There's Muggles."

"He doesn't care about Muggles," Hermione said. "He never has. He's taken over multiple countries, and no other Muggle country has ever retaliated."

"That's not possible," Bill said. "If he attacks Paris, the Muggles will know. He must have something - some sort of power or spell that keeps them oblivious."

"Or blocks the rest of the world out," Fleur said.
Hermione didn't doubt what Bill was saying. If anyone would know about curses that could keep Muggles from caring about an attack on the city, it would be him.

Still, they did not have time to debate this.

"We need to run," she said.

"Run?!" Bill jumped to his feet. "No, we - We have nowhere to go. We can't run. My ward will hold."

"You don't understand."

"If there's Death Eaters swarming the streets, we can't just waltz on out, Hermione!" Bill yelled, sounding anxious.

Hermione shook her head. "You don't understand. He doesn't have just Death Eaters. He has wyverns. They'll rip right through the wards and tear the buildings apart. Their flames alone will burn everything down around us. We need to run."

The door to Maurice's tiny bedroom creaked open. "What's going on?"

Hermione ignored Bill's desperate look. They couldn't afford to wait and find out what was happening.

She knew firsthand what it was like to wake up to Hellfire.

"The Dark Lord is here," she said. "We need to run. Gather your most important things and put them in a bag. Wear comfortable shoes."

"Hermione!" Bill cried.

"Bill," Fleur snapped. "Hermione has been on the run. She knows. We will follow her." She looked at Hermione, her facial expression severe. "What do we need in the bag?"

Hermione gave orders, telling everyone what to do, what to bring, and what to wear. Hermione used Bill's wand to cast an extension charm on three bags. Maurice put food and water bottles into one bag. Fleur put potions and charmed objects that they felt were important into the second one. Bill put clothing and their wizarding tent into the third bag. They all bundled up, because it was January and it was cold, and then they stood in the center of the room.

"All right," Hermione said. "Everyone hold hands. Bill, you'll have to Side-Along us all outside. Don't try to go too far, or we could all be Splinched."

"Why can't we bring our wands?" Maurice asked.

"Because they'll likely have a Ministry-grade Trace on magic performed," Hermione said. "Now that the Dark Lord is here, nowhere is safe. One wand is all we'll be able to have, and even that might be unsafe."

"But we have to have something," Bill said.

"Yes," Hermione said. "We have to."

Skreeee!

Hermione nearly screamed with terror.
She knew that sound anywhere.

"Wyverns are outside," she hissed, her eyes wide. She held out her hands. "Grab hands."

"Where can we go?!" Bill said, taking Fleur's hand with his wand in it. He grabbed Hermione with the other hand. "If they're outside . . ."

Hermione didn't know. She didn't know everything. All she knew was that wyverns were killers, and they'd killed the last friends she had left. The burning of the sanctuary had scarred her.

But as she stood there, with all three sets of terrified eyes staring back at her, she realized something.

She was the only person in their little makeshift family that had any experience with wyverns. She was the only one who could help them.

Skreeeee! Another screech, and then there was a flash of light, followed by flickering orange in the window. They peered towards it.

The building beside theirs was on fire.

A winged beast on two powerful legs was clutching the shingled roof, its menacing, spiked face peering directly into their window. It pulled back its lips to snarl, revealing razor-sharp teeth.

"The wards," Bill said. "It can't see us, right?"

"It doesn't matter!" Hermione screamed. "Grab hands! We need to go -"

The wyvern exhaled suddenly, and flames engulfed the flat. Whether the object Bill had to keep the flat hidden worked or not was not known. In the next moment, everything was on fire and it was not cold anymore. The roof and the wall were engulfed. Smoke that was dark and thick began to fill the room.

Hermione's mind was blank.

Why is this happening again?

Why couldn't we just be happy?

The glass in the window shattered. Maurice, a frail old man, fell to the floor in horror. Fleur knelt beside him, coughing. Bill and Hermione were in shock.

It all happened within seconds.

The wyvern launched itself from the roof of the building next door and came crashing into the flat from the broken window. Its great girth slammed into Maurice and Fleur, cutting off their screams as the floor caved in from its weight.

Everyone went down.

Hermione heard screams, snarls, and the rush of air as the fire flared with the added oxygen from the shop below. The wyvern snarled and growled, its teeth and jaws snapping together as it tried to bite anything in its path. Fleur and Maurice's screams stopped instantly when they hit the shelves first. The wyvern fell atop the wood, destroying the shelves and everything on them. Bill landed on a large statue and did not move again.
Just like that.

It was always so simple and anticlimactic.

But it hurt so badly.

Hermione squeezed her eyes shut, bracing herself for a death that she would much rather have.

And then she landed on a warm, scaly body.

Hermione's eyes snapped open. She was on the wyvern's underbelly. Its neck had curved and its head was now trying its best to come down and bite her. Without thinking, her body reacted.

She rolled off of the creature just as it opened its mouth to inhale. As it blew its fire above her, she flattened herself to the ground.

She could see the door.

The wyvern rolled over, its tail and wings splintering wood and destroying porcelain trinkets as it did so. Hermione scrambled forward until she was on her two feet again. She ran for the door, holding her shirt over her mouth to try to filter out some of the smoke.

She made it outside right as the wyvern blew its flames a third time.

Just like in Wicklow, everything was chaos.

But unlike in Wicklow, she didn't stop to let shock take over. Even though Paris was burning - even though she could hear the screams of Muggles and wizards alike - she ran as fast as she could down the street. She was headed for the river.

Anywhere to get away from the smoke and the skies that burned.

Bill, Fleur, and Maurice. Gone. As easily as though they were made of paper on a windy day. She couldn't think about it. She couldn't let it stop her. She wasn't going to watch them die, only to let herself be killed by the same wyverns who had taken everything from her.

She put them in a box and sealed it tight.

Hermione flew down into a side alley, the screeching of wyverns echoing in her ears like the song of her nightmares. She could hear them, their wings flapping and their flames blowing. Their unearthly shrieks.

There were no Hebrideans to save the day this time.

In the darkness of the alley, the smoke had not quite reached the center of it. She stopped for a second, her throat and chest burning. She fell into a coughing fit.

A growl.

Whirling around, she came face to face with two very tall, very muscular werewolves. They were covered head to toe in hair, with horrifying teeth and bright, angry yellow eyes. Their ears stuck straight up and they were so much taller than her that she felt like a small child. They wore shredded trousers and they stood on the pads of their feet. Spittle flew from their mouths as their snarling increased.

Werewolves?! She thought in horror as she backed away, back the way she'd come. The Dark Lord
Has werewolves?!

She took off.

Tears of fright filled her eyes as she ran. The smoke was so thick, much thicker in the cramped alley than it had been in Wicklow. She could hear the pounding of the werewolves coming after her. They were on all fours.

Fortune shone on her for a split second.

Reaching the end of the alleyway, she dashed out into the cobblestone street. This was still the wizarding section of town, so the witches and wizards that she saw around her were trying desperately to cast spells, hexes, and jinxes. They were fighting werewolves and wyverns at the same time, the wolves launching themselves from the ground and the wyverns dropping from above.

Everything burned.

Hermione flew.

She didn’t look behind her. She didn't want to know. If they caught up to her, then she didn't want to know whether it was wyverns or werewolves. She just wanted to run.

Suddenly, she smashed into the chest of a tall person. She looked up.

It was a Death Eater.

She shrieked and tried to turn and run the other direction.

Three werewolves were there.

There was another loud screech. Above them, a wyvern was moving across the roof of a building. Its violent eyes were blazing, fixated right on Hermione.

She let out a cry of frustration.

This was it. There was nowhere else to go. She was either going to die being torn apart by wolves, avadaed by a Death Eater in a mask, or burned alive by a wyvern.

She spun to face the Death Eater. At least she could take a stand against him.

With a wild howl, she leapt.

The Death Eater’s body jolted, visibly shocked as she came for him with flailing arms and fists. She wrapped her arms around his neck and kicked her legs, trying to take him down. She wanted his wand. Maybe if she could get his wand, then she could -

Suddenly, one of the Death Eater’s arms was around her waist, pinning her tight against him. In the same quick moment, his other hand shot out. She heard him hissing curses and jinxes, the voice coming out of his mask and sparks shooting out of the tip of his wand.

Hermione, confused and still in a state of panic and terror, twisted herself out of his grasp until her feet hit the ground.

The Death Eater grabbed her forearm and yanked her behind him with so much force that she stumbled. She watched from behind his back as he cast more curses and took the three werewolves
Above, the wyvern had opened its jaws to inhale.

The Death Eater spun to face her. He grabbed her shoulder. She felt a pull behind her navel.

The fiery alley swirled out of existence.

All was quiet.

Hermione's eyes snapped open to darkness. She smelled soot and ash, but from what she could see, they were in a quiet, moonlit area that held none of the horrors they'd just come from. Before her, the Death Eater stood like a dark sentinel, watching her.

"Who are you?" she cried, eyes wild as she looked up at him. "Why did you take me?!"

The Death Eater reached up to grip his mask with one hand. With the other, he pulled his hood off. As he was removing the mask, Hermione saw that he had tousled platinum blond hair.

The mask came off.

"Malfoy?"

He glared down at her, his eyes bright and fierce under the stars. "Granger."

Hermione didn't know what to think. She knew who this was - she remembered him and would probably never forget him. Draco Malfoy. Draco Malfoy, the Pureblood wizard who had bullied her through all six years that she'd attended Hogwarts. The wizard she'd seen acting like a complete coward in the Room of Requirement in the Seventh Year, and then battling against her and her friends at the Battle of Hogwarts.

And he'd just rescued her.

He'd killed those werewolves and Apparated here.

"Where's the . . . The wyverns?" she asked, completely beside herself with puzzlement.

"The Dark Lord puts up a barrier on wizarding sections of town. The wyverns are there. The fire is there. But the Muggles remain oblivious as their cities burn," Draco said. His gaze scanned her body and landed on her leg. "You're hurt."

Hermione blinked and looked down. Her trousers were torn by the knee, likely from the fall from the flat. She hadn't even realized she was bleeding. Now that she looked at it, she could feel that it was throbbing with pain.

Pain.

Bill . . . Fleur . . . Maurice . . .

Her eyes filled with tears and she looked up at Draco, enraged.

"Why did you save me?" she said. "Why did you save me?!"

His eyes flashed and he lifted his chin.

"I need your help."
Hermione woke with a violent start, gasping for air.

She felt like there was smoke in her room, like wyverns were clawing through the windows. Her heart pounded, desperate to beat its way out of her chest. Her limbs trembled and immediately, she looked to the right.

Draco was not there.

*I wasn't screaming,* she thought, relieved. *I wasn't screaming.*

She felt her heart sinking down as she remembered the horrors of that night. Hermione closed her eyes and buried her face in her hands, struggling to control her anxious breathing. It felt like her lungs were spasming from the spilled grief.

Bill. Fleur. Maurice.

Luna. Seamus. Hannah.

Ron. Harry.

All of her friends were dead.

She put them all back into their boxes in her mind, gently closing the lids and sealing them shut tight.

"Draco! Draco, come now! Please, oh - !"

That screaming, that anguished screaming.

Was it . . . ?

Lucius.

And then he was hollering, and it was broken.

"DRACO! CALL A HEALER!"

Hermione's eyes widened and she threw her coverlet off.

She stumbled out of her room, tripping slightly right as she opened her bedroom door. She fell out into the hall, catching herself on the doorframe just as Draco’s door appeared beside her room. He burst out from within, wearing naught but boxer pants and a black shirt. His hair was everywhere. His eyes had that same desperate look that was in them yesterday when Hermione had gone running through the Manor looking for his father. They sought her out, sweeping down her body.

"Dracooooo!" Lucius roared.

Draco’s head snapped towards Narcissa’s room. He looked at Hermione, the two of them exchanging wide-eyed glances.

It was the most open, raw expression of despair that she had ever seen on his face.

Hermione felt sick.
No.

It couldn't be.

They ran.

Draco skidded to a halt in the door. Hermione was forced to stop behind him, trying to see into the room.

Lucius was lying sprawled out over Narcissa, sobbing with keening wails that sounded like they were coming from the depths of his soul.

Draco let out a ragged breath and Hermione felt him leaning back slightly, into her.

"Hermione," he said, his voice breaking. "I can't - fucking - breathe."

Hermione didn't even think about it. She threw her arms around his waist. Because she knew this feeling. She knew it like the back of her hand, like the air she breathed. She knew this feeling like she knew the stars in the sky.

They sunk to the floor together, where she pressed her cheek against his back because nothing mattered. Not the fights or the hatred or anything.

Narcissa Malfoy was dead.

Chapter End Notes

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Hermione's grandfather died when she was nine.

It was on Christmas Day, and they were at her house. He hadn't been feeling well, but since he was always on the healthier side, no one had paid it any attention.

"He's got a bit of a chill, I think," his son, Hermione's father Richard had said to Hermione while pressing a kiss to her cheek.

Her grandfather died in his sleep that night.

Hermione couldn't remember much from that time period. If anyone asked her how her grandfather died, she wouldn't be able to tell them. But she could tell them that she remembered her father not breaking down in front of anyone in public.

But there was one thing she could remember with such vivid detail that it was like it had been imprinted upon her mind.
It was two nights after her grandfather's funeral. She'd fallen asleep on the couch, watching the
telly. Late at night, she'd woken up, gathered her blanket to her, and trudged down the hall towards
her room. Her parents' bedroom door was open. She glanced inside.

Richard was sitting on the edge of the bed beside Hermione's mother, Elizabeth. He was hunched
over, shoulders shaking as he sobbed openly into his hands, the normally stoic man having
completely crumbled. Elizabeth was beside him, the strongest of guardians, with her hand rubbing
circles on his upper back. She was murmuring something that reminded Hermione of the way her
mother comforted her after her nightmares.

It was at that moment that Hermione realized her father was a human being, and not just a moniker
for provider and warrior of the family. He was real. He lived, and he breathed, and he laughed, and
he wept. And when he wept, his wife, whom he loved so much, was right there to hold him upright.

Loss was something Hermione understood. It was something she knew well. It rose and set with
her, like the sun as the Earth traversed the universe.

She knew loss intimately, like she knew the network of faint green veins that criss-crossed their
way up the backs of her hands. She'd studied her veins as she wrote essay after essay in Hogwarts,
watching them fade into the flesh of her tawny beige skin. When she read books, she watched the
way they moved with her fingers as they trailed under sentences, as though they were the only web
of life that was holding her together.

Hermione held Draco while he shook and forced back sobs. He was just like her father, trying to be
strong for reasons known only to him. Even though there were so many things going on between
them, so many arguments that they had had, Hermione would never forget what her mother had
done for her father all those years ago.

She'd just held him.

_Breathe,_ she thought to him, hoping off-chance that he could hear. _You have to breathe, or you will
pass out._

His answer was to gasp aloud as though he were coming up for air only to be pulled back under.

She kept her arms wrapped tight around him, pressing herself so firm against his back that it was as
though she were trying to absorb him. To absorb all the anguish because she knew how to cope
with it. She'd been doing it for so long that she just wanted to take it all away from him, and she
didn't want to think about all the nasty words they'd spat at one another this past month.

Draco remained on the floor with his knees pulled up to his chest, his elbows on his kneecaps, and
his fingers tangled in his hair. He was panting for breath, his chest seeming to spasm as he fought
for air.

Hermione knew that feeling well, too. The panic and anxiety he was probably feeling, knowing
that his mother was never going to open her eyes again. That everything he had done to try to save
her had been for nothing. That no amount of running, hiding, or fighting had been enough to keep
her alive.

He did not cry, but this was just as palpable.

And just when she thought he might burst into tears, she felt one of his hands dropping to cover her
fingers. He squeezed tight. So tight that she worried he'd break them. She closed her eyes against
the pain.
You can take it from me, she thought, hoping he heard. Whatever you need.

There was no reply, but she felt the gentlest whisper of a cold air against the front of her mind. Then, as soon as she registered it, it was gone.

Lucius wept himself into catatonia. Hermione had never heard weeping that sounded so anguished. It made her eyes sting, but she knew she couldn't let herself fall apart. She didn't have the right. Lucius was weeping over his wife, the love of his heart and the woman he had married. Hermione had no right to thieve from his grief.

When his sobs finally tapered off to deep, pained breaths, and even Draco's breathing had calmed, Hermione realized that it was quiet. Too quiet.

Narcissa had taken the only light with her, and now it was dark.

The seconds ticked on into minutes. They all sat in the silence and emptiness of death for so long that Hermione's knees began to ache and her calves went numb from sitting on them. She held tight still, taking warmth from his body island hoping that he was doing the same.

Draco had since let go of her hands. He had folded his arms on his knees so he could bury his head in them. Hermione wished she could see into his mind, to see how he was feeling. To see what he needed exactly.

There was a chance that he would never say what he needed aloud. There was a chance that he would bottle it up, like he seemed to do with everything else. That meant that it was up to Hermione to take control. It was up to her to be strong and fight for him and for Lucius - yes, Lucius - in spite of everything that had happened because if she didn't, the entire house would fall to ruin.

They were all she had, in a morbid way, and she was a Gryffindor. She would never put herself ahead of anyone else. She would always put the people around her first.

Extricating her arms from around Draco's torso, she stood.

Draco's head snapped up. He looked pale and haunted, even in the darkness of the corridor. Hermione almost felt like she was looking into the eyes of a ghost, like she was seeing right through him into his center.

"Where are you going?" he whispered.

Hermione tucked a stray curl behind her ear. "First, I'm going to get you and Lucius both blankets. Then, I'm going to take your wand and use it to call a Healer with my Patronus. It's faster than an owl." If I can even still manage one after this long without magic.

Draco nodded, his gaze falling. "Quickly."

More words hung unspoken in the air between them, dangling off the edge of a cliff Hermione didn't yet understand.

I need you.

Hermione nodded, turned, and dashed off to her room. She knew a blanket wasn't a lot, but it was only the first thing she'd have to do these next few days. She knew things were going to be tough. She grabbed her coverlet off of her bed and then went to the room beside it.
Draco's.

The door hadn't disappeared, so she assumed he was the one who had to make it do so. She hesitated for a brief moment. She was about to walk into his bedroom. It was more than a little overwhelming.

Inside she went, aiming straight for his bed. It was dark, but after a quick glance around, she saw that it looked very Victorian, with heavy gossamer curtains and a black chandelier. There was a lot of furniture, a fireplace, a four poster bed, and armchairs. The carpet was much softer and thicker underfoot than the carpeting in the other parts of the Manor. If she could describe his room in one word, it would be "cozy."

Not at all what she expected from Draco Malfoy.

She pushed aside the curtains on his bed, her gaze washing over the coverlet. She touched it. It was satin. Massive in size.

Why did she feel so weird about this?

"Hermione."

Hermione's eyes widened. He'd said her first name. When he'd seen his mother, he'd said her first name. Years and years of calling her Granger, and the first time he used her first name was in his most open, painful moment.

What did it mean?

Pulling the blanket with her, she walked backward until it came off. Then, dragging both of the coverlets along, she returned to the hallway outside of Narcissa's room.

Draco was still sitting on the floor with his knees up, staring blankly into the room. Lucius was lying on the bed with Narcissa's body, his arms wrapped around her and his leg hooked over hers. Hermione's heart wrenched with pity.

She went to him first.

Taking her coverlet, she tossed it over the two of them. Lucius barely stirred. Hermione couldn't look at his face for longer than a second. His eyes were closed, but he looked to be silently crying in his despair. It was too much, with everything between them. But she understood.

Then, she went back to where she'd left Draco's comforter in the hall. She glanced at him as she passed. He was sitting cross-legged now. His face was blank. More than blank. It was the vastness of space between every star, that bleak, cold emptiness that stretches for too far to fathom.

He looked defeated.

She grabbed the coverlet and came around to kneel in front of him. She wrapped it around his shoulders, pulling it tight until only his head poked out from the top of it. Her mother had done this for her when she was a young girl when she was sitting on the floor, whether it was to watch the telly or to read. Hermione knew how comforting it was to be enveloped.

"Is your wand in your room?" she whispered as she stood, not wanting to disturb Lucius. "I can -"

Draco's hand shot out and he snatched her wrist. Hermione let out a small cry of shock. In one movement, without looking at her, he pulled her down into his lap inside the blanket. She went
rigid in her surprise, even as he pulled the blanket around them both. His arms slid around her waist and held her close, with her arms crushed against his chest and her head slightly higher to the left of his.

Hermione took a breath. She could feel the softness of his hair as he ducked his head, resting it on her shoulder and the curve of her neck. He inhaled so deeply that she felt his chest swelling. His body was warm, made even warmer by the blanket surrounding them. She felt his heartbeat slowing down and hers speeding up, like she was taking his panic and his woe and making it a part of herself.

He was shaking.

Hermione's compassion kicked in again and she wrapped her arms around his neck. One of her hands pressed against his head by his ear; the other combed through the hair at the top of his head.

_I need more time._ His voice in her head was muted. Flat.

She supposed they could wait a little longer to call the Healer.

They sat there for a period of time, Hermione resting her cheek atop Draco's head. She melted against his body, curling up in his lap and stroking his hair until he was calm.

For a moment, she felt like they were still at Hogwarts. Sixteen or seventeen, huddled up together in a blanket under a dark sky void of light.

It was the strangest thing.

For the first time in years, she felt like Hermione Granger again.

---

It took a little bit, but Hermione was finally able to get up to go collect Draco's wand.

She tried a few times to cast a Patronus in Draco's room, but none of her memories seemed to work. She felt sad. Had things in her life really gotten so bad that she couldn't even cast a wisp of blue?

_You know_, her thoughts had whispered to her when she'd given up on the Patronus. _You could hex both of them right now and run._

But even as she entertained the thought for the briefest of seconds, she just couldn't do it. She didn't want to. The thought of leaving now, with so many things unresolved was nightmarish. If she left now, she'd always wonder what the truth was. Something inside of her told her that it would be something that Draco would never forgive.

Hermione wasn't sure why she would need his forgiveness, nor why that would keep her from running. She just knew that she wasn't leaving.

_Not yet._

_Perhaps an owl would be best after all_, Hermione thought.

She went back to Narcissa's room after that, and knelt beside Draco again. She tapped him on the shoulder and he gave her a bleary-eyed look.

"You'll have to do it," she whispered, pushing back her forlorn feelings. Not being able to cast a Patronus was nothing compared to losing your mother, and she knew that. "Or send an owl."
"Later," he mumbled, their fingers brushing for an extended moment as he took his wand from her.

She offered him the first genuine smile she'd given him in weeks. "Later, let's take care of this, yeah?"

His eyes searched hers like he was seeing for the first time. "Together?"

Still smiling, Hermione nodded. "Together."

They decided to leave Lucius alone with Narcissa for a couple more hours while they tried to get some more sleep and prepare for a trying day. Draco paused at his open doorway, still clutching his blanket around his shoulders. He looked like an overgrown version of his younger self.

Hermione looked to him, her hand on her doorknob. "Did you need anything? I can get you water?"

His brows twitched together for a moment before he shook his head. Then, he averted his eyes. "You . . . Left your coverlet. You don't have anything to sleep under."

Hermione shrugged. "It's nearly Summer. I'll be all right."

He bit his lower lip, peering into his room and then back at her. "Did you want to . . . I mean, my bed is quite large."

Hermione held her breath. Her blood rushed in her ears and her throat went dry.

"You mean," she said, clearing her throat, "share?"

He gave her a short nod.

Hermione tilted her head to the side. "You could just Transfigure me a blanket."

He looked away. "You know that's not the same."

They stared across the distance at each other. It felt like they were challenging each other in some strange way. Even now, hours after his mother had passed, they were still playing the same game they'd been playing since the beginning.

Because what if it wasn't just sharing a bed for him? What if he was looking for solace?

Hermione wanted to help him, but that wasn't what she'd had in mind right now.

And yet it would be a small price to pay in return for the things he'd done for her. When she took her anger and set it aside, she could see that not only had he rescued her from a wyvern and werewolf attack, but he'd given her a safe place to live where she had a bed, nice clothing, a full stomach, and all the books she could dream of.

She still had questions, and they still had things to work through, but he needed her.

"Okay," she said.

Draco watched her as she padded up to him, and then he turned and walked into the room. Hermione felt a slight spark of amusement. She had to wait for the blanket to trail by before she could follow. There was something so strangely domestic and un-posh about an aristocratic Pureblood wizard like Draco Malfoy trundling about with a giant coverlet around his shoulders.

He pulled the blanket off and reached to pull his bed curtains open. Using his wand to settle the
coverlet back onto the bed, he prepared it for them to sleep in. Hermione stood off to the side, watching him work with her hands clasped behind her back.

She was glad she'd worn leggings and a large shirt to bed. If she'd been wearing a camisole, awkward would have been an understatement. Especially given what had occurred between them in the clearing, and in her room.

He climbed in first and slid over, running his fingers through his hair and yawning. Hermione went next, tentative and slow as she took her place beside him. It was the most comfortable bed she'd ever laid in and the moment she relaxed back against the extravagant number of silk-covered pillows, she felt the sleepiness starting to settle in.

She looked over at him, but he was already lying curled up on his side, his back to her.

It was easier to drift off after that.

The day passed slowly.

Hermione woke before Draco, rising from an unmemorable dream. He was still in the position he'd been in the night before, curled on his side. She pulled the curtains aside and sunlight filtered in, illuminating his back. She hadn't realized how dark it was with them drawn.

It took a gentle, jostling hand on his shoulder to wake him. When he opened his eyes, he looked unwell. It was like his eyelids weighed ten tons each. Like he couldn't see any point in waking up when someone he loved would never wake again. It was a bit jarring to see him looking so human when she'd spent so long thinking of him as a monster.

Hermione knew that feeling, too.

The morning was spent waiting for the Healer, Aurors, the *Prophet* reporters, and the executor to come to the Manor. The Healer would be coming to make the confirmation. Aurors would take Lucius' statement and collect the body. The reporters would collect the official death announcement and then the executor would read the will.

All before lunch.

Draco was in muted, dampened spirits. Lucius was stoic and his eyes were blank. Both dressed in formal wizarding robes, looking dark and dreary. They took to the sitting room downstairs to wait for the guests by the Floo.

During that time, Hermione went to the kitchens to try and take stock of everything that was inside of the pantry and the refrigeration room. It was almost laughable to her that their refrigeration was as archaic as a Catholic nunnery in 1970's Romania, but she wasn't surprised. Pureblood wizards lived their lives steeped in ideals from the past.

Draco had given her his wand to use for the day, so she used it to help make a quick, light breakfast for them all.

*Just run.* The thought continued to wiggle at the back of her mind, all through the morning. *Just take the wand and run.*

But she couldn't bring herself to do it. It felt wrong and cruel.

She used the wand again to float the wizards' plates and silverware into the sitting room. Lucius sat
on one end of one black chaise and Draco stood near the window. While Lucius looked shrunken and frail, Draco's presence seemed to fill the room with regality. He was gazing out at the peacocks on the estate with his arms crossed over his chest and his hair swept back away from his forehead.

"Here is some breakfast, Lucius," Hermione said, her tone soft. She tried not to focus on the way he'd treated her, and instead let her compassionate nature drive her. She held the plate out to him with one hand, using the other to hold the wand and keep Draco's plate afloat.

Draco turned his head away from the window, watching Hermione.

"Hm?" Lucius blinked and then looked up at her, appearing disoriented. He gave her a strange, twitchy smile. "Yes. Well, then. On the table, please. Thank you, Miss Granger."

Hermione felt sad as she floated his plate to the table, where she suspected it would not get eaten. If Lucius was showing gratitude without even the slightest hint of malice in his tone?

Narcissa had taken him with her.

She returned the smile with a polite one of her own and then went to Draco's side. She floated the plate into his waiting hands. His expression was unreadable, but no less intense than usual.

"Can you eat?" she asked, lowering her voice.

He gave a nod. "I'll try."

They stared at each other, like they had that morning. Hermione thought back to their cold war. It felt silly now, when she looked back on it. All of it felt like such an immature waste of time. But it wasn't that long ago that Hermione was the one on the receiving end of questions on hunger.

They'd both treated each other horribly. She'd been a brat for refusing to eat just because he was asking. He'd been cruel for trying to force it or starve her out. The only way they were going to overcome the animosity was for Hermione to put it on the back of her broom for a little bit.

She wasn't going to forget all of the things she didn't trust about him, but she would agree to put them on hold.

"If you can't, it's all right," she said, offering him the same polite smile that she'd given Lucius.

He tilted his head to the side as he looked down at her, and said nothing.

She went back to the kitchen to eat her own breakfast alone.

While the Prophet reporters were here, taking statements and snapping photos, Hermione thought it was best to stay upstairs. The slight hope that even just one of her friends was alive kept her aware of the fact that if anyone knew that she was living safe and sound in the Malfoy Manor, they'd be enraged with betrayal.

She didn't quite know what to do, so she went into Draco's room to make the bed. It made sense, since she'd slept in it. She set the wand down, wanting the effort to take up more time. When she was done with that, she looked around and noticed with surprise that Draco's room was actually quite messy. It was mostly clothing and accessories like belts and shoes, but it was a mess nonetheless.

It was almost eerie, being upstairs and knowing that Narcissa lay dead in her room. There would be
no more trips back and forth from the potions lab to her room. No more reasons to forage. No more reasons to keep the moonflowers. All of her research, fruitless though it was, meant nothing now.

*I'll just have to hold onto them,* she thought with a sigh. *For later.*

And Draco had been right about one thing yesterday.

She would never get to have answers about the fall of Wicklow Sanctuary, and there was nothing she could do about it except let it go.

While she was picking up the mess on Draco's floor, putting it in a neat pile in the center of his bed, she heard voices coming up the stairs. Lucius, a female Healer, and a couple of men she didn't recognize. She didn't focus on them. They were the Aurors, so she already knew why they were here.

She stood out of sight in Draco's room, holding a jumper of his in her hands while she tried not to be discovered. The Dark Lord knew about her, but that didn't mean he'd be okay with her picture and name being splayed all over the news tomorrow. Especially when he was still deciding what to do with them.

*What are the chances that Narcissa would pass today, before we get summoned?* Hermione thought as the crack of the Aurors DisApparating with Narcissa's body reached her ears. *At least she didn't have to watch her son die.*

The executor arrived after lunch.

He, along with Draco and Lucius, went into Lucius' study to do the reading of Narcissa's will. Hermione went in five minutes or so after they took their seats. Lucius had conjured two armchairs before his desk, and the executor was in one of them. Draco was in the other, and Lucius sat in his own chair behind the desk. Lucius kept his hands clasped on the desktop, his face sad yet impassive while Draco maintained a stoic, cold appearance.

Hermione set the tea tray that she had prepared down on a table by the door, interrupting the executor's train of speech.

"Is this . . . ?" The executor, a tall, thin man with an equally thin beard said. "Your wife, Mr. Malfoy?"

Draco answered. "No, but she can stay."

As Hermione began preparing the teacups, she feigned disinterest at the pregnant pause.

The executor cleared his throat. "Well, sir, typically, the will can only be read in the presence of family members."

"She's family," Lucius said, his tone clipped. "She can stay."

Hermione nearly dropped the lid to the sugar dish. Had Lucius just . . . Called her family? She gulped, her hands trembling as she tried to focus.

"Is she a sister, or perhaps a cousin?" the executor replied.

"She is family," Draco said this time, his tone firm. "Please, continue."

Hermione thought her heart might come out of her throat. She didn't know how they could consider
her family when to be honest, they'd all treated each other horribly. Draco and Hermione bickered, Draco and Lucius rowed, and Lucius had literally beaten Hermione.

Yet here she was, cooking for them and ensuring that they were taken care of and supported in their grief. Like a friend, or a family member.

She didn't know how she felt about this new development.

The executor finally continued, and Hermione focused on the tea. For Lucius, she had no idea what he liked and he hadn't eaten breakfast or lunch, so she wasn't sure he would even drink it. She went with simple for him, just in case: one sugar cube and one drop of cream.

Draco was a different story.

He was the type to give her Hell for it later if she got it wrong, so this was going to take some contemplation. She quirked her lips and thought hard. Would he like two sugars? Three? Did he want honey or milk? She looked at the tray filled with all the necessary ingredients.

Draco was not a sweet person on the outside, but the way he'd always seemed unable to not care for her when she needed it showed her he had a softer side. The way he'd cared for her after her accidental poisoning, the way he held her hand in the forest so she wouldn't trip, and the fact that he'd given her so many apology gifts that actually seemed to have some thought behind them.

He was salty on the outside, sweet on the inside. Therefore, he probably liked sweets like candy and tarts, things like that. She put three lumps of sugar into the cup and stirred until it dissolved.

Hermione looked to the milk and cream. Draco was thoughtful in the sense that he seemed to think a lot more deeply than he looked on the outside. But he was emotional and built thin walls up that could never possibly hold, giving and giving and giving until he broke. That much was evidenced by the fact that he'd taken all those rounds of the Cruciatuus just to keep her role in Carrow's death a secret.

Milk was lighter, airier than cream. Cream was thick and filled all the empty spaces of a liquid until it became something a little more hearty. Draco definitely liked milk.

Hermione gave herself the same sort of determined nod she used to give herself when she was sure she'd found the correct answer on an exam in History of Magic or Arithmancy, and she tipped the milk into the tea. She didn't put too much - he wasn't that emotional. Not like Ron, whose anger was a bit more explosive, or Harry, who made decisions with his heart and not his head.

She paused.

The person who was sitting in that chair right now? That was a person who had lost his mother. A person who had just watched his father sob uncontrollably over her dead body, and who had possessed the self-awareness to ask Hermione to share his bed because he didn't want to be alone. That person deserved some cream, too.

She added three drops of cream, stirring it into the mixture until it became a pale beige color.

It was ready.

Using the wand and her peripheral vision, she delivered the tea to Lucius first, and then to Draco second. She didn't turn around, not wanting the executor to recognize her, so she was unsure what they were going to think. Once it was delivered, she gathered up the tray and headed for the door.
As she left, she felt ice in her mind. Draco's voice came in her head.

Swot.

Later that night, Hermione decided to go check on Lucius.

It didn't make any sense why she would want to, but she couldn't get the sounds of his sobbing out of her head. It had humanized him in her mind and even though she didn't forgive him, she was not cold-hearted. She would help get both Malfoy men through the day, or the week, or whatever it was they needed, and she would be glad to do it.

Compassion was not a weakness; holding grudges was.

Draco was in the gym and had been in there for hours. Hermione had left him alone, only intruding to leave a plate of dinner on the bench by his water. He was fighting the dummy so violently, so passionately, that Hermione didn't have the heart to remain in the room. The clanging and clashing of the sabres followed her out, like a cacophony of sadness mingled with anger and defeat.

She knew he probably felt like he'd failed, she just didn't know if it was her place to address it.

She knocked on the door to Lucius' study.

"Lucius?" she said, voice tentative. "Would you like some dinner?"

There was silence, but Hermione heard the fire crackling in the hearth inside. It was only a few moments before he bid her enter, and then she was stepping into the room.

"Come sit for a spell, won't you?" he drawled from the armchair. He sat in it with one leg crossed over the other, a glass goblet in his right hand, and his chin propped in the palm of his left.

Hermione hesitated. There was a chair across from his by the fire as well, but she wasn't so sure it was a good idea. What if he was back to his old self already? She didn't think she could take any negativity on today of all days, especially with how much she'd helped them.

"I would just like to speak with you," Lucius said with a sigh, tearing his eyes away from the fire. "Please."

With some reservation, Hermione slowly made her way to the chair. She sat down on the very front edge of it, perching with no desire to settle in. "What did you want to talk about?"

"I apologize," he said, his grey eyes piercing across the firelight at her, "for my actions."

Hermione stilled. She didn't know what to say. She hadn't expected this.

He went on, "I don't know what else I can say, Miss Granger. Only that I am deeply sorry for the way that I treated you. You have shown all the grace and character of a Pureblood witch today with your kindness and decorum, and I do believe that neither I nor my son deserve it."

Hermione averted her eyes. How much could it really mean if he still held the same ideals about Muggle-borns?

"And, Miss Granger, I know that you may never forgive me. I'm not asking for your forgiveness, nor your understanding. But as a gift to my wife, I thought it would be best that we speak. However, I knew that would not be possible until I apologized."
Hermione pursed her lips, biting her tongue. She wanted to call him out for apologizing for reasons other than feeling guilty, but her curiosity was too great.

"Did Narcissa have something she wanted me to know?" Hermione said, her hands curved tight over her kneecaps atop the fabric of her dress.

Lucius took a sip of his liquor. "Yes. She did."

Hermione leaned forward with eagerness. "What did she say? Did she say it before - when she -" Lucius interrupted. "Yes, this is something I have known for a long time. I was not a part of it, but I have kept it hidden out of love for my wife. Had I known that she would not . . . " He closed his eyes and Hermione saw the grief flickering across his brow. When he opened his eyes again, they were glassy. "I would have told you when you first arrived."

Hermione gritted her teeth to stop them from chattering. She waited until he continued.

"I knew my wife was a member of the Order of the Phoenix," he said, gazing into the fire once again. "I knew she had joined in Draco's Sixth Year to award him extra protection, but I declined to pay any attention to it. I knew that the Dark Lord could look into my mind quite easily. You see, it is the Black side of the family that excels in Occlumency. I used all of my power just to keep the knowledge hidden. My fear of the Dark Lord's retribution was too great.

"However, by the end of the war, she was a full-fledged member. Any secrets that - as we now know - Severus did not share, she shared. And when the Order fell and Pot -" He stopped, shooting her a look that she could only describe in awe as respectful. ". - Harry Potter was killed, it was discovered that she betrayed the Dark Lord in a way that could not be forgiven. Hence the reason why he knew that Harry was alive in the courtyard."

Hermione sucked in her breath. "What?"

"Narcissa was distraught," Lucius said, his voice choking slightly. "She and I both had received no word from Draco in hours. We had thought that he was hurt, or worse. And so when Harry came down to the forest, after the Dark Lord called upon him, her wits were not about her. She leaned down to listen to his heartbeat and when she realized that he was still breathing, she whispered and asked him if Draco was alive. Harry nodded. And when he nodded, the Dark Lord heard her thoughts. He knew then that he'd been usurped, and that Narcissa had failed him."

Hermione felt her heart sinking. That's why the plan hadn't worked. That was why the Dark Lord knew about the stone. He'd pieced it together. If Harry was still alive after the Killing Curse, that automatically meant that he had the Philosopher's Stone somewhere on his person. Anyone with knowledge of Alchemy would know that.

It wasn't Narcissa's fault, but she had caused the end of the war.

Lucius kept speaking.

"That is why Narcissa continued to assist the Order, even after the war was over. She helped as many people as she could without the Dark Lord's knowledge. She honed her Occlumency to a point where her mind was an impenetrable fortress. She was able to keep the Dark Lord from finding the information in my mind, even. She delivered as many people as she could to the sanctuary and when the Dark Lord found out, he was livid."

"And the Dark Lord didn't punish her? For lying?" Hermione asked, her mind spinning and reeling.
"He did. At first, he forgave her aloud for lying about Harry for love of her son. But I don't believe he ever did forgive her. When Narcissa was discovered Apparating to Scotland to deliver more to the sanctuary, she was punished."

"How?"

Lucius looked at her. "He cursed her. That is why you are here, is it not?"

Hermione could feel her mood changing. Something didn't sound right. "When?"

"Directly after it happened. It was a slow-moving curse that eventually caught up to her." Lucius swirled his drink, staring into the fire with a forlorn expression. "And now, it has finally taken her."

Hermione stared at the floor, panic increasing the pace of her breath.

The sanctuary fell in July of 2002.

Hermione had arrived in January of 2004.

Draco had told her his mother was cursed in December of 2003.

*This was why it seemed like he didn't care what happened to his mother one we're summoned to Buckingham.*

*He knew definitively that Narcissa was doomed from the beginning.*

Her hands curled into tight, clenching fists.

*He lied to me. Again.*

"Why would Draco wait this long to bring me here?" Hermione asked, her voice strained. "If he wanted to save his mother, why would he wait to enlist my help?"

Lucius gave her a strange, cautious look. "You'll have to ask him yourself, Miss Granger. The curse that the Dark Lord used was not of this Earth. He has . . . Power. Unimaginable power. And the curse was incurable."

Hermione felt faint. So that was why Lucius had been so hateful to her. Narcissa wasn't going to live. Lucius knew that. Draco knew that. They'd both just entertained a Muggle-born in their house for reasons unknown to her. In Lucius's eyes, her feeding a useless potion to his wife was mocking to him.

*Why would Lucius let me live in his house if I was essentially pouring nothing down her throat twice a day?*

"I held hope," Lucius said, as if sensing her thoughts. His eyes were bright. "I held hope that you could be the answer. I do not know what thoughts my son has going through his head, but what I do know is that he truly believed in your ability to save her. As for why he didn't bring you here sooner, I am unsure. But you must know . . ."

He downed the rest of his liquor, as if he needed it to say his next words.

"When Draco cares about something, he cares fiercely," he said, tone clipped again as he held Hermione's gaze. "Ferociously, like a dragon. He would not have done any of this for no reason. Please understand that."
He stood and walked toward her, holding his hand out. When she just stared at him, he gave her an encouraging nod. After a moment, she placed her hand upon his in a delicate manner. His skin was worn and leathery, contrasting greatly with the smoothness of the rest of his appearance. He pulled her to her feet.

"Thank you for saving my son," he said, searching her eyes. "If it weren't for you, Carrow would have killed him. And, please. Take care of his heart. It's too big for his own good."

He let go of her hand and left the study.

Hermione stood there for a long time, painstakingly creating a new box in her mind for her anger at Draco Malfoy and his constant barrage of lies.

Chapter End Notes

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Chapter Summary

TRIGGER WARNING: implied off-screen suicide. And some smut. And someone leaves, but not for good; they will return in Part Two.

One more chapter, and then Part One is complete!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Hermione looked everywhere for Draco.

He'd left the gym at some point and was nowhere to be found. She wasn't going to yell at him or anything. In fact, she wasn't even going to bring what Lucius had told her up. She just wanted to
find him and look him in the eyes.

After that, she had no idea what she was going to do.

She wouldn't dare make today about her. No, not even if she was that angry. She had no desire to.

But everything was just so fucked.

When Draco found her in Paris, he'd had to convince her to come with him. She was in a completely terrible state, having just watched three loved ones die so abruptly after being reunited with them for over one year. She'd felt like she had no other option. Draco was familiar and she'd been so close to giving up that she just believed whatever he told her. She believed him when he said his mother was "sick."

Hermione understood dark curses. She understood potions.

What she did not understand was why Draco would have her make a potion that he knew wouldn't work by specifically telling her that the curse it was being used to treat was curable. Why would he lie and tell her Narcissa had been recently cursed? Why would he wait until she'd been cursed for nearly two years with a slow-killing dark curse from some other random dimension?! What if the curse could have been cured in the beginning? And if it couldn't, then why did Draco feel like her time was that worthless?

To spend weeks - no, months tipping a vial down her throat that did nothing? Bollocks.

She stopped on the stairs, taking a breath to calm herself. No. She wasn't going to let herself be angry with him today. Not today. Not even this week.

Into the box it went.

Hermione let her anger ebb and she took another steadying breath.

There was nothing that could be done about it now. It was already late.

She went back down to the library. Lucius had left, so at least maybe if she read in peace, she could calm herself down. Besides, there was nothing that she needed to talk about with Draco right now.

It could wait.

O

The next day passed in a blur of people and cooking.

Hermione made sure three meals were made for them throughout the day, even though Lucius barely picked at his food. Draco ate, but he seemed distracted. She ate all of her meals in the kitchen by herself, finding that it was actually quite nice being in that room all alone. Since it was a House Elf area, the architecture wasn't as extravagant as the rest of the Manor.

It reminded her a little of the Burrow.

She hadn't realized that the Malfoy family was as connected as they were until she saw just how many people came to pay their respects and offer condolences. Any time a wizarding family came calling at the Floo, Hermione took it upon herself to hide upstairs. Maybe when she was younger, before everything had fallen apart, she would have stayed and faced them all. But now? The last
thing she wanted to do was alert the Dark Lord to any form of recklessness.

The slight chance that he might not actually execute them was enough for her to march herself upstairs anytime she heard a *whoosh*.

"We decided not to have a funeral," Draco told her when she brought him dinner in the lab on the first night. He took it from her and set it on the table, his other hand scrawling notes on his parchment. Hermione caught a glimpse of it and saw that his handwriting was much like his room: surprisingly unkempt.

"Oh?" she said, stepping back to give him - and herself - space.

"She wouldn't have wanted it," he said, tone flat. "A funeral attended by the Dark Lord? She would have argued against it. She loved Italy, so we're going to . . ."

When he trailed off, Hermione peered at him. The pulse in his throat was jumping. His jaw clicked.

Hermione lowered her gaze, feeling a bit embarrassed.

He finally said, "We're Portkeying there tomorrow morning to spread her . . . She loved the Arno River, so that's where we'll be."

"All right," Hermione said, handing him his wand back. "Did you need me to do anything?"

He shook his head and then stopped. He set his quill down, looked at the food, and then looked at her. For some reason, she felt like his gaze was clearer than normal.

"Why are you doing all of this?"

Hermione blinked, her eyes wide. "Because you . . . Need me to?"

He stared at her. "Did I ask for it?"

Her heart twinged like it stung. "No, but -"

"Then don't assume that I'm incapable of taking care of myself," he said, his eyes narrowing. "If I recall, you don't give a flying fuck about me or my father. Or did you forget the vitriol you've spouted to me for the past three months?"

Hermione felt speechless. She wanted to be angry, wanted to yell and start a row, but she couldn't. His mother had just passed. She knew that grief could make a person do cruel things. She didn't want to lash out in return, and then have any regrets about herself.

She darted forward to take the plate. "Let me know if you need anything else."

As she turned to go, she heard him scowling.

"Granger, wait -"

She hurried out of the lab and spent the rest of the evening in her bedroom.

A little before she finally turned in for the night, she left to use the loo. As she was walking down the hall, she glanced at Draco's bedroom door. It was closed, but visible. He hadn't hidden it.

She wondered if he wanted her to come in again?
Forget it, she thought, feeling bitter. *He can't open that jar of worms, and then expect me to come sleep in his bed. Not happening.*

When she went to her bedroom, she laid on her side under the blanket she had transfigured for herself earlier that afternoon. She stared out the window at the stars, wondering what was going to happen next.

O

The following day, Draco and Lucius were gone for a long time.

It was nearing 10:00PM before they returned home via Portkey. They appeared in the front entryway right as Hermione was on the landing at the top of the staircase. She stopped, her heart jumping at their sudden appearance.

"You frightened me," she said while they marched up the stairs.

They were both dressed formally in black, and the expressions on their faces were unpleasant. Sour. The air was tense. It was clear they'd been having it out. Hermione stepped aside to let them pass her.

Draco suddenly stopped two steps above her and whirled, causing her stomach to flip over with shock and unavoidable nervousness.

"What happened between the two of you in February?" he said, sounding more than a little angry. When Hermione stood there with her jaw hanging open, he raised his voice. "What - happened - in the corridor - with the House Elf Wormsling?!

Oh.

"What?" Hermione's gaze slid to Lucius. He looked away from her and she didn't think she'd ever seen the great Malfoy patriarch look so ashamed of himself.

"No, don't look at him," Draco snarled, stepping into her line of sight. "The night that I was bitten, the night you two worked *together* to sew me up, what happened?"

Hermione opened her mouth. The words died on her lips. She hadn't wanted to say anything in the first place out of fear, but as time had gone on, she'd thought it was better to leave it in the past. What purpose would it have served for Draco to know? She didn't even know how to say it, let alone explain it.

Had Lucius *told* him?

*Why?*

Draco put his hands on his hips, towering over her as he yelled into her speechlessness, enraged.

"*What the fuck happened between you two?!*

Hermione felt her own anger rising. "Apparently, you already know! Why should I have to go over it again? Why should I have to explain it?"

His eyes flashed, his temper as dangerous as a bolt of lightning. "Get over here. *Now.*"

"What?"
Draco let out a growl of frustration. He hooked his hand around the back of her neck, dragging her closer. She yelped as she stumbled up a step, her hands pressing flat against his chest to keep distance. Their eyes locked.

Ice.

And then he was in.

Legilimency was not a precise art for anyone other than Tom Riddle and Draco Malfoy. Draco's magic rifled through the corridors of her mind, sifting through boxes of memories as though he were storming an office. Hermione could tell he wasn't trying to hurt her, but the invasion was so uncomfortable that she struggled in his hold and whimpered. It was all she could do to keep him from finding the boxes she'd created most recently and even with those, it was clear that he saw her trying to hide them.

Please don't find Cillian, she thought to herself. Please, please don't find him.

She shoved the box with the memory of the night Lucius beat her forward. Draco ripped into it, viewing the images and scenes with growing ire. The frost in her mind intensified, until she cried out aloud from the freezing pain.

"Do you realize how worthless you are?"

"The mercy my son extends to you is mine to give. Both of you seem to have forgotten that even Zeus himself was beholden to Cronos."

"What will my son do when he finds out I've beaten his little Mudblood toy?"

"Breathe a word of this to your master, and I will avada as you sleep."

Draco slid out of her mind much gentler than he entered it. Hermione felt like his icy magic had reached her blood.

He looked livid.

With his hand still around the back of her neck, he turned slowly to look at his father.

"The mercy you extend," Draco said. "And what mercy was that? The end of your decorative cane?"

"Draco . . ." Lucius said with a sharp, defeated sigh. He held a hand out, gesturing to them. "I apologized to her just last evening. I think that -"

"Your apologies mean nothing," Draco hissed, letting go of Hermione. He started up the stairs with a purpose. Lucius backed up onto the landing with wide, fearful eyes.

Hermione didn't know why she did what she did next. She didn't know if it was because she pitied Lucius, or because he'd apologized to her. She just knew that something bad was going to happen if she didn't.

She darted forward, slipped past Draco, and made it to the landing before Draco did. She placed her hands on his chest again, his body warm beneath hers. She shook her head, giving him a pleading look.

"Please, Malfoy. Just . . . Let it go. It's in the past."
Draco's eyes blazed up at her. "It's in the past?"

"He's apologized," she said. "And your mother has just -"

"Move."

She shook her head. She wouldn't let him hurt his father. Not when that was the only parent he had left. Not when she understood what it was like to lose everyone.

"Move, Granger," Draco snarled. "Or you'll lose those hands."

Hermione pressed her lips firmly together. "No."

Draco's jaw clicked and then his hands were on her waist. She cried out in shock as he lifted her up with ease, walked up the remaining two steps, and set her down out of his way in the same movement.

He lunged for his father.

The two of them struggled. Lucius tried to fight back, but Draco's rage was too great. He spun them around, getting a good grip on the front of Lucius's robes, and began to slam his fist into the center of his face over and over.

Hermione gasped, her hands flying to cover her mouth in horror as blood spurted from Lucius' nose and began to drip down over his mouth and chin.

"Don't you ever - fucking - touch - her again," Draco roared, punctuating the punches with words, and the words with punches. "Don't you ever!"

Lucius could only respond with exclamations of shock and pain. His hands pushed at Draco's chest, but it was as though he had aged twenty years in one day. He was too weak.

Hermione couldn't stand here and watch this. As cruel as Lucius had been, as foul of a man as he may be, he was old. He was old and he had just lost his wife.

Draco had lost his sanity.

"Stoppit!" Hermione shouted, rushing forward and grabbing Draco's elbow as he pulled it back for another blow. He tried to wrench it away, but Hermione held on tight, digging her fingernails in through the fabric of his sleeve. "Stop this, now!"

"Granger, if you don't let go of me -"

"You'll what, Malfoy?" she said, breathless. "You'll beat me, too? Just like you're doing to him now? Just like he did to me?!

He bared his teeth, his eyes wild with fury. He made another attempt to free himself from her grasp, but she refused to allow it. He let go of Lucius' robes and Hermione hurried to insert herself between them. She pushed him back, catching him off guard.

Immediately, he growled and tried to move forward again. They fought for a moment, each pushing this way and the other. But Hermione was through with this. She wasn't going to let the Manor fall into disrepair.

She'd told herself that she was going to help them get through their grief, and that's what she was going to do.
"No! Go -"

"Let go -"

"- into - go into -"

"Move out of my way -"

"- go into your bedroom, now, Draco Malfoy!" she shrieked, shoving him back so hard that he stumbled against the wall beside his door. She glared at him, fists and teeth clenched. "And give me your bloody wand so I can heal him!"

With one final look of contempt, Draco ripped his wand out of his sleeve and tossed it onto the ground.

"If you want it, you can pick it up off of the ground yourself," he hissed.

Lucius stepped forward. "I'm sorry to disappoint you, son. It will never happen again."

"Fuck off, old man," Draco snapped.

Five seconds later, the door to his room had slammed shut.

As Hermione went to the visibly-mortified, wounded Lucius's side, she realized that there were tears in her eyes. The Malfoy family had deteriorated into painful shards of nothing, and all she could think about was the fact that her heart felt broken.

This loss - the sort of loss that could cause you to snap and beat your own father - was a pain that she understood.

Hermione healed Lucius's nose with an *episkey*.

It felt nice to use magic again, nice to feel it flowing through her veins. She cast *scourgify*, and then stepped back away from Lucius.

"Why don't you just leave?" he asked her, smoothing out his hair. "You have his wand. You have free reign of the estate. It would be very simple for you to go."

Hermione fidgeted with the wand between her hands, one hand on the hilt and one hand on the tip. She bit her lower lip and looked down at the carpet.

*Because I want to find out the truth.*

*Because I don't think I'd make it out there alone.*

*Because I can't imagine myself leaving right now.*

*Because the thought of not seeing Draco for one day bothers me, and I have no idea why.*

"I don't know," she said. "I'll let you know when I figure it out."

Lucius gave her a long, unreadable look. For a moment, she thought he might thank her for defending him. Instead, he spoke.

"Do you remember when I told you that my son cares as ferociously as a dragon?"
"Yes," Hermione said quietly.

Lucius's eyes were sad. "Well, he also fights as ferociously as one. He will raze cities to the ground for anyone in his life that means something to him. And he doesn't have many people left to care for. Please, remember that?"

Hermione felt a strange churning in her stomach. She didn't want to reply, but she did.

"I will."

He gave her a nod, and then walked with a straight back to the room that used to be Narcissa's.

*Used to be.*

Hermione cast one final look at Draco's bedroom door. She didn't understand him. Why would he care if she was beaten by his father? Why would he care enough to threaten Lucius? Why would he defend her like property if he didn't see her as property?

It didn't make any sense.

*I don't know what to believe,* she thought, feeling distressed. *He says I'm not his slave, that he doesn't see me as one, but he reacts as though I am. He talks to me as though I am. He's kissed me like I am.*

All she wanted to do was pound on his door and demand answers.

But she couldn't. His mother had just died yesterday.

She took all of her anger, put it into the box, and went to her bedroom with Draco's wand.

*O*

Lucius was gone.

The morning of the third day after Narcissa's death, Hermione saw his cane by the front door. He never left it out anywhere, so she thought that was strange. Typically, he had it by his side.

She walked up to it and picked it up. Inspecting it, she located the curved, silver snake head. She pulled, having remembered seeing him do it at the Battle of Hogwarts.

*Click. Shiick.*

The wand slid out of the wood.

Hermione's brow furrowed with concern. This was abnormal. Why would a wizard leave his wand behind?

Perhaps he was elsewhere in the house?

Hermione wandered through the entire Manor. It was still the early morning, the earliest she'd ever woken on her own since she'd arrived here. As far as she knew, Draco hadn't woken yet. The light that filtered in through the windows was blue, adding to the altogether somber atmosphere in the house. She kept her footsteps light as she searched all the rooms she could, save for the Drawing Room.

That room was a room that no one used.
The study was the last room she checked, and it was empty. She stood in the center of it, chewing on the inside of her cheek.

Something didn't feel right.

Hermione went and sat down on the top of the stairs with Lucius' cane lying across her thighs. She could feel her anxiety rising as each second went by. Her intuition was telling her that something was wrong, but she didn't know how to prove it. She could only hope that Draco took her seriously.

When his bedroom door opened, she hopped to her feet, nearly tripping over the top step. He stepped out, wearing nothing but his pyjama trousers. His facial expression seemed tired, but not angry. Hermione's gaze swept his body and then locked with his own.

"I think something is the matter with your father," she blurted out, holding out the cane with both hands. "He left his wand by the front door."

His eyes hardened. "Let him go wherever he wants. He's likely walking the estate."

Hermione grimaced. Something inside of her told her that he wasn't walking the estate, not without his wand. But Draco was already trudging towards the bathroom, giving her nothing but the muscles of his back to look at.

"Should we go look for him?" she called.

"No."

He shut himself in the bathroom and she heard the shower start running moments later.

She had a bad, bad feeling about this.

The hours passed.

Hermione noticed Draco getting more and more agitated as the day went by. He didn't seem like he wanted to say much to her, but she could tell that his mind was full to the brim with thoughts. There were heavy, dark clouds behind the screens of his eyes. They were hot with the electricity of a brewing storm.

When he was in his lab, she came in to bring him breakfast because she didn't want him to forget.

It felt strange, seeing her table looking so unused after only a couple of days. She'd spent every single day in here since January, and now to come in and have it feel like it was his lab and not the lab was strange. She lingered in the doorway so she could look at it one more time, and then noticed something.

Draco was drawing circles on his parchment, his forehead against his palm and elbow on the tabletop.

Around lunch, he was in the gym sparring with the dummy again. When she entered, he was fighting so hard that sweat was pouring off of his bare torso and he was making a lot of "Hah!" and "Graah!" sounds. He jumped, ducked, and spun, clashing swords with the magical dummy as though it were real.

Their was a loud crashing right as Hermione reached the wall. She turned to look.

He'd smashed the dummy into the wall so hard that it broke.
She set his plate on the bench beside his water. He stopped and turned to look at her, adjusting the sabres in his hands.

"You busy?" he said, breathless.

Hermione shook her head. Perhaps he wanted to go look for his father? "No. Why?"

"Come on, let's spar," he said, nodding his head to her.

Hermione blanched. "No, remember? I don't -"

"Do the activities portion," he said. "Yeah, I remember. That was with them." He held out a foil to her, averting his eyes. "But this is with me, yeah?"

Hermione bit her bottom lip. She'd just watched him pretty much obliterate the magical dummy. He was way better at fencing, or sword fighting, or whatever it was than she would ever be. She had absolutely no idea what she was doing. She was paranoid, to say the least.

But he looked a bit like a small dog, standing there, holding it out to her without looking her in the eyes.

"I suppose I could try it," she said. She glanced down. She was wearing a long, high-waisted skirt and a tee shirt tucked into it today. It wasn't exactly the best sparring outfit, but she had no intention of sparring well, so it would have to do.

Hermione took the sabre from him, pulling a face. "The handle is wet."

"Because I'm sweating, smart one," he said without the hint of a smile on his face. Even his hair was dripping. He looked like he'd been at this for hours. "Here, copy my position."

Hermione spent the next hour with Draco, learning whatever he had to teach her. She wasn't the best at it, but the blade was light and easy to wield. She very quickly found out that all the spinning, jumping tricks that Draco could do were a result of years of training and practice, and not because they were easy. She was able to pick things up rather fast, though, at least when it came to positioning and technique.

She'd always been rather good at that.

As time wore on, however, it seemed that Draco was getting more distracted and his mood was worsening. He stopped going so easy on her. He stopped correcting her form and when he struck a blow, he struck it hard. It wasn't until he quick-stepped forward and slapped her waist with the thin blade so hard that she knew it would bruise, that she realized he wasn't doing okay.

"Malfoy!" she cried, pain blooming on her side as he drew back. She dropped her sabre and clutched at her flesh, hissing.

Draco's face contorted in something akin to remorse and he too dropped his blade. He rushed over, pushing her hands away with his own. They were both covered in sweat, and when he peeled her shirt up to look at her waist, she almost felt like the wetness was disgusting.

Almost.

"Stop! Lemme see, lemme see," he said, grimacing.

They both looked down at the horizontal, reddening welt that was fast darkening there. He reached
out to touch it with his other hand and Hermione whimpered. In spite of the strange chill that rippled along her skin when he did so, it hurt.

"Forgive me," he murmured, some of his damp hair falling forward into his eyes as he ducked a bit to see it better. "I'm not myself today."

Hermione stared at his face, at his sharp jawline, long nose, and the smoothness of his skin. The set of his dark brows over grey eyes flecked with silver. He gave her a lopsided grin as if trying to offer her silent support or understanding, and his pearly-white teeth flashed.

In the beginning, when she'd first gotten here and they'd bantered more often than they bickered, he'd always smiled as though he were sheepish. She hadn't seen that smile in weeks.

_Merlin, he is disturbingly handsome sometimes._

_Most of the time._

_Always._

His fingers trailed across her flesh again, his eyes gazing intently at her body. Hermione felt like he was stealing the breath right out of her lungs. Her arms, which she was holding up out of the way so he could lift her shirt, seemed to have minds of their own.

Hermione may have had poor mental health at the moment, but she was not shy.

She grabbed his face and pulled him down to meet her. Lifting herself onto the tips of her toes, she pressed her lips against his with a desperation she hadn't realized she possessed. She kept one hand against his cheek, wrapping the other around his neck. Coaxing his lips open with her tongue, she kissed him the way she'd wanted to the night she touched herself to the thought of him.

She hoped he could see inside her head right now.

He seemed confused for a moment. Then, he growled against her mouth and grabbed her hips, yanking her up into the air until her feet completely came away from the ground. Something about the possessiveness of his hold awakened a fire within her, and she was on him like a Nargle on mistletoe.

Hermione tilted her head to the side and intensified the sweeping of her tongue, kissing past the sweat and the sighs he was making. Past the grief she knew wracked his body and into the person that lay somewhere beneath it.

His toned arms wrapped completely around her waist, crushing her against him as he tried to keep up with her. It was like the sparring had jumped from sword to tongue, and this time, Hermione was just as skilled as he was.

She was doing this because she wanted to, and she didn't care how sweaty he was.

Then, her mind suddenly cleared.

Draco's mother had just died and his father had been missing without his wand all day.

With a moan of near-anguish, she pulled her lips away. His hair was a disaster and he was looking down at her with kiss-swollen lips and dazed eyes.

"I'm sorry," she squeaked out, dropping back down to the floor. She reached behind her back and
clasped his hands from his arms, freeing her body. "I shouldn't have done that."

He just stared at her, looking bewildered, still panting for breath.

"Um . . . Enjoy your lunch." She turned and walked away as fast as she could.

Hopefully, he would forget that she'd just done that.

O

Hermione found him later in the sitting room upstairs.

Much like Lucius had the night Narcissa died, he was sitting in an armchair and staring into the fireplace. There was no fire in it, though, which made sense since it was June and he was not as old as his father.

She had decided that it was best if she didn't address the kiss again. It was best if she pretended it never happened. If he asked to talk about it - which she doubted he would do since he hadn't last time - then she would just say she didn't want to.

It wasn't entirely clear to her why she'd lost control like that with him, especially since she was the one who was so adamant that he was a Bad Wizard who wanted her to be his slave.

I'm such a hypocrite.

"Did you want dinner?" she asked from the entryway of the room.

"No," he mumbled from behind steepled fingers.

She hesitated. "Should we go look for him?"

He was silent.

She took a step into the dark room. "Malfoy? Did you hear me?"

His eyes snapped to meet hers, his face illuminated by the late afternoon sunlight from the hall. She nearly stepped back.

They were open, revealing a violent pain that made her heart wrench in her chest.

As soon as she spotted it, he looked away. "What did you say?"

"Should we go look for your father?"

"I'll go," he said, and he sounded resigned.

Hermione followed him down the stairs and stopped on the bottom step. He stepped outside into the orange glow of the approaching sunset, casting her one last blank look over his shoulder before he shut the door. She sat down on the step and waited.

The way that Lucius had sobbed was still imprinted on her mind, a memory that she could pull up and watch like a film reel inside of her head. It was awful. She didn't want to think about how Lucius was feeling before the fight, but after Draco had attacked him like that? What if that had been the final nail in the coffin?

Hermione felt a very acute anxiety curling in her gut. Tears of concern pricked at her eyes,
surprising her at her sudden sensitivity.

She couldn't say she hated him anymore. Even though they weren't exactly friends, she couldn't imagine the pain he must be experiencing.

Lucius had been absent for a long time.

Either he had gone to have some time alone to grieve on the estate, or he'd walked off somewhere to die without leaving a note.

She desperately, desperately hoped it wasn't the latter.

She waited for a little while longer, resting her head against the end of the banister. Her heart was pounding so hard that she was struggling to breathe. She closed her eyes and prayed to all of the Gods above that Draco found Lucius. If he found Lucius, she vowed to never bring up the slave thing again. She would just drop it and accept her lot in life, if only they didn't take his father -

The door swung open.

Draco walked in and stopped in front of her.

Schlop.

Hermione looked down at a soaking wet pile of black fabric in front of her.

"He's dead," Draco said, his voice completely devoid of emotion.

"What?" Hermione cried, the tears starting to fill her eyes further.

Draco walked past her and started up the stairs. He did not look back at her. "He went into the pond on the south side of the estate. Didn't come out. Those are his robes."

Lucius was dead. Draco's father was dead. Within days of his mother.

And he still hadn't shed a tear.

"What?!" Hermione shrieked, jumping to her feet and spinning to face the stairs. "Where are you going? We need to - what are we - Draco!"

He stopped on the landing, but still did not turn.

"We need to contact somebody," she said, her voice desperate. "Or at the very least, you need to -"

He whirled on her, glaring down at her. "Don't presume to tell me what I need to do about my family, Granger. My father was a vile, loathsome man who ruined my entire life with his prejudice, cruelty, and cowardice. He is the reason why you are standing there, and I am standing up here. He is the reason why your precious Potter is dead. If it weren't for him, I wouldn't have let the Death Eaters into the castle because I never would have picked the Dark Lord's side."

Before Hermione could think, could process or speak, he was slamming his bedroom door shut again.

She collapsed on the ground, weeping for reasons that didn't make any sense to her.
Hermione woke in her bed when the moon was full and the stars were out.

Confused, she sat up and looked around. How had she gotten here? Last she remembered, she’d wept herself to sleep on the stairs.

Had Draco actually carried her to her bedroom?

She frowned.

From what he’d said, it sounded like he blamed his father for the path he'd chosen. Hermione wondered what that meant, exactly. Was he saying that he wished he would have chosen Harry's side? Or was he saying he just wished he hadn't had to participate at all?

Did that mean that he was happy his father was dead?

That couldn't be possible. It was too . . . He had to love his father, even if only a smidgeon. He had to care for him enough to feel upset over his death.

She felt a lump in her throat again. Bollocks. Her compassion was trying to get the best of her again. It was like it had wiped out all of the feelings that led her to believe she hated him. She still had things she was angry about, locked away in a box label *Malfoy* inside her mind, but that was the problem.

With the hatred gone and the anger locked up, all that remained was lust.

Taking a deep breath, she scrubbed at her face with her hands. Perhaps she should go talk to him. Or at the very least, see if he was all right. He may have been bottling the emotions up. Anyone would be devastated to lose both of their parents, even if they hated one of them.

They could address the kiss later, if need be.

She got out of bed, went to the dresser to put on some appropriate pyjamas, and then stopped to look at herself in the mirror. Her hair was as curly and gravity-defying as usual, but it was simple enough to knot it at the top of her head. She turned, lifting her black tee shirt to look at her side.

The bruise was gone.

Her eyes nearly popped out of her head.

*Draco carried me to bed and treated my wound?*

She closed her hanging jaw and let the shirt fall. He didn't have to do that. Especially not on the day his father had died. Now, she was even more curious how he was doing. It was becoming very difficult to hate him.

Hermione wasn't sure she ever had.

Putting her slippers on, she left her room. His bedroom door was still visible. She wasn't sure if he’d taken to leaving it visible because he wanted her to come in, or if he was just too frazzled with everything going on to remember to charm it to be hidden like he had the entire time she’d lived here.

*Knock, knock, knock.*

She waited, but no answer came. She tried again twice more.
With a sigh, she opened the door and peeked into the dark room.

"Malfoy?" she whispered, walking up to the curtains. "Malfoy, can I -"

The bed was empty.

_Calypso_

Hermione's spirits lifted. Oh, that made perfect sense! He'd gone to see Calypso. Who else would be better for him right now, than her? She wasn't sure if he'd been out to see her since the last time they were there and while the last time had been _interesting_, Hermione just wanted to go out there and make sure he was all right. Seeing Calypso would be wonderful, too, and exactly what they _both_ needed after the last couple of days.

Hermione smiled when she spotted his wand on the bedside table. She recalled Draco telling her that Calypso liked to chew on things, so it made sense that he'd left it behind. The wand would enable her to get through the wards and light her way to the clearing.

Snatching the wooden instrument up, she went back to her room to grab her boots and a jumper to go over her leggings. Then, she headed downstairs.

Pausing by the door to the potions lab, she thought for a moment. Perhaps it might be a good idea to take a drink of some of the _Calming Draught_ on the shelves across the room. It seemed that when she got anxious, she did barmy things like antagonize him or kiss him.

That would _not_ be conducive to the environment.

Once she felt the potion working its magic, she left and made her way to the clearing.

_O_

When Hermione arrived, Draco was alone.

_Calypso_ was missing.

If she hadn't taken the _Draught_, she knew she'd be panicking. Instead, she stood just inside the circle of willow branches, looking at the way the moon illuminated the glade with a bluish tint. The lack of breeze made it seem as though the clearing was dead. The boulder, pond, and moonflowers were all there, and the green leaves of the willow trees, but nothing moved.

In the center of the clearing, in the grass, sat Draco.

He had his knees pulled up to his chest and his arms wrapped around them. He was wearing black trousers and a black jumper that looked way too big for him. Or maybe he just looked frailer than he should with how much he exercised, she didn't know. His hair was forward again, the fringe in his eyes as he stared up at the sky.

Hermione approached him. Her heart rate did not increase, but she had a worried feeling in her mind.

"Where is Callie?" she asked, slipping his wand up into her sleeve.

"You told me to think about it," he said, the tenor of his voice soft. It felt like the quiet of the glade was so oppressive that it was compressing the volume of his words. "So I did."

"Where is she?"
"I sent her away," he said, lowering his chin until he was gazing at the grass in a forlorn manner. "It was selfish to keep her locked in here, making it bigger and bigger when she's going to be as big as a bloody hill. She was already bigger than a mountain troll. So I made her leave."

Images of what that might look like flashed through Hermione's mind and if it weren't for the potion, she knew she'd be unable to breathe. All she felt was sad.

"I'm bad for her. I couldn't take care of her. I'm not her Drakin. I'm not some... Some heroic warrior of the light who can - can connect with dragons and ride them," he spat, lifting one hand to scrape all of his hair back away from his face. It looked silken under the starlight. "I'm a Death Eater. I've poisoned more people than I can count. I've killed more than that with my swords. The Dark Lord will summon us away from the Manor, and we may never come back. Who would care for Callie then?"

"Malfoy..."

"I had to tell her I didn't want her anymore, you know that?" He was talking to her, his face contorted with his anguish, but he was glaring at the ground. "I had to tell her I didn't want her here anymore to get her to go. She looked so fucking... Sad, just... Looking at me with those eyes and I..."

He trailed off and Hermione saw his throat jump.

Hermione knelt down beside him, placing a tentative hand on his shoulder. The thought of Callie winging away into the shadow of the moon after Draco had to make her believe something so hurtful was gutting her. She wished she could have at least been there to say good-bye, or that they could have done more research to figure out another solution.

"You did what you thought you had to do," she said, squeezing his shoulder.

"Who would have thought?" he whispered, searching her eyes for something she wasn't sure of. "Callie could always fly away. She just didn't want to."

He folded his arms on top of his knees and buried his face in them.

Hermione could feel it in the air around him. He was barely holding it together. He'd lost everything in three days. His mother, his father, and now his dragon.

And he was blaming himself.

Hermione knew a little something about that.

It didn't matter what she thought she should do; all that mattered was that she did what he needed. Just like her mother had done for her father when her grandfather died, Hermione began to rub circles into his upper back.

He fell apart like an Acromantula web.

"I'm bad for her. I was always bad for her," he said, his voice hollow in the cage of his arms. "I'm bad for everyone. The Dark Lord's going to kill you in front of me as punishment for what I did. Then he's going to kill me, like he's always wanted to do."

"Maybe he..."

He lifted his head and looked at her, his eyes seeming to shine under the light of the stars above.
"Come off it, Granger. You know what he's got planned. You can't be that dense. He knows how much I fucking care about you. He's going to make sure I watch you die."

If it weren't for the Calming Draught, Hermione knew her heart would have stopped in its tracks.

She kept moving her hand on his back.

"I'm not strong enough to protect you," he whispered, pulling his knees closer and resting his chin on his forearms. He squeezed his eyes shut and bit his lip for a moment. Hermione knew what was coming. "I wasn't strong enough to protect anyone."

"You're strong," Hermione murmured, because it was the truth. "You're the strongest wizard I know."


He stopped for a moment, staring so hard at the grass that she thought it might burst into flames.

"The last thing I told him to do was fuck off. I just . . ."

Yes, Hermione knew quite well what was coming.

"I can't do this anymore," he said. There were tears shimmering in his eyes like glittering diamonds. "All this - this fear and waiting. The bloody waiting for him to make his - his decision, I - I can't. I just can't -"

His voice broke.

Like a damn, he fell into shambles, his entire face seeming to melt with despair. He sobbed uncontrollably, without a trace of shame. The tidal wave of grief washed over him, and Hermione could see that he'd been holding it back for a long time. She understood this. It was exactly what she had done, until it became too much and she broke down. Until it overwhelmed her and pulled her under.

He was drowning and he needed someone to hold him up.

Hermione slid her hand up to his neck and adjusted herself to sit cross-legged. She pulled him against her, tucking his head underneath her chin. It was as though she were trying to shield his face from the moon as she slid her fingers into his hair to stroke soothing lines across his scalp. Her other hand rubbed up and down his bicep, just like her mother used to do for her while she cried.

She held him while he wept. His entire body shook with a shuddering violence, the gut-wrenching sobs that left his mouth sounding tragic and piteous. Draco clutched at her arm that was wrapped around his neck, clinging to her as he went limp in her embrace.

"It's all right," she murmured in a tone meant to console, pressing her cheek against the softness of his hair. "It's all right."

"It's n-not," he sobbed, his fingers squeezing her arm. "It's never g-going to be. It's -"

"Shh," Hermione whispered, closing her eyes against the overwhelming emotions that were starting to spring up. She'd only taken one drink of the Calming Draught, and it had taken her thirty minutes to get to the clearing. It was already starting to fail. "It's all right."
"I'm better off dead," he said between sobs. "I'm better off fucking dead."

Hermione felt the panic starting to rise, warring with the potion. Her rational mind told her that he was just emotional, in agony over all the loss. But her heart was starting to open up, to beat faster and faster. It was telling her that he was going to follow in his father's footsteps if she didn't do whatever she could to convince him that no life was worthless.

Especially his.

Hermione pulled back far enough to grip his face in her hands and tilt it upward. He looked like a mess, but she didn't care. None of that mattered right now. All that mattered was that she knew what he needed to hear.

"You're not worthless, Draco," she said, her brows pulling together with conviction. "And I know things have been difficult - I know I'm difficult - but you're not worthless. You'll never be worth -"

His hand shot up and gripped her hair at the nape of her neck. In seconds, her head was the one that was tilted back, he was the one that was looking down at her.

And he was kissing her.

Hermione moaned when his tongue delved down into her mouth, searching for whatever comfort she had to give. She could feel the wetness of his tears on her cheeks, urging her forward as she threw her whole being into the kiss.

She knew she shouldn't. She knew she shouldn't give this much of herself to him, but it felt like he was dragging it out of her. It felt like he was ravaging her of every little part of herself that she had hidden inside her body. Every corner of her heart, the recesses of her body, the depths of her mind - it was all his. He was taking it.

She was giving it to him.

He tightened his hold on her hair, deepening his kiss with a groan. His other hand came up to stroke the side of her throat, awakening her body in a way that was both familiar and alien. It was terrifying. She felt caught up, swept within a tidal wave that he was directing.

He grabbed her thigh and pulled her to straddle his lap, breaking the kiss so he could trail his lips down her throat. She sighed and let her head fall back, let him devour her skin as though it were sweet. She put her mind elsewhere, making sure not to let Cillian's box come open when Draco twisted her curls and allowed his hand to roam her body.

This time, when he caressed her breast, she wanted it.

It felt like things were moving too fast, yet too slow. He never stopped kissing her, never let go of her hair, even as he shoved his hand underneath the hem of her jumper. She felt ice along the forefront of her mind.

Is this okay? His words whispered into the fiery wasteland that was her mind right now.

Yes, she answered back.

You're not gonna scream at me and call me your Master? She could swear he was smirking.

Not unless you want me to.
She moaned into his mouth when his fingers slipped beneath the wire of her brassiere and closed over her right breast.

She felt it in her core.

Hermione felt her sanity finally snapping in two when the pads of his thumbs passed over the peak. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pushed her hips flush to his, grinding them against him as her arousal grew and grew.

Draco finally let go of her curls, allowing them to cascade around their bodies like a curtain of chocolate brown spirals. He moved his other hand to mirror the first one, tweaking her flesh in a way that had bolts of electricity pulsing in her womb. She pressed her cheek against his as she rocked her hips faster and faster.

"That's it, Granger," he growled into her ear, his teeth catching the lobe and drawing a cry from her lips. "Take what you need. Come on."

Hermione felt his hardness between her legs, even though there were two layers of fabric between them. She closed her eyes, her hips jerking with every movement of his finger against her breasts. She'd never felt this way before. She'd never felt like her skin was on fire and her body was screaming for something so intensely.

Except for the night she'd touched herself.

"Help me," Hermione moaned. "Help me, please."

Draco moaned, too, one of his hands moving down to grip her core above her leggings. The feeling was acute. His fingers found the right spot, the perfect spot, and her mind went white. She swirled her hips in a circle against the press of his touch. She could feel sweat beading underneath her clothing.

The summit of the mountain drew near.

"Let me see you come for me, sweet girl," he whispered.

It was his words. Maybe it was his voice. Or perhaps it was just the memory of what they'd done together in her room the night of the battle anniversary.

Either way, she crested suddenly and with a sharp convulsing in her muscles. It rolled through her body, dragging a low moan out of her throat.

Draco sighed and began to attack her jawline with his lips, moving down towards her mouth. His head tilted to the right and he kissed her hard and deep.

"I wanna fuck you," he groaned after he pulled back. "Please. I need you. I need to forget. Please let me -"

Hermione wasn't thinking. She couldn't think. Her mind was all sorts of addled and she just wanted him.

She nodded, whispering yes repeatedly.

With the speed of a wild animal, he had her on her back in the grass and he was yanking her leggings and knickers down her legs. She opened her eyes for a moment, seeing the moon full and beautiful above her. It was flanked by all the stars she'd never once stopped counting. They
watched with a comforting twinkle.

The fabric got tangled at her knees.

"Just leave it," she hissed. "Just - come back - come -"

Her vision was filled with Draco.

They were snogging again, and Hermione's fingers were pulling the drawstring ties on his trackies. They both worked together to try and get them down below his rear, both of them laughing against each other's lips as they did so. Hermione's heart warmed for a second, but she didn't allow herself to think about it.

She only allowed herself to kiss and feel.

When she wrapped her hand around his length, he choked out a lengthy *fuck* into her mouth. She began to stroke him, refusing to let the box's lid come off that told her exactly why she knew how to do this so well. She focused on him, on the way his hips moved to meet the pull of her hand, and the way he nuzzled his face into her neck.

"Do you like this?" she said in the same slow, sensual voice she'd used on him the first night she'd touched him. "Do you like when I do this?"

"Oh, *fuck* yes," he groaned, his teeth scraping against her pulse. The feeling fanned the flames of desire within her already tingling body. The movement of his hips increased its pace. "You're so good."

- at this.

The words hung in the air, heavy and laden with memories.

Hermione closed her eyes against them, against the thought of Cillian's blue eyes.

No.

She wouldn't let him take this, whatever this was, away from her. She wouldn't let him control her narrative.

She scooted herself up slightly, surprising Draco by lining him up with her core. Before he could say anything more, she slid down onto him. The grass scratched at the skin of her rear as he sank into the depths of her body, into the vast coulee of solace she had to offer.

He lost it.

Draco positioned his knees on either side of her thighs and pinned her down by the throat. His hair fell into his blazing silver eyes as he rutted into her with ferocious, wild abandon. He hit deep and fast, leaving Hermione only room to gasp and moan. She tilted her neck up against the rings on his fingers, craving the replication of the feeling she'd felt when she touched herself.

She didn't want to breathe until she came.

Hermione lifted her hand to clench her trembling fingers in the fabric of his jumper as he drove into her again and again and again. She arched her spine and her head fell back, until she saw the boulder upside-down.

It ripped words out of her throat, throaty and desperate.
"Oh, that feels so good, Draco. That feels so good. Don't stop, don't stop, don't stop."

He cursed and used his other hand to touch her pearl, pulling yet more noises from her that she hadn't even realized she could make. He gathered her arousal, used it to slick his touch, and she screamed. It was garbled, choked by the press of his fingers around her trachea, but it was a scream nonetheless.

She had never felt this good.

Suddenly, he let go of her throat. Her disappointment was quickly replaced by surprise as he pulled out and tore her leggings and knickers the rest of the way down, leaving her in nothing but her boots and jumper. He pushed her legs apart and crawled up her body, still fully dressed but with his pelvis exposed. She lifted her head and their eyes met for a moment.

Hermione felt ice.

I want you to ride me until you come, sweet girl. Can you do that for me?

Her brows twitched together in a distressed expression as she nodded. "Yes. Please. Yes."

Draco grabbed her thighs and rolled them over. He grabbed her hips, starting to lift her, but a sudden surge of need within her took control of her body. She pressed her hand to the center of his chest and slammed him down firm against the grass.

The look he gave her was smoldering.

"You wanna see me come?" she whispered, tossing her curls back as she rolled and slid her core along the heat of him.

His fingers dug into the fleshy part of her hips, above the bones and he nodded.

She bit her lip as she rocked her hips, taking pleasure in the way it felt. After a few moments of this, Draco let out a whine.

"Please. Inside," he groaned. "I need to be inside you."

Hermione wasted no time impaling herself on him, doing exactly what he'd asked her to do earlier. She rode him, holding herself up by curling her fingers into his pectorals through his jumpers. The muscles she'd seen countless times, but had never imagined touching while she -

"Salazar's fucking - Circe," Draco hissed through his teeth as he slid his hands up to the concave dips of her waistline. His hips snapped upward, hitting deeper than he had before.

Hermione threw her head back in a fan of curls. She was dripping sweat beneath her jumper, and his pelvis was just as moist, but she didn't care. She didn't care about anything.

She just wanted to come.

"This is what you've always wanted, isn't it?" she moaned, grinding against him in a way that added to her bliss. "You've wanted me like this, on top of you, doing this to you."

He didn't say anything, seeming to be so lost in his own desire that his eyes were rolling up. His mouth fell open and Hermione found that she couldn't tear her eyes off of his face. The surreal nature of this situation - laying together like this in a beautiful, moonlit clearing encasing them in whispering willow branches - was overwhelming in its erotic vibe.
He needed this.

She needed this.

Anything to forget the pain.

As Hermione picked up speed, chasing her own undoing, his back arched further up off of the ground. She let her eyes caress the sharp curve of his jaw and the way the tendons in his throat stuck out as he groaned low in his chest.

"Oh, fuck," he whispered. "Fuckfuckfuck - I -"

"Come," she said. No, she ordered it like it was the only thing standing between him and completion.

"Not b-before -" He cut himself off with a breathy whimper, his hips rolling to meet hers with fervor.

"Come," Hermione said, because this was for him. It wasn't for her.

She wasn't thinking clearly and Cillian's box kept trying to come open, but as long as he got what he needed, everything would be all right.

Wouldn't it?

Draco bit his lip and arched his back again as Hermione spoke to him with her core, wrapped around him like the petals of a moonflower. She could feel that he was trying his best to hold back and something about that enticed her, drove the heat in her blood to the sky and helped her soar.

She heard him let out a laugh on an exhale. He said, "You're gonna come, aren't you?"

Hermione's eyes met his and she saw it there: the challenge that was always there when they spoke.

She squeezed him with her muscles and shook her head.

"You will," he whispered in an almost dangerous tone, his eyebrows shooting up.

Two seconds passed and then she felt his fingers against her pearl. Her eyes popped open wide as he took the reins, the Snitch, the crown - whatever it was.

He won.

Hermione sucked in her breath and gazed down into Draco's eyes. He smirked and raised himself up on one elbow, his other hand working her to the edge.

"You're so fucking sweet," he said through his teeth. When she started to shake her head, her eyelids falling half-shut, he slowed his pace to a gentle speed she hadn't known she needed. "You are. You are sweet. Making me tea, cooking for me. Taking care of me, even though you like to pretend you hate me."

Oh, Gods, she thought. Please say it. Please say it.

"Tell me," he said, grinning like a Chesire cat. "Do you hate me now?"

He'd obviously seen it inside of her head, without her permission.
"You - absolute - tosser," she hissed, and then she was done for.

She went careening over the cliff, into an orgasm so strong that she thought she might pass out. It rocketed through her body and caused her thighs to squeeze his hips as he continued to laugh. It was nothing like the way it had felt to touch herself. It was so, so much more.

"You're so - fuck - that's good," he said, still smirking, and then his head fell back. "That's - I'm gonna -"

With one last sharp slam of her hips downward, he came with a quiet moan. His body shivered beneath hers as he finished, sitting up to slide his arms underneath hers and curve them around her shoulders. His nose sought hers and then their lips met.

This kiss was languorous in its indulgence, with the slow swipes of his tongue against hers. She combed her fingers through his hair, thoroughly sated with a mind that had been painted white with ecstasy.

And then it all shattered.

He pulled away from her, gazed up into her eyes, and shook his head.

"I have no one left but you," he whispered.

Hermione held him with her entire body as he dissolved into tears again.

Chapter End Notes

Before y'all crucify me . . . Callie WILL return. I have HUGE plans for the battle at the climax of the story. I mean dragons upon dragons upon dragons upon Greek mythology goodness. I won't spoil anymore, but I don't want anyone freaking out and thinking I'm getting rid of her.
Chapter Twenty-Seven

Chapter Summary

This is the final chapter of Part One of the Scattered Starlight series.

The first chapter of Part Two, titled Capture the Stars, is up on my page, so feel free to trundle on over and follow! Click my author's name, and the story is in my Works!

I wasn't going to split it up, but I find that scrolling through more than 30 chapters on the drop-down can deter me as a reader, so I decided to cut it in half. Plus, the tone of the second part is more fantasy, with the dragons and the darkness and magic. I felt this was best for readability, with how many words I write.

Thank you so much to everyone who has followed along for the two weeks that this story has been up, and I am so excited to get going on Part Two. It's been a wild, hectic two weeks full of nonsense, but we made it through. I love all of you, and will see you in the sequel.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes
When they woke, Draco tried to kiss her.

Hermione turned away.

There was a bit of awkwardness as they used his wand to *scourgify* themselves and get dressed, and Hermione found that she couldn't look at him. She felt overwhelmed with shame for what she'd done. For the way she'd lost herself to the passion without thinking about the repercussions.

She hadn't stopped to remind herself that her body was not collateral, and that she'd been fighting for three months to get him to understand that. She still didn't trust that he was genuine.

Hermione had been adamant that she was not his slave, yet what had she just done? She'd acted exactly the way she'd acted with Cillian.

She felt like a whore.

There was a dark need to blame herself for everything. She wanted to blame herself and feel self-hatred that burned through her veins and made her feel like screaming. But she felt like she couldn't because she was Hermione Granger, and Hermione Granger wasn't allowed to feel anything other than pure, brutal strength.

"We can't do that again," she said as they walked back through the trees. She kept a good distance away from him. There was just enough sunlight filtering through the thick leaves for her to see without assistance.

He was quiet as they traipsed through the loam. Hermione's mind worked, trying to deduce what he might be thinking. She didn't want to look at him. Not when she could still remember what his face looked like when he -

"Agreed," he said, and his tone was brusque.

Hermione ignored the sting. "I just wanted to -"

"There's no need for an explanation," he said. "I was upset. You offered comfort. That's all it was."

Hermione knew that she was the one suggesting that it was a mistake. She knew she was the one with the regrets and the misgivings and the problems.

But it hurt to know that Draco felt it was a mistake, too.

For something that was nothing but comfort, he'd been awfully vocal.

*But the same could be said for me,* she thought, gazing at the ground as she walked. *I was just as vocal, with just as filthy of a mouth.*

She felt his eyes on her, but when she looked over at him, he was facing forward.

They walked in silence the rest of the way through the forest. It was painful. Hermione felt more uncomfortable than she'd ever felt in her entire life. Not only did she feel like a complete trollop, but she felt like they were strangers who had slept together after a drunken night at a pub.
Not that she'd ever done anything like that, but that was how she imagined it would be.

The tension between them was sickening.

"Today, don't worry about cooking for me," he said as they neared the back door to the house. "I'll have to do a repeat of the other day. Aurors, executor, the Prophet... And I'll need to owl the Dark Lord again."

Hermione nodded, feeling numb.

He held the door open for her. She walked underneath his outstretched arm, feeling a shiver running the length of her body as she passed by. Once again, she could feel his eyes boring holes into her.

"Check in with me later?" he called.

At this, she did look back at him. What did he mean, check in with him?

He looked like he regretted his words. A hand came up to rub the back of his neck. "Nevermind. Off with you."

She went up to her room.

Sometime after lunch, when Hermione was perusing the stacks in the library, Draco approached her.

"Are you free?" he asked, his gaze lingering on the spines of the books.

"Yes," she said in a cautious tone. She put a book back on the shelf where she'd picked it up. "Why?"

"My father's..." He sighed and pushed his hands through his hair. "I need to go through the papers in my father's study. Now that all the guests have left for the day."

Hermione turned to face him, folding her arms. She could tell by the way he was staring at the books that something else was bothering him. As awkward as things were, she was still curious to know what was going on.

"Did something happen?"

Draco looked at her and then looked away. "The Dark Lord finally sent a missive."

Hermione's heart leapt up into her throat. "The summons?"

"No," Draco said, sounding a bit bitter. "Just a letter reminding me to focus on the potion. If anything, it's much worse to receive a letter like this." He curled his hand into a fist on the shelf and hissed, "He knows we're waiting on his decision. He wants us to dread it."

Hermione bit her lower lip, not missing the way Draco's gaze dropped to her mouth for a moment.

"There's nothing we can do about it," she said with a shrug. "All we can do is wait. How were the meetings?"

Draco let out a heavy sigh, slipping one hand into the pocket of the trousers he'd put on as part of a three-piece suit. "The executor read me the will. My father left me everything, obviously. It didn't
take long. The Aurors took my statement and went to inspect the pond. He was . . . He was in there. I made my announcements to the Prophet, which went exactly as you thought it would, with Rita Skeeter still delivering her trash news. Did you hate her as much as I did?"

Hermione watched him, listening quietly. On the inside, she was marveling at the fact that he was telling her all of this. She didn't know if it felt like he was getting too familiar, or if she felt honored. The Hermione that had joined with him last night felt the latter; the one full of regrets felt the former.

At his question, she answered automatically.

"In Fourth Year, I locked her in a jar when she was in her Animagus form." Hermione smiled faintly. "She's a beetle."

Draco's eyebrows shot up and the corners of his lips curved upward. "Riding dragons and locking witch-beetles in jars? What else has the Golden Girl done?"

Hermione couldn't help but smile as fond memories of Ron and Harry burst forth in her mind. "Do you want to know about the troll we faced down in First Year? Or the Polyjuice incident in Second Year? You would be very interested to hear that tale."

"You mean when they pretended to be Crabbe and Goyle?" He flashed her the lopsided grin that she had come to feel so pleasant around. "Why do you think I said such vile things about you?"

"Because you're a tosser?" Hermione said, narrowing her eyes.

"No, but I'm a prat," he said. "And you're the brains of the Golden Trio. They definitely were not. I saw right through them within seconds."

"So why didn't you expose them?"

Draco rolled his eyes. "Because I'm a prat. Come, Granger. You can keep up, can't you?"

"You're gonna come, aren't you?"

The intrusive thought blasted into her mind out of nowhere, triggered by his words and voice. Heat rushed up to Hermione's cheeks and she turned quickly to the bookshelf. She pulled out a book that she didn't care to actually read and pretended to flip through it.

Gods, he was probably already in her head. She hoped he didn't say anything about it.

"Well," she said, "I think it's unsurprising that you didn't say anything. However, I think it's extremely surprising that you were able to deduce that it was them."

"I've always excelled at potions, Granger," he said, taking a step toward her. "You can't seriously presume to think that I wouldn't know a Polyjuiced individual when I see one?"

Hermione snapped the book shut and slid it onto the shelf. She could feel his breath shifting the curls on top of her head. She stepped around him to go.

"Wait," he said, "I came to find you to ask you for your help."

Hermione turned back to him. "What did you need?"

"I need help going through the papers in my father's study. There's a lot of them, and I need to sift and figure out which ones are important enough to keep."
"I don't see why not. It would give me something to do."

They headed to the study, Hermione falling in-step behind him. She wasn't sure how it was going to feel to be alone with him after what they'd done, but she was sure that cleaning out his father's study was not something that required two hands.

This was something he needed.

They entered the study. Draco lingered in the doorway.

To Hermione, it was just a room. She walked in and stood at the center, putting her hands on her hips. She glanced around at the mahogany drawers, cabinets, and bookshelves.

"Where do we begin?" she asked. "And what exactly are we doing? Are we filling boxes and cleaning it out? Are we -"

"We're destroying things," he said in a flat tone, finally entering the room and striding over to the desk. With an unceremonious hand, he began pulling papers and knick-knacks out of drawers and tossing them onto the desktop.

"All right," she said, and then she walked over to a wooden filing cabinet to begin pulling.

They worked together for a good hour, creating a pile in the center of the room. Before Hermione had seen the clutter of Draco's room, she would have been shocked at how un-Pureblood it was to throw things on the floor. Now that she had, she was not surprised that he just wanted to discard them like that.

Hermione snuck glances towards him, trying to see if she could catch a glimpse into his emotions from the look on his face. He was obviously struggling, as evidenced by his breakdown the night before, but she didn't know whether he was more upset by the fact that the Dark Lord was drawing out the torture of making him wait to hear his verdict, or his father's death.

It was no secret to her that she regretted sleeping with him. He seemed to agree with her that it was a mistake, so it was clear that he regretted it, too. Did that mean that her fears of him wanting her as his slave were unfounded?

She gritted her teeth as she worked.

How was she supposed to believe him? The last time someone did something kind for her out of the goodness of their heart, they locked her in their flat and coerced her into becoming their sexual slave for three months. Everything that Draco had done for her had been seemingly out of nowhere. They'd never been friends. He'd hated her in school. And now, knowing that his mother was meant to die anyway and the need for a potion was all a ruse, what other reason could be left?

He'd sobbed on her in his grief, yes. But everyone wept when they lost someone, and that was something Hermione knew intimately. She couldn't let herself be taken by emotion. She needed to keep in mind that there were questions that eventually needed answering.

Last night was a huge mistake, she thought as she opened a wooden cupboard. All I've done is effectively turn myself into what I've been accusing him of wanting me to be. I need to be stronger than this.

"How are you?" she asked, eyeing him from across the room.

"Fine," he said, tossing papers into the pile. "Why?"
"I mean, since last night," she said. "With your decision about Callie."

There was a pause. She glanced over at him. He was kneeling before a chest, looking at papers and tossing them over his shoulder to the pile.

"Don't wanna talk about Callie," he muttered. "Don't wanna talk about any of it."

Hermione raised her eyebrows and turned back to her own work.

They worked in silence again. Hermione rumbled through the cupboard she was in. Draco had said anything that didn't seem important to the estate, family legacy, or him specifically had to go. Inside this cupboard, there were a lot of wooden boxes with intricate designs on them, stacked atop one another. She lifted one up and opened it.

Letters.

Turning back to the cupboard, she tucked the small box under her arm and checked the others. All of them were full of letters.

From Draco.

They started to speak at the same time.

"Granger," he blurted out. "It's my birthday today -"

"Malfoy," she said. "I think these might be important to you -"

They looked at one another. Hermione pushed a curl behind her ear.

"It is?" she said.

He nodded. "June 5th. I don't like to make a big deal out of it."

"I'll make you dinner," Hermione said. No one's birthday had to be as awful as all of hers had been for the past six years. "What's your favorite food?"

"Bouillabaisse," he said. "With mussels. I don't know if you can make that, though."

"I'll figure it out," she said. "There's cookbooks somewhere in the library, isn't there?"

Draco looked down. "My mother has a recipe tin. Black family heirloom."

Hermione studied the sadness that entered his eyes. As complicated as things were between them after last night, she felt a strong urge to figure this out for him. It was his birthday, after all.

"Then I shall make an attempt. You get the ingredients, and I will cook it."

He gave her a guarded, unreadable look, and then jerked his chin towards the cupboard. "What did you find?"

She turned to see him looking at her. "Letters from you to your father. He kept them in these boxes, and -"

He bustled over, nearly jostling her as he glued himself to the cupboard. He snatched a box out and ripped it open. His eyes were wide as he lifted up the parchment letters with their broken green wax seals.
"They're from when I was in school," he said, grabbing as many boxes out of the cupboard as he could.

Hermione's heart pounded as she began to help. Soon, they had all twenty boxes perched in their arms. He walked over to the rug by the hearth and set them down. Hermione followed suit, knowing that she'd been right in thinking these were important to him.

He started unfolding them again to read them, so Hermione took it upon herself to do it, too.

*I wonder what a young Draco Malfoy was thinking in that head of his,* she thought, pulling one box onto her lap and opening a letter from within.

They read Draco's old letters for a long time, occasionally breaking the quiet mood to read a line aloud to one another with a smile on their faces. It turned out that as a young wizard, Draco was every bit as pretentious in his letters as he'd been in real life. There were a lot of complaints about other students including his friends, not "recognizing and witnessing his prestige," and even one letter entirely dedicated to how offended he was by McGonagall giving him detention *with* Harry and Ron.

"And what?" Hermione said, laughing so hard there were tears in her eyes. "You would have rather had detention by your lonesome?"

Draco held a hand over his face while his shoulders shook for a moment. He lifted his head and Hermione saw that he was laughing, too.

"You don't understand, Granger. I hated them both so much by that point that I didn't even want to use the same *loo* as them. I thought McGonagall was trying to sully the purity of my -" He broke off because they were both laughing so hard. "- my blood."

Hermione couldn't breathe. That was quite possibly the most hilarious thing she'd ever heard. She clutched her stomach as she fell to the side in her mirth, catching herself on the floor with her elbow.

"Detention with Harry and Ron sullying the purity of your blood?!" she howled. "I cannot breathe."

Draco threw his head back. "Ah, Circe, I was such a fucking *prat*!" He reached in and grabbed another letter, skimming it. "Wait until you hear this from that same year. 'And you must understand, father. I am the most illustrious wizard in the entirety of Hogwarts castle. Nay -'" Draco looked at Hermione. "I wrote 'nay - the entirety of Britain. I should not be required to share a dorm, a Great Hall, or even a classroom with any of these peons.'"

He began to laugh again, tears of amusement shimmering in his own eyes. "'I think you should write to the Minister and request that I be given my own wing of the castle in which to receive my lessons and meals. I should be given express permission to go to Hogsmeade by myself whenever I wish, and I should be permitted to use the Malfoy family name to attend classes above my year. Please, father. With your assistance, I could be graduated -' Oh, my fuck. I wrote, '- by the end of my Third Year.'"

They laughed until Hermione had to go use the loo.

When she came back, he was still sitting in the same place, his eyes devouring the words he'd written to his father long ago. Hermione smiled to herself.

It was nice to laugh with him like she used to laugh with her friends. To reminisce, as though they'd graduated Hogwarts like normal, and everyone was still alive.
She knew, though, that if that were the case, this would not be happening. She would never have given Draco a chance, would never have gotten to know him. She wouldn't be in the Manor, Narcissa wouldn't have gotten cursed, and Lucius wouldn't have walked into that pond.

That sobered her for a moment.

She walked back to her spot on the floor. He shot her a look that had a bit of a twinkle in his eye.

"I'm sure he kept these for personal reasons," he said, a smile playing about his lips. "Or perhaps just to have a laugh at me."

Hermione grinned. "I know I would have kept them, if you were my son."

"But I'm not your son." He raised one eyebrow and when their eyes met, she felt like the look in his was the same as the smoldering one he'd given her last night.

A memory bled forth, of his fingers digging into her flesh and his sighs in her ear. Her stomach twisted.

"No," she said, focusing on the letters in one of the boxes, "you're not."

"So you do think he kept it for a laugh," he said, smirking as he dug through the letters again.

"Trust me, Malfoy," she said, pulling one out for herself to read. "It was easy to laugh at you back then."

He gave her a sharp look.

"'Dear father,'" she read aloud, trying to hold back her giggles. "'I am sure you are proud of me for all of my accomplishments this year, however something has occurred that I believe should be brought to your attention. It is a most grievous wrong that has been done to me by one Mudblood Granger -'"

"No! Don't read that one!"

Draco lunged towards her on the floor with a wild look in his eyes, but Hermione leapt to her feet and dodged him. She began to read louder, still laughing even as he growled up at her with a threat in his eyes.

"'Just this afternoon, when the sun was starting to lower, she struck me in my nose. And as you are well aware, the Malfoy nose is very important to the legacy that I am to pass down. I don't understand how Muggle anatomy works, but I do know that our bodies look quite similar to theirs. Does that not mean that if any part of my body is damaged, that the Malfoy heirs could be damaged as well? I am sure you see how this could be an issue -' No, Malfoy! I am reading this one!"

She squealed as he chased her around the room for a few moments. He was laughing, but there was desperation hinted in his tone that showed her that this letter was one she definitely wanted to read. She continued to read while she skipped around the desk.

"I am sure you see how this could be an issue, seeing as all of the portraits will be ruined after my legacy is carried out within my sperm. And how do you think that would look in the foyer? Ghastly. In any case -'"

Hermione danced around the other side of the desk again. Draco looked like he was caught
between breaking down with howling laughter, or yelling at her in rage. They stood at either end of the desk, faking to the left and right to try and usurp the other. She kept reading.

"- Granger has not been reprimanded for this wrong she has done me, and I am not confident that the old bat McGonagall will appropriately punish her. When I tell you she struck me, I mean she struck me, father. She used all of the force in her body and attacked me with the vehemence of her filthy ancestors. She chose me to take out centuries of anger and I wept. Father, I wept. This was not a moment of weakness, but -"

Draco chased Hermione across the room again, pleading with her between laughs to stop, but Hermione was much too quick. She had no qualms about jumping onto the cushion of the armchair just to get away from him.

"- but a moment of clarity. She has cursed me, father. Bewitched me with magic that is neither of this Earth, nor of this dimension. I truly believe that her cowardly attack placed an ancient curse upon me. She appears in my dreams, father, and eclipses my mind when I'm awake. I cannot even eat in the Great Hall without thinking of her. Sometimes, I find myself aching to be struck by her once again. Call the Aurors and have her arrested. I fear that I am either grossly offended, or . . ."

She trailed off, stopping in front of the desk as her eyes read the rest of the letter. Draco approached her slowly from behind, both of them panting from exertion. Hermione's smile faded as she finished reading it out loud.

"- or I've fallen in love with her, and I'm quite sure . . . It's not the latter . . . All my best . . . Draco."

The silence was so thick and so oppressive that Hermione felt like she was suffocating.

"I told you not to read that one," Draco said, his voice lower than normal. He was right behind her, his breath rustling her curls. "I was a prat."

"A prat who had a crush, apparently," she said, not turning around. She felt like she couldn't look at him.

If this confirmed her thoughts that he'd had some sort of interest in her as early as Fourth Year - Third, now - then only one of two things could be true:

Either he'd formed an unhealthy, menacing obsession with her at the end of Third Year that caused him to hunt her down after the war and trick her into becoming his slave . . .

. . . Or Draco Malfoy was in love with her.

She felt his fingers pushing her curls to the side, exposing her ear and throat. He whispered into her ear.

"Typical swot. Always sticking your nose where it doesn't belong."

Hermione felt a chill running down her spine, a pleasant one. She felt the same lioness that had awakened within her last night starting to stir. She wasn't sure what the truth was, but she knew one thing for certain.

She wanted to turn around.

"So, you've figured me out," he murmured, his lips tickling her earlobe. "Fifty points to Gryffindor."
The tension shattered.

Hermione whirled around and pulled him into a sizzling kiss, turning her face and locking her fingers behind the nape of his neck. He groaned and grabbed hold of her hips, pressing her against the desk. On tip-toe, she let him lift her to sit upon it. The heat in the air had intensified.

This was a large Manor. The study was just one room. They were completely alone.

"You could scream for me," he sighed, dropping kisses along the curve of her throat like flower petals, "if you wanted to."

Her head swooned backward as he began to explore her chest. She moved her hands to his shoulders and let out a moan when his tongue tasted her collarbone. She wore a knee-length dress today that buttoned up the front of the top, and the fabric was thin. There was a chill in the room that heightened the feeling of his touch.

Her mind spun, screaming at her that they were making another mistake. But when she tried to rationalize it and find a reason why they should stop, the only reason she could come up with at the moment was that they were on a desk. All of their other problems - her past, his lies - had locked themselves away for the time being.

They were doing this.

A sudden surge of courage burst inside of her body and she began unbuttoning her dress. Draco's eyes met hers for a second. The grey irises flashed and then he was unbuckling his belt with the same amount of speed.

He started to speak, but she shook her head.

"Don't say anything," she said. "Don't ruin it."

Draco's face took on a serious expression as he finished undoing his trousers. Hermione slid back down to the floor so she could ruck her skirt up to her hips, her eyes never leaving his. With a sultry look, she wrapped her arms around his neck and used him to hoist herself back up onto the desk.

Seconds passed. Their lips met.

Then he was inside of her.

Hermione cried out against his lips as he cut a slow, thorough pace, setting her skin aflame with every thrust. He buried his face in her neck. She placed her hand on the desk behind her to keep herself upright. One of his hands gripped the swell of her rear; the other slipped into the open bodice of her dress, caressing her breast in a way that sent shockwaves down to her core.

Draco was gentler with her than he had been last night, but she found that she didn't mind. As long as she kept her eyes closed, she didn't have to escape the moment. She wouldn't be forced to face the fact that the mistakes that they had made were now becoming bad habits. Because she knew by the way he was stoking the fire within her that this was going to happen again.

And again.

And again.

Hermione let out a sigh when he hit a sensitive spot inside of her. He kissed his way up to her ear.
"There?" he breathed, the erotic tenor of his lustful voice urging a moan out of her throat.

"There," she whimpered.

Draco took both of his hands and held her tight enough to leave marks. He began to slam his hips against hers, moans of his own echoing aloud as he took her. He dove into her as though her womanhood were the deepest trench in the sea. His hair fell forward and he cursed.

Hermione arched her spine and collapsed on her back on the desktop, the feelings overwhelming her. Her hair fanned out to hang over the opposite edge of the desk and she squeezed her eyes shut. She felt used. She felt like he was using her body for whatever he needed, and it was everything.

There was no time to dwell on how disturbing that was.

When he began to touch her at the apex of her core, she felt her release rushing towards her like a speeding tidal wave in the ocean that was her body. She reached up to grip the edge of the desk, cracking her eyes open to watch him. To watch him towering over her in his blazer, button-up, and tie, his trousers open just far enough. His eyes burning with desire, looking at her in that way that he always had.

It almost felt like this Manor was theirs.

"You're mine, aren't you?" he hissed through his teeth, ignoring her request for him not to speak.

She didn't think. She just nodded.

"This is mine, too," he said, strumming her strings like a violin. "Your body is mine."

She came with a wild cry, her spine curving up like a bow as his words, voice, and actions combined to create the perfect storm. Her entire body convulsed around him as he ground against her over and over, harder than he had before, stealing her breath.

Draco's eyebrows pulled together as a long, low fuck whispered out beneath his breath. She lay there, limp and boneless as he thrust into her through his own ecstasy, pulling out in time to empty himself out on her dress.

Just like Cillian.

Hermione's entire body seized up and she was up like a shot. Panicked, she hopped off of the desk and yanked her knickers up her legs. She turned to the left and right, casting frantic glances about for his wand.

"What?" he cried, audibly anxious as he adjusted his trousers. "What's the matter?"

"Nothing," she said, her voice trembling. "Nothing. I just have to . . . Use the loo."

He watched with a puzzled expression on his face as she used the wand to scourgify herself and cast a contraceptive spell she remembered from her school days. Then, she handed it over to him, avoiding his gaze as he cleaned himself up, too.

"Are you all right?"

She forced a smile as she backed towards the door to the study. "I'm all right. Can you get the papers cleaned up without me?"
"Yeah," he said slowly, waving his wand to start the charm that would destroy the pile of things that they weren't keeping. "I need to go get the recipe tin and then I'll have to go get the ingredients myself, since the House Elves are gone."

"Lovely," she said, high-pitched and not caring to think about where he would even be going to get them. She could feel her heart racing. She just needed to be alone for even just five minutes. "Lovely. I'll . . . Meet you in the kitchen in an hour?"

He nodded, and then she left.

"I don't know if it's any good," Hermione said as she entered the tea room with the bowls floating at the tip of Draco's wand.

"We'll see," Draco said, tearing his gaze off of the windows and watching her.

"Your **bouillabaisse**," she announced, settling the bowl in front of him. She took her seat and put on a tentative smile. "Happy birthday."

He didn't smile back, but just raised his eyebrows. He raised the spoon.

"Don't be as dramatic as you were in your letters to your father," she said as he took the first bite. "If it's bad, there's no need to go overboard -"

"It's excellent," he said, cutting her off. He tucked in with zeal, saying no more.

Hermione gave herself a self-satisfactory smirk and continued to eat. Cooking using his mother's recipe had been no easy feat, due to how worn the parchment that it was written on had become. But Hermione was a determined woman, and she did her best to achieve success. She'd always been that way.

Suddenly, there was a tapping on the window. Draco looked up and Hermione turned to glance over her shoulder.

There was a small black owl hovering there, a scroll attached to its leg.

Still chewing his last bite, Draco picked his wand up from the table and waved it, vanishing the window glass temporarily. The owl winged in, Draco took the scroll, and then it was gone.

Hermione took another bite, feeling the evening breeze against her back through the now-open hole in the wall.

Draco unrolled the scroll and read it.

"Happy fucking birthday to me," Draco muttered, and then he tossed the scroll onto the table. He tucked into his food with zeal.

Hermione felt a sinking in her stomach. She picked up the scroll and read it.

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**Draco,**

*My deepest condolences as to the loss of your beloved parents. I had no knowledge of your mother's condition. Had I known, I would have offered a hand. Perhaps it could have saved your father. Please, I wish for you and your slave to come to Buckingham tomorrow. There is much for us to discuss.*

*Best, Tom*
"If he means a hand in her death," Draco said as she lowered the parchment to the table, "then, yeah. Given that he was the one who initially cursed her, I can see why he'd want that knowledge."

Hermione was reminded of some of her old mistrust. The lies that Draco had told in Paris to get her to come with him. Not wanting to ruin the mood, she swallowed the consternation and put it back into the box in her mind.

"So, this is the official summons?" she asked, taking a hesitant bite of her food. She didn't exactly feel hungry anymore.

"Yeah," he said, his tone clipped. He stirred his soup around a bit before taking another bite. "Looks like he's made his decision."

Hermione swallowed. "Right."

They finished the meal in silence. It seemed that it was too late.

The mood was already ruined. Draco took the dishes in his hands when they were done eating. "I'll take them."

"What, the illustrious Pureblood wizard is soiling his porcelain skin with dirty dishwater?" Hermione asked, a faint smirk on her face as she rose from the table.

"I said I'd take them," he said, walking ahead of her. "I didn't say I'd wash them."

"Ha," Hermione said, rolling her eyes.

He went towards the kitchens, leaving her alone. She headed towards the stairs, waiting for him at the foot of them. She looked around the entryway, marveling at how hauntingly beautiful the architecture of the Manor really was.

Her nerves began to rattle.

What if this was it?

What if tomorrow was the day they died?

"We should discuss it," Draco said, his voice sounding faint then getting louder the nearer he drew. "What might happen tomorrow."

She placed her elbow on the banister, leaning on it. "What do you think is going to happen?"

Draco stood a foot or so away from her, much closer than he would have before they'd lain together. For the first time in weeks, she didn't feel like moving away from him.

"There's only three routes this could take," he said. "One, he just wants to spout nonsense, get us to swear fealty, and then send us home. Two, he wants us to stay at Buckingham forever. Or three, he kills us."

"I won't swear fealty to that vile man," Hermione said, her hackles rising. *Maybe in January, I would have. But not anymore. I'm stronger than that.*

Draco raised his eyebrow. "Even if he threatened to kill you on the spot?"

She mirrored his expression. "Just make sure he's not at my funeral."
There was a moment, and then Draco laughed. He covered his mouth with the back of his hand to
shield his smile as he looked at her. A lock of his hair fell forward.

Hermione reached up and pushed it back.

His laughter faded, and she snatched her hand back. Heat rushed to her cheeks as she averted her
gaze.

"So, option two," she said, clearing her throat. "Us going to Buckingham . . . What would that
entail?"

"Well, I have quarters there: a room with a connecting loo and a second room attached that I use for
a potions lab. House Elves bring meals directly to me typically, but casual dinners are held in the
dining hall."

"Does Tom attend?" Hermione asked, wrinkling her nose.

Draco reached to touch his fingers against the scarred tip of her nose, causing another flare of heat
in the apples of her cheeks. "Occasionally. He likes to spend most of his time indulging, in council,
or handling affairs."

"Affairs?"

"Tom is a person who keeps his affairs close to the breast." He sighed. "However, he has made it
clear that every move we make takes us one step closer to his final plan. What that plan is, none of
us has any idea."

Hermione frowned. "Do you know what exactly he's planning to do next?"

"Romania is in his line of sight," Draco said. "He wants the vampires. He's already got Death
Eaters from all the countries we've taken, the Alpha Pack and the allegiance of most werewolves in
Lithuania, the wyverns in Wales . . . For some reason, he took Greece first. I'm unsure why. He's
building an army, but for what, no one knows. Besides perhaps Nagini."

Hermione frowned. "The only thing of importance in Greece is Atlantis."

Draco pulled a face. "What would he want with that old library? The texts and scrolls in it are
completely useless. The guardians are all centuries old and stay behind their wards most of the
time. I don't think anyone's been seen coming out of them in at least three hundred years."

"I'm not sure," Hermione said, tapping her chin. "What order did he take those countries in?"

Draco looked up at the ceiling. "Uhh . . . Well, first he took Hogwarts and the Order down. Then,
he split us up. Some stayed in Scotland to handle skirmishes, and the rest went to Greece. Greece is
a small country with a focus on peace, so it went quickly and without a fight. He focused on
Scotland and England.

"Wales, then Ireland. Lithuania was next and after that, France. We worked on Lithuania for most
of last year, and then now, we've been working on Finland. France went fast. Now, he's got his
eyes on Romania." When Hermione breathed in to speak, he said, "Wait. There's also been talk of
Russia for the past few years. I'm not sure what's in Russia."

"The Dark Lord's pretty adamant that we keep that end goal in mind. No matter what we do in the
interim, we're going to Russia in the end. What's in Russia? I have no fucking clue, but we're
going."
Hermione remembered him mentioning it the night he'd gotten drunk and come to her room. The Dark Lord wanted something in Russia, but how much did it matter if tomorrow, they'd be dead?

And France . . . She knew France was the Dark Lord's. She knew it intimately. She'd been there the day his army attacked.

"Why did France go so fast?" she asked.

"They joined willingly after the attack. Took one look at the army he'd amassed, and they signed the accords."

As Draco spoke, Hermione felt a slow realization creeping up on her. This was the most information she'd ever gotten out of him. It was almost like he was a completely different person. More relaxed, less angry. There was still a sadness about him, but it wasn't overbearing.

"And the potion that you make for him?" Hermione said. "Would you continue to make that, if we went to the palace?"

Something shifted in his eyes in the way of caution. "Yes."

Hermione pushed it further. "What does it do?"

Draco stared so hard at the air above her head that it was like he was glaring. He opened his mouth to speak, looking momentarily irritated. Then, his eyes met hers again.

"I can't say."

She studied him for a moment, searching her brain. "Is it something that he needs to keep himself looking young the way he does?"

"I cannot talk about this." Draco's expression was pained.

"Is the Dark Lord ill?"

"No," he said, his eyes flashing, "but stop asking."

Hermione bit her lower lip. It seemed that she could ask some, but not all questions. There were some that seemed off-limits. Either he was choosing not to tell her, or -

"Malfoy, did you take an Unbreakable Vow?"

He gave her a deadpan expression, and she knew she'd struck gold. "You and I both know I can't answer that."

So he had. Interesting. What would the Dark Lord be taking a potion for that he'd want to keep between him and his potioneer using an Unbreakable Vow?

"And if he chooses the third option?" she said. "The one where we die?"

He looked thoughtful for a moment, his brow furrowing. He uncrossed his arms and reached for her, his hands warm against her waistline. His eyes sought hers.

"Then," he said slowly, "I'd say I'm glad that we were able to work everything out."

Hermione wrapped her fingers around his tie, looking at it while she spoke to him.
"Not everything," she said, and then she twisted her lips, thinking about her next words. "If we die tomorrow, then I'd say we're dying in as good a place as possible when it comes to us. If we don't - if he lets us live and we come back - then I want to talk."

Draco nodded, his fingers pulling until she was crushed against his torso. She stood frozen in his embrace, her eyes wide as he surprised her with a hug so full and warm that it was undeniable. He dropped his head to the crook of her neck and shoulder, taking a singular deep breath that spoke of resignation and contentment. She felt his skin searing through the fabric of her bodice.

"I'm glad it's you," he whispered.

Hermione didn't know what to say. She wasn't sure what she felt, and she was not a liar. It didn't matter if it was her last day on Earth or not: she wasn't going to tell him something that wasn't true.

"Sleep in my room tonight?" he said.

"No," she said, before she had really thought about it. She just didn't want the last thing she did to be a bad habit.

He stilled for a second and then said, "Okay."

Hermione extricated herself from his arms, gave him one last small smile, and then went up to bed.

Hermione knocked on Draco's bedroom door.

She hadn't even made it a full hour before the fear started to creep in. She was brave, but she wasn't that brave. The time period in her life where she hoped for death was over. Because try as she might to ignore it, she cared about Draco. That meant that there was no reason to feel so desolate that she would want to die.

And she couldn't think of anything worse than sleeping alone tonight.

He opened the door, wearing nothing but his trackies. He looked down at her.

"If I die tomorrow, and he lets you live," she whispered. "What will you do?"

He held her gaze.

"Follow you."

Hermione closed her eyes. "I changed my mind. I don't want to be alone."

"Come here," he breathed, sounding almost relieved. He reached out, cupped the back of her skull, and pulled her against him. He wrapped his other around around her neck and kissed the top of her head as he pulled her over to the bed.

Hermione allowed it.

They climbed into the bed, closing the curtains behind them and plunging them in pitch black. Then, they laid on their backs beside each other, staring up into the darkness. If Hermione used her imagination, she could pretend they were outside, looking at the stars.

"Do you feel unfinished?" he said. "Like you have this long list of things you always wanted to do, but never got around to doing?"
"What could you possibly have on a list that you haven't done?" Hermione said with a scoff. "You have more galleons than I have cells in my entire body."

"True." He let out a quiet laugh. "But no - I mean things like . . . You know, riding a broom across the country, or riding on the back of a unicorn -"

"Do you like to be in motion?" Hermione said, and it was a joke.

"I do, actually.".

"To answer your question," she said. "Not so much anymore. I used to."

"What changed?"

Hermione was silent. There were so many things that she could answer with, and pretending like they were shut tight in their boxes would be a lie.

The war, her friends' deaths, the fact that she'd never see her parents again, her three months with Cillian, the murders she'd committed, the fall of the sanctuary, and the attack on Paris . . . They were all out in the open plains of her mind, poisoning her body from within. She could feel them, caustic in the way they burned her slowly to ash.

She supposed she used to have a list, but when she thought of it now, it was faded and brittle on the edges.

"Everything," she finally said. "Everything changed."

As things went quiet for a bit, Hermione tried to focus on her surroundings, to savor this. If it was her last night, she wanted to remember it. The sheets beneath her were as soft as velvet, and the pillows were like clouds. Draco's coverlet was thick and smooth, and his entire room had the faint smell of incense.

When she turned her face to the left, she caught a whiff of his natural musk, and it was heady in its calm scent. Being behind the curtains on the bed was nice; it felt like they were in their own little world of softness and fragrance.

If they were to die tomorrow, she was glad that she finally, finally felt safe.

"Are you scared?" he asked.

"Yes. Are you?"

"Always."

She closed her eyes against the memories that his response triggered. Luna, with her pale blonde waves glinting beneath the sunlight on the plains.

Hermione felt Draco's hand seeking hers in the dark by her side. He twined their fingers together and gave her a gentle squeeze. It was like when they would walk to the clearing, only this time, there was no need to guide her. They were already at their destination.

"Where do you think Callie is right now?" he said, not letting go of her hand.

Hermione tried not to feel too sad. She didn't know where she could be. Calypso was a dragon who hadn't been able to grow up around other dragons. Theoretically, she could find herself having a lot of trouble socializing with others of her kind. And that was if she even made it to a place that had
dragons. Draco had to know that her chances were completely based on luck.

But she knew that wasn't what Draco wanted to hear.

"The mountains," Hermione said. "I think she's in the mountains, and I think she found a - a group of - or a flock of dragons to live with. I think she'll find a mate soon, too."

"Do you think she'll be happy?"

"I know she will," Hermione said, her heart wrenching. She was glad she hadn't been there, even if she did wish she could have said good-bye.

Draco was silent again for a solid minute.

"Tomorrow, he's probably going to kill us both," he said. "For you, he might make it painless. But for me . . ."

"He probably will," Hermione replied.

"Do you trust me?"

She opened her mouth to reply, but didn't know what to say. There was an urgency within her that told her to lie, to make him feel better on the night that might predate his death. But she just couldn't lie.

"No," she said.

"Ah, okay."

More silence.

He spoke again.

"Would you believe me if I told you it was the latter?"

It took her a second, but when it clicked, she felt her heartbeat skipping to catch up on itself. Her throat went dry.

He was referencing the letter from his father's study.

"No," she said, her voice trembling.

"Hermione?"

Her hand shook in his. He never used her first name. The only time he ever had was when his mother died.

She knew what was coming. She could feel it.

The things his mother had said, about him being afraid to be burned by her flames. What his father had told her, about his pages being open to her for ten years. The letter, stating the beginning of what was to come. And Draco having offered her safe harbor, even if she didn't fully understand what it all meant.

Whether it was obsessive or not, unhealthy or not, he loved her.
"Yes?" she breathed.

"You are everything to me."

She closed her eyes, letting the words sink in. Breathed them in and let them roll on the surface of her skin. Focused on being his everything for three seconds so she could decide if it felt good and right.

For now, it did.

Hermione rolled on top of him, her fingers fluttering along his face in the dark. When she found his cheeks, she closed her eyes and pressed her lips against his. His hands went to her waist, slipping beneath her camisole, which she'd worn because she knew this was going to happen.

She'd wanted it to.

Widening her thighs, she pressed her knees to the mattress, putting her pelvis flush with his. Rolling her hips, she ground her body against him. He was already hard, as if he'd anticipated this, too. As their bodies moved against one another's, Hermione found that the pleasure she obtained from this dance was minimal compared to the allure of listening to the choked moans he was emitting.

"You're gonna -" He gasped into her mouth. "- gonna make me come like this."

Hermione ignored him, continuing to grind her pelvis downward. There was power in this, and intoxication in the feeling it gave her to know that she could do that.

"Nnh - please," he said, a breathy whine. "Not like this. Please."

Hermione's stomach twisted and her skin flushed with warmth. She kissed his neck, little pecks and tastes with the tip of her tongue. He thrust his hips upward, and she felt him straining against his trackies and pants.

"Granger," he growled in warning.

"What if I want you to come like this?" she said in a small voice beside his ear.

"It's our last night. Can't we go slower?"

Surprised, Hermione sat up on his hips and knotted her curls at the top of her head. She couldn't see him with how thick the curtains around the bed were, but she felt his gaze on her.

He was right. It was the Dark Lord they were dealing with, and she wasn't just any Undesirable. She was Undesirable Number One. Draco had committed what was likely one of the worst crimes against Tom that he could have. The fact that he'd made them wait this long for his summons was proof that tomorrow was the last day that they would be alive.

Earlier, Hermione had panicked because Draco reminded her of her past in Rosslare, and if they weren't in this position, she wouldn't even be in his bedroom with him. There was no slow with Cillian. It wasn't about her with him.

She wasn't sure about this, but if it was her last chance, she wanted to see what it might be like.

"All right," Hermione finally said, feeling somewhat nervous for the first time. "We can go . . . Slower. For now."
His hands trailed up her sides, spreading heat along her skin as they moved to cup her breasts. Her breath hitched. She hadn't worn a bra, so when his thumbs played with the peaks, she felt her hips jerk with enjoyment. Her lips parted to let out a sigh.

Perhaps it was okay to let go of the past, just for tonight. If they lived past tomorrow, she could pick it all back up and deal with it then.

She arched her back, pressing up into the caress of his palms. Her flesh was sensitive where he touched her, the juxtaposition of his hot skin and the cold rings on his fingers adding to the heightened feeling in her body.

Draco paused for a second. "I don't think I want to go slow."

Hermione's heart leapt with a dark feeling. "I don't think I want you to go slow, either."

The span of a blink passed, and then Hermione was on her back beneath him. His lips molded to hers in a ferocious kiss that felt like she was flinging her body into the depths of Hellfire. She threw herself into the kiss with zeal, her hands trailing over the divots of his abdominal muscles. She felt the curve of his collarbones, swallowing his sounds with her mouth.

Their kissing intensified as his hand slipped between them to grip her womanhood above layers of fabric. She turned her face away from his to expel a harsh breath. His fingers sought the apex of her core, sought the bundle of nerves that always made her see sparkles when anyone touched it.

"You want me to fuck you, don't you?" he growled into her ear. "You want me inside of you?"

"Yes," she whispered.

"Louder."

"Yes," she wailed, spreading her legs wider and pulling her knees up.

Her mind had gone white.

Draco began tearing at Hermione's clothes, ripping her trousers downward and kissing his way up the center of her stomach as he pushed her camisole up. She gasped when his mouth closed around first one breast and then the other. It wasn't an easy feat, but she was able to assist him in removing the top and trousers, and then she was lying there in only her knickers.

"I'm gonna taste you," he cooed against her sternum, running his tongue up to her throat. "I wanna see how sweet you are."

Hermione's brain felt addled as he began to kiss his way down her body again. She was still shocked that she was doing this with Draco Malfoy, of all people. Part of her thought she should feel incredibly guilty, but the other part of her felt defensive. She wanted this. She wanted to be with him like this again, and that was okay.

Draco slid down until his mouth was at her core, breathing hot against the center of her knickers. Still in an absent state of mind, Hermione rocked her hips in anticipation of what was to come. No one had ever done this for her before, so she guessed that her Last Day was as good as -

Her eyelids flew open when he tasted her for the first time, whispering sinful, Luciferian things into her body. She spread her legs even wider, using her feet to drive her hips up to meet the cadence of his tongue against her flesh. Her hands slid upward, underneath the pillows, and wrapped around the bars of the headboard that she hadn't even known were there.
Things began to fall from her lips as he drove her closer and closer to the edge, things that she had never thought she'd say. Her chest and thigh muscles spasmed in unison as her orgasm began to build with lightning speed. The feeling was almost overwhelming, like she wanted to escape it and chase it, all at the same time.

If it weren't for his fingers pressing her hips so firmly to the mattress, she feared she might have floated away.


With one final cry, she came on his tongue with another spasm. She practically sobbed as the release of energy threw her into a vast coulee of ecstasy. She threw her head back so far that her top knot came undone.

Still shivering, Hermione felt his hands on her hips, pushing one side and pulling the other. He wanted her to turn over. She did so, and then she felt his length searching at her core.

"Tell me if you want it," he said, his fingers pressing lines down the discs of her spine that felt like soothing massages.

Her answer was a whimpered, "I want it."

He slid inside of her. They moaned in unison, Hermione lifting her lower body to get him to hit where she wanted him to, deep within her body. He stroked that same spot over, over, over, and over. Until she was mindless. Until all she felt was the flames of pure pleasure.

Hermione buried her face in the sheets, breathing the hot non-air as he rutted into her like he was trying to win an award for it. She screamed into the fabric, her head already spinning from the lack of oxygen. He grabbed a large clump of her curls, his fingers sifting deep within them.

"Fuck, you feel so good on me," he whispered as he thrust. "I wish we could do this every *f*ucking day."

Hermione took one more breath, her lungs squeezing as her brain pitched in her head. She could feel herself about to pass out. She was going to fall unconscious, but her release was *right there*.

His fingers reached between the bed and her body, and they began to work their magic on her pearl. Electricity sparked from the tips of her curling toes to the top of her dizzy head.

"Such a sweet girl for me," he groaned, his tone a mixture between cajoling and proud. "It's time to come for me."

Hermione wailed into the mattress, so loud that it sounded like she was crying, and crested. It was intense - more intense and bone-deep than any orgasm she'd ever had before. She wasn't sure if it was because it was him, or if it was because she was so sure she was going to die in a matter of hours. She just knew that it felt good.

He gripped her hair and yanked her head up. She gasped loudly for air, her body still twitching and seizing around him. He let out a breathy laugh.

"Did you do that on purpose?"

"Yes," she said through a groan as he began to thrust faster. "I like it that way. Take points from Gryffindor, or accept it."
He laughed again and leaned forward to press kisses to the side of her throat. His strokes became deep once more, and so hard that she was crying out with each one. As macabre as it was, she knew she could be as loud as she wanted to.

There was no else here.

Draco pulled out and flipped her onto her back. Her hair splayed out on the mattress as he yanked her down onto his length again. He let out a pleased growl, and then he was at it again, slamming his hips against hers with no reservations. Their bodies were starting to slide with sweat.

"Say my name," he said, sounding pleading. "Fuck. Please fucking say it, Granger."

"Why?" she challenged, feeling a third wave of bliss coming towards her.

"I want to hear you say it, before . . ."

Her heart sank. He didn't need to say it aloud for her to know.

"Before we die."

"Draco," she moaned, scraping her fingernails down his chest.

"Ah - fuck," he said, and she could tell by the pitchiness to his tone that he was close. "Do you want me to make you come again? Tell me you want me to -"

"I want you to make me come."

"Spread your legs wider," he ordered. She did, and then she felt his fingers, wet against the top of her exposed core. His other hand wrapped around her throat and she cried out as a fresh wave of pleasure tackled her. "Don't stop saying my name. I'm close."

"Draco . . . Draco," she chanted over and over.

"Come," he said, and it was a command from the only person she had left in this entire world.

Her body stilled, dangling on the edge. Everything seemed to increase pressure at once, from his fingers on her pearl to his hand around her neck to the thrust of his hips. It was hard and it was fast and it was good, good, good -

"Fucking come," he snarled.

She did.

The moment her body clamped down around his, he reached the top of the mountain and hurled himself off of it. He fucked her through both of their orgasms, until they were spent and weak from exertion. They collapsed in a tangle of limbs, panting for breath. Draco moved her curls to begin pressing faint, gentle kisses to the back of her neck and shoulders. It made her shiver with a delight that ached deep in her soul.

She wished they could do this every day, too. That it could really be that simple. That they didn't have the war and years of past between them. That the Dark Lord wasn't exacting his vengeance tomorrow.

But she wished that everything else was better. That Calypso could come back and be in the clearing again. That Lucius hadn't walked into the pond, and had been able to make amends and become a better wizard. That Narcissa hadn't died, and that she'd been able to heal and be with her
family again.

That the war had never happened.

That Harry and Ron were alive.

That she was happy.

Hermione wished for so many things, and was sad that she couldn't seem to capture any stars that would grant them.

At some point, he accioed his wand and used it to clean them both up, as well as to perform the same contraceptive charm that Hermione had used that afternoon. She wanted to make a snarky remark about how surprised she was that he'd paid attention in Charms their Fifth Year, but she was just too tired.

And that made her sad, because she wanted to stay awake as long as possible, just in case.

Draco slid his arms around her, both of them lying on their sides and facing one another. Hermione buried her face in the heated skin of his bare chest, indulging in one last thing. One last thing that she could be selfish about. When they laid like this, she could pretend everything was okay.

She could pretend she wasn't scared.

There was an omen deep inside of Hermione that told her that something was coming. Something from the dark grew nearer to the horizon, on its way to cast shadows over the land. A darkness would eclipse everything that she had ever known, and it would happen whether she lived or died. She felt the fear of the Dark Lord creeping along her veins like molten rock devouring the surface of the Earth, but she knew that she wouldn't give in until she drew her last breath.

Tonight, she would sleep.

Tomorrow, she would fight.

Just as Hermione had promised Narcissa, she wouldn't stop fighting until she had counted all of the stars in the sky. She would pluck each one out of the expanse of time, gathering every piece of herself that had scattered along her journey to home, until she had captured them all. Then, when she held the universe in her hands, she would wish to breathe.

Hermione fell asleep to Draco's soft voice in her ear, his fingers ghosting along the edge of her face as though he loved her. Which she supposed he did.

"You've always been everything to me, Hermione. I'm gonna protect you from him. I promise."

- END PART ONE -
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